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## Rita the Angel

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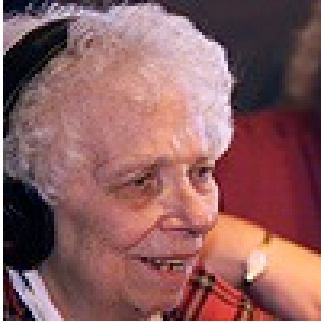
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## Rita the Angel

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(Story and photo courtesy of the Dayton Daily News. Tom Archdeacon's story originally appeared in the Dayton Daily News Jan. 15, 2008.)

So much for "Rest in Peace."

They had just buried their 92-year-old mother a few hours earlier — in her favorite Dayton Flyers shirt, her basketball earrings, her QUEEN pin and with that rosary she prayed so religiously before and during games draped between her folded hands — but now Rita Weisenbach's three daughters were calling her back to action.

Rita's funeral was Nov. 28 — the day Dayton played Miami at Millett Hall — and when the Flyers fell behind by 21 points, youngest daughter Kathy — watching the televised game with the rest of the family — minced no words: "I said, 'OK Mom, you can't rest yet. Get it in gear. They need help down here.'"

And, sure enough, in one of the greatest comebacks in UD hoops history, the Flyers won 63-62 when Brian Roberts' long 3-pointer with 5 seconds left somehow found nothing but net. "We were all jumping around hollering Mom's name," daughter Joann said.

Soon after, the family got an e-mail from Mark Adams, the ESPN basketball announcer who used to host Flyers Feedback, the WHIO postgame radio call-in show on which Rita was a regular. His message simply said: "Miracle Win! Coincidence? I think not!"

Today, a lot more people are thinking along those lines. Since Rita — one of the best-known and most beloved Flyer fans — died, the men's and the women's basketball teams at UD have not lost. Each has won 12 straight games since her passing. The men now are ranked 14th in the nation and the women are on the cusp of a Top 25 ranking.

"We've been thinking a lot about all that lately," Kathy said Monday. "It's kind of freaky. It sends shivers up my spine." There's no doubt there's something special about this season and maybe it's as one e-mailer to the Weisenbach daughters put it: "The Flyers' sixth man is an angel."

She's also somebody who — when it came to UD basketball — found heaven on earth. Growing up on Adams Street, it was just a short walk for Rita, her three sisters and brother to watch Flyers games at the Fairgrounds Coliseum. It was her brother who nicknamed her "Tear Buckets" because she'd cry when the Flyers lost. After she married, she followed the Flyers from the Fieldhouse to UD Arena, where the family still has seats in Section 116.

Some 10 years ago, when health problems began keeping her from games, she'd listen on the radio, always keeping a rosary in hand. Sometimes she'd just need to work a few beads, other times she'd thumb her way through the entire strand.

In the mid-1990s, when Adams debuted his Feedback show, he happened to make an on-air request for women fans to call in. On a whim, Rita dialed in and the two hit it off so well that Adams dubbed her The Queen of "Flyers Feedback."

Each year on her birthday, Rita would join Adams for his postgame broadcast at Flanagan's Pub and when she'd walk in everybody in the bar would stand and chant "REE-ta ... REE-ta."

She became such a celebrity that one of her other rosaries was auctioned off at the Secret Smiles charity gala a couple years ago and brought — thanks to Adams, said Rita's granddaughter, Christine — \$1,000.

And though she's now gone, her presence is still felt.

"I did a little research," Adams said. "The 10 years prior to Flyers Feedback and Rita's calls, UD won 42 percent of its games. The next 10 years — once the show started and she called each week — the Flyers won 63 percent. So I figured the power of a Hail Mary and an Our Father was about 21 percent.

"But now that she's got an even closer pipeline, well, it's unbelievable."

That's what happens when the sixth man is an angel.