

Parkton native earns Centralia College's highest honors

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CENTRALIA, Wash. — As James Chapel walked through the halls of Michael Smith Gymnasium on the campus of Centralia College in Washington, he paused and glanced at a wall displaying the pictures of the school's Hall of Fame athletes.

Scanning up and down the rows of faces, he paused to notice one that seemed misplaced.

"It was me.....up on that wall," said Chapel, a 52-year-old Parkton native. "I was blown away. I still couldn't believe it."

On Feb. 21, Chapel became the latest addition to the two-year institution's prestigious group, earning the honor for his efforts on the basketball court. A 1984 graduate, Chapel helped lead the Trailblazers to the Northwest Athletic Conference Championship twice, earning All-Region honors in his final season.

"I always thought of myself as a poor man's Scottie Pippen," said Chapel, a 6-foot-6 forward who averaged 16.2 points and a team-high 8.4 rebounds per game in 1984 for the Trailblazers. "...blossoming in my years at Centralia gave me a chance to continue my career."

After earning his associate's degree in General Studies at Centralia, Chapel used his last two years of eligibility to play at Division II St. Martin's University in Lacey, Washington — where he continued to dominate the boards at the team's top rebounder. After graduation and a brief stint in a local Pro-Am league, he decided to hang up his sneakers for good.

"I'm forever grateful to my coaches, family and friends that contributed to my journey," Chapel said. "Growing up in Parkton....I got to watch and learn from so many great people."

Jack State is among the names Chapel credited for his development as a person and basketball player. State was an assistant at Centralia College during Chapel's time there and presented James at the Hall of Fame induction. A former player himself, State said the maturation process of Chapel was a vital part of his success.

"Watching (James) develop was fantastic," said State, who played at Eastern Washington University before heading to the ABA where he suited up for the Oakland Oaks. "I've never seen a kid work as diligently to perfect his (shooting) technique. But the biggest single thing I admire about him is his growth as a person."

The son of Mary and Jimmy Wactor, Chapel's growth started in Parkton until his family moved after his sophomore year in high school. He then transferred to Seventy-First in Fayetteville before making the transition to Tacoma, Washington — where he currently resides.

“The core of everything I’ve done goes back to Parkton,” Chapel said. “Because I was in a military family, we were on the move. I love Washington, but the Parkton community was instrumental in making me believe I could play college ball.”

While Chapel is proud of his accomplishments on the court, he has even more regard for the work he’s done the last 25 years in a different court as a probation officer for the Pierce County Juvenile system — another mark that earned him a nod into the Centralia College Hall of Fame.

“I have a challenging job and basketball taught me so many things about life that I still use,” said Chapel, who graduated from St. Martin’s with a bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice. “Teamwork, communication, encouragement...those are all key elements in what I do every day. Some days are good and some are bad.”

A lot of Chapel’s time is spent doing tedious desk work or making appearances in court, but he’s also seen his share of heartache over the years as an employee in one of the most violent counties in Washington.

“When I first got here the gang wars were out of control,” Chapel said. “There were so many (drive-by shootings) and a lot of kids were killed. After hearing about 12 or 13 kids you worked with getting shot or killed, it’s sad because it almost becomes numb to you. But you never forget.”

Chapel said the qualities his parents instilled in him inspired his drive on the hardwood, but are even more valuable in his current field as a molder of young lives.

“I’m fortunate to still have my parents and to have grown up in a two-parent home,” he said. “A lot of the kids I work with come from broken homes without hope, consistency, or accountability. My mother and father were all about discipline and accountability, but at the same time they gave me freedom to make choices.”

For Chapel, the discipline and accountability he applies to his job has made him an enemy to some, but he says it comes with the territory.

“I’m at the age now where these kids I’ve worked with years ago will come up to me and say, ‘James Chapel, you can’t get me anymore cause I’ve straightened out’, but they always follow it by saying they’re appreciative for what I did to help them. That’s what makes it rewarding.”

Mary Wactor said she isn’t surprised by her son’s accomplishments on and off the court, calling Chapel “self-motivated.”

“He’s always been determined in everything he wanted to do,” said Wactor, who still lives in Parkton with her husband. “He knew he wanted to play basketball and he knew what he needed to do to accomplish that goal. He’s still as determined as ever in what he does today.”

While he sees himself as “low key” and independent, Chapel admits that his Robeson County roots have a lot to do with who he is today and his accomplishments.

“My roots are in Parkton and I’m always thinking about getting back there eventually,” Chapel said. “Being named a Hall of Famer is a great honor and I’m thankful that basketball and my job have allowed me to accomplish that goal....through it all I’ll never forget where I came from.”