



## Deborah "Coach J" Johnston

September 24, 1953 - November 16, 2024

Deborah Cay Johnston (Coach J), age 71, of Kankakee, passed away after a brief illness on November 16, 2024. She was born September 24, 1953 in Kankakee, Illinois to Marguerite and Lawrence Johnston.

A 1971 graduate of Eastridge High School, Coach J graduated from Illinois State University, where she played on the women's golf team, becoming the number one golfer her junior and senior years and placing third in the AIAW state championship as a senior.

Her career as a teacher and coach in the Kankakee school district spanned over 40 years, beginning in 1978 at Eastridge and Westview High Schools, continuing to Kankakee High School and Middle School. As an educator, she served as a Physical Education teacher for over 14 years, as well as in numerous staff support positions. Her expansive coaching career included several roles, including Head and Assistant Girls Basketball at KHS, Head and Assistant Girls Softball Coach at KHS, KHS Girls Golf Coach, and Assistant Volleyball Coach. She also served as the Assistant Athletic Director for ten years, and as the All Sports Equipment Manager for over 10 years. She retired in 2018 but came out of retirement in 2022 to coach the KJHS Girls Softball team for a season. Coach J's excellence as a coach was demonstrated by her many winning teams. Her KHS Girls Basketball teams took regional titles in 1982-83, 1983-84, 1985-86, 1986-87, 1988-89, and

1993-94. Her KHS Girls Softball team took the regional title in the 2011-12 season. In 1984, she was inducted to the Kankakee High School Athletic Hall of Fame, along with her father who volunteered for Kankakee Boys and Girls Basketball for 51 years.

More importantly, Coach J loved her athletes as her own children, driving them to be the best students and athletes possible, helping them apply for scholarships, and mentoring them throughout their college and professional careers. Her career is exemplified by the notable quote, "A good coach can change a game. A great coach can change a life."

In recent years, she continued her dedication to the educators and students of Kankakee by serving her second term as an elected Board Member on the Kankakee School District Board of Education, having won the most amount of votes in the 2023 election.

Coach J's varied interests expanded beyond the playing field. She shared her writing skills as a reporter for the Kankakee Daily Journal. She loved music, having introduced her nieces and nephews to the Beatles, and later enjoying Broadway musicals and live music concerts. She loved fishing, Harry Potter, the Hallmark Channel (especially *When Calls the Heart*), travel, and talking on the phone to her many friends and family. She was a dedicated life-long Chicago White Sox fan.

Coach J is survived by her beloved 44-year-old parrot, PJ, her sister-in-law, Elva Johnston of Cincinnati, Ohio, and six nieces and nephews (Scott Johnston of Frederick, Maryland, Cathy Johnston Krause of Flower Mound, Texas, Mark Johnston of Rockford, Illinois, Mary Johnston Craig of Occoquan, Virginia, Marie Johnston Richards of Cincinnati, and Matt Johnston of Columbus, Ohio).

She was preceded in death by her parents and brothers, Gerald Johnston and

Bill Johnston. Other adopted members of Coach J's family include the Pauli family of Peoria, and the Null and Gaytan families of S. Anne, including her goddaughter, Annyca Gaytan.

A Celebration of Life event for community, family, and friends will be held at Kankakee High School on Sunday, December 8 from 2:00-5:00 pm.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the Coach Deb Johnston Memorial Fund. Checks can be mailed to Mr. Lyle Neal at 240 Warren Avenue, Kankakee, IL 60901.

# Previous Events

## Celebration of Life

DEC 8. 2:00 PM - 5:00 PM (CT)

Kankakee High School  
1200 W. Jeffery St.  
Kankakee, IL 60901

# Tribute Wall

CJ

“ Cynthia Jackson lit a candle in memory of Deborah "Coach J" Johnston



Cynthia Jackson - December 03, 2024 at 12:03 PM

KT

“ Kristine Trombley lit a candle in memory of Deborah "Coach J" Johnston



Kristine Trombley - November 30, 2024 at 10:42 AM

BF

“ Brenda Frooninckx lit a candle in memory of Deborah "Coach J" Johnston



Brenda Frooninckx - November 28, 2024 at 03:20 PM

PL

“ Paul And Antione Leach lit a candle in memory of Deborah "Coach J" Johnston



Paul and Antione leach - November 25, 2024 at 06:23 PM

AF

“ Annie Johnson & Family lit a candle in memory of Deborah "Coach J" Johnston



Annie Johnson & Family - November 23, 2024 at 04:46 PM

GJ

“ RIP Ms J. You were the best second mom and coach to me. You taught me life lessons such as to push forward and work hard. You taught me how to drive a stick shift which was sooo scary. Along with my parents you played a major part in my life. Thanks for all that you did for me. I remember house sitting and watching the birds. I will always cherish all the memories that we shared. You did so much for us and that will never be forgotten. Being older I always looked forward to seeing you at the holiday tournaments whenever I decided to go. Gonna miss you much. Love always , Gracie

Grace Jefferson - November 23, 2024 at 02:52 PM

JB

“ Jim Brickle lit a candle in memory of Deborah "Coach J" Johnston



Jim Brickle - November 23, 2024 at 02:43 PM

KB

“ *RIP Ms. J. You will truly be missed. From coaching me to my two daughters. Thank you.*



---

**Kim Banks** - November 23, 2024 at 01:15 PM

BE

“ *Brenda Euell lit a candle in memory of Deborah "Coach J" Johnston*



---

**Brenda Euell** - November 22, 2024 at 10:48 PM

RO

“ *Roberta Olson lit a candle in memory of Deborah "Coach J" Johnston*



---

**Roberta Olson** - November 22, 2024 at 06:40 PM

MW

“ *Deb was a very special lady with a heart of gold and a love for her career both as a coach/teacher. Her devotion to education and the youth of Kankakee is evident in her involvement as a school board member. She will be dearly missed.*

---

**Michele L Walsh** - November 22, 2024 at 05:58 PM

CW

“ Cheryl Wilson lit a candle in memory of  
Deborah "Coach J" Johnston



---

**Cheryl Wilson** - November 22, 2024 at 05:36 PM