The morning of Sept. 12, family, friends and former players gathered in St. Thomas of Villanova Church to bid farewell to an outstanding figure in University, and college basketball, history. Roland V. “Rollie” Massimino was the head coach of the Men’s Basketball program for 19 years, from 1973 to 1992, and the guiding force who led Villanova to its first NCAA national championship, in 1985.

But Massimino was much more. Indeed, he was mentor, teacher, friend and inspiration to those who came together for the funeral Mass. Numerous messages about how “that man changed my life” reached his family after Massimino died of cancer on Aug. 31 at the age of 82.

Weeks later, the William B. Finneran Endowed Head Coach for Men’s Basketball Jay Wright, who was hired by Massimino as a Wildcats assistant in 1987 and served seven years by his side, was still contemplating all that “Coach Mass” meant to him, the basketball program and the Villanova community.

“It’s been a tough time,” Wright said. “Coach has been such a huge part of this University since 1973. It’s a big loss to all of us here. There were people in academia he stayed close to, and coaches in other sports—like [Women’s Basketball coach] Harry Perretta—he was always in touch with. For me, he was my mentor. It’s probably one of the toughest losses I’ve had personally. I miss him.”

Tom Massimino, who served as an assistant coach to his father at Villanova, offered a son’s perspective at the beginning of the Mass.

“He always made our family feel special, even when he was a high school coach making $3,600 a year. We had love, each other and pasta. What else could any family want?”

In his remarks, Billy Cunningham, the former Philadelphia 76ers star and coach, who led the team to an NBA championship in 1983, talked about the passion and love for life of the man he called “one of my dearest friends,” the man who never knocked at the Cunninghams’ front door but would walk in and ask, “What’s goin’ on?”

Certainly, 1985 was, Cunningham said, “a phenomenal year for the community. It was the way he structured his life. And everybody was family.”

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IN MEMORIAM

“MASS” APPRECIATION
Players, coaches, fans and friends said farewell to Rollie Massimino

BY MIKE SHERIDAN

Top photo: The 1984–85 Men’s Basketball team brought home Villanova’s first NCAA national championship in 1985. From left: Coach Massimino with his team in the late 1970s; speaking at a dinner celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Men’s Basketball Championship. No name is more closely tied to that victory than that of Rollie Massimino, Villanova’s gesticulating, gum-chewing, irrepressible coach. But Coach Mass’ legacy wasn’t built in a day. He called forth the best in his players throughout his career in college athletics.

• From 1973 to 1992, Massimino guided the Wildcats to 357 victories, including 20 in NCAA tournament play.
• In addition to the 1985 run, the Wildcats advanced to the Elite Eight in 1978, 1982, 1983 and 1988.
• Villanova posted 10 seasons of 20 victories or more in his tenure.
• Massimino was the 1982 Big East Coach of the Year and, in 2013, was inducted into the Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame.
• He earned 816 victories during his nearly 50-year career as a collegiate head coach.

Members of the 1985 national championship team reunite in 2014. Seeds of Greatness

Villanova’s six-game march to one of the most famous upsets in NCAA history is the stuff that sports documentaries and top 10 lists are made of. At Rupp Arena in Lexington, Ky., April 1, 1985, the Wildcats, a No. 8 seed, outshot No. 1 Georgetown by two points to claim the Division I Men’s Basketball Championship.

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