

“Press On...” by Tianna Bartoletta

St. Paul Lutheran School Track Dedication: December 5th, 2014

Good morning, first I would like to emphasize how honored my husband and I are to be a part of today's track dedication. Seventeen years ago, when I was in middle school, my track and field career began on a track not unlike the one we are unveiling today. Running has opened so many doors for me to people, countries, and experiences I would have only been able to dream about if I had not been participating in sports. It brings me an endless amount of joy to know that right here in Lakeland, with the opening of this track, hundreds more will be introduced to a sport that I have been a part of for over half my life.

What I especially love about today is how we came to be a part of it. Like you've already heard, what really started out as John offering to share our table at Epcot turned into so much more! I think what I found most amazing was that Mr. and Mrs. Munson remembered our names for so long after that evening! I even remember the ride home back from Orlando. I had been regretfully reflecting on the fact that I hadn't had more time to ask Mr. Munson more questions about NASA and space! Anyway, when they shared with us the plans for the track St Paul was building for the school and the surrounding community also inviting us to come see it and take part in the dedication I was deeply moved. It truly reminded me of Proverbs 20:24 that talks about how “a person's steps are directed by the Lord.” I honestly feel there is no other explanation for

how this came together so effortlessly and seamlessly and for this reason we did not hesitate at being a part of this special event.

It would be quite easy for me to stand here and talk about my list of achievements, my titles, and the number of medals I have. But on this day of celebration I wanted to shine the light back on all of you. I believe that there are three characteristics an athlete, or any person for that matter, must have in order to be successful and they are on full display here today: Community, Faith, Perseverance. Look around, you have a community here, what I often refer to as a support system or a team working together for a common goal, you have all displayed unwavering faith, and even during the times where it seemed impossible to believe you persevered.

Those characteristics are no different than those I use to train and compete on a world class level. One thing that is not often mentioned when people talk about my list of accomplishments is the six year gap in my career timeline. Six years passed between my first medals and my Olympic Gold medal in 2012. For six years I stumbled and faltered my way through embarrassing performances, injuries, and financial difficulty. I was living in a world where my support system was just me, I didn't have faith in many people, or I put my faith in the wrong people. Every time I experienced a new set back or disappointment I fell apart. I gave up.

I was completely discouraged with myself and track in field until I made some huge life changes. Well first, I met my husband but then suddenly the people around me weren't

draining me or taking from me, but were encouraging me, and giving to me. For the first time in my professional career I had a community of people- a team surrounding me that wanted nothing more than to see me succeed and be happy. Everyone present here today is a member, a part of a community that wants the same thing for its students, athletes, teachers, church, and members of the larger Lakeland Community. What I see here today, if I may summarize Hebrews 10:24 and 25 are people who actively “consider how they may spur one another on toward love and good deeds...encouraging one another.”

A community, team, or support system is the single most important yet underrated asset any successful person can have. I would not be standing here in my Team USA Olympic Gear had it not been for some very important people, all of whom I am so grateful to say are with us today.

First, my husband John- he’s done a lot of things but one of the most important and impressive things he does for me is that he diets and works out with me. Being disciplined 24 hours a day, every day of the week is hard. Especially when my body is perfectly content where it is. He does not let me go through it alone. If I have to lose five, he loses five. If I have to cut sugar out of my diet, he cuts sugar out of his. I would not have been able to do half the things I’ve done if it weren’t for his commitment and discipline right along with me.

Second, my husband's parents James, and Zita Bartoletta who are so close to my heart that the term in-laws actually demeans how strongly I am attached to them made it possible for me to have a car that was safe enough to get me to and from practice in Daytona Beach at the time 2.5 hours away from home (one-way!) and back. Now in that same car I drive from Tampa to Bradenton (1.5 hours away) every day without fail.

Third, my friends, who by now I can just refer to as family. On the very first day I met Eliot he pulled out a scrap piece of paper and drew a diagram of a stick figure attempting a long jump and calculated how fast I'd have to run and how much height I needed at takeoff to jump farther than I ever have before. We've been friends ever since. Mikey, who cares about John and I so much that with less than three hours notice she hopped a flight to England with me when last minute business kept John away and she knew I would be traveling alone. George Beardsley and his team who have taken the guess work out of social media, marketing, and branding completely freeing me up to focus all my energy on training and competing. And Mr. and Mrs. Munson, who have helped me to see the importance and the value in what I do as an athlete and who I am as a person by inviting me to participate in this event today.

The Circle of Giving, the principle, the Pastor, the administration, the coaches, the students, all of your friends, and family are all important. You are all important to each others' success, not just to the completion of this track, but to the building up of each other in whatever other goals you may have as individuals and as a community. No one makes it alone. I didn't do this alone.

The second characteristic is "Faith." Mrs. Black told us that she trusted God for this project, her faith allowed her to push the send button on her emails. And your faith answered prayers. Faith, "The confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." I never know the outcome of a training session, a race, or a season in advance. I set my goals and I breathe life into them by believing wholeheartedly. And it isn't always easy to have that kind of faith, I experienced this recently in Poland at the Indoor World Championships this year. I wasn't sure that I was good enough, I wasn't sure that I was ready or fast enough. But when you start to feel that way about anything- and everything I'm sharing with you today is about LIFE. I'm not standing here as a track and field athlete with sport specific tips and advice.

Whenever you start to feel that way, whenever I start to feel that way I remember two things. The first, Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans that I have for you declared the Lord plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." The Second, James 2:17 "thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." I had done the work. You all have done the work. It would have been one thing to have been fooling around, not taking my training sessions seriously, not studying, or not doing the right things. I took the faith that I had in myself, my team, and God to work as hard as I could for as long as I could. When it was time for that final race, the race where the medalists are decided, I released my anxiety and I just ran. Which reminds me of another great scripture, 1 Corinthians 9:24- "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize." Work in such a way as to get the prize.

The long jump and the 100 meter dash are two very different but very technical events, every meter and every slither or time in each event is accounted for, there is a perfect body position I should be in- in every moment that can mean the difference between the Gold Medal at the Olympics and a fourth place finish. For example, When I start my race, I have to think about dragging my toe, if I don't think about dragging my toe on the track then I raise my foot too high and I get beat out of the blocks. Of course I have faith that I can run with the best of them, but if I don't execute my technique I can't realize that potential. I jumped my personal best jump this summer in Oslo, Norway. I jumped 23 feet. Before the competition I told myself, "Tianna you are one of the best jumpers in the world again, but if you don't run as fast as possible, if you don't remain patient at the takeoff, if you don't extend your legs through the landing you are making it really easy for everyone else in the competition." I had faith in my ability as a jumper, but I couldn't showcase any of that talent without the proper action. The same goes for the students and student- athletes here today, if you don't do the small things- all the little things that can add up to that great performance you won't get there. If you don't take the time to learn the lessons in class you can't ace the test. If you don't get enough sleep you can't perform at your best on any level. You can believe but you must couple that belief with effort and hard work.

Finally, the last characteristic is "perseverance". 2013 was a bad year for me in almost every way imaginable. I used to reflect on that season begrudgingly. More than willing to lock it away and to forget about it. For starters, the coach that had trained me to my first

Olympic Team took a job in England shortly after the Games effectively ending our coach/athlete relationship. Then, I got injured in the weight room and didn't realize how serious it was until after I'd embarrassed myself by having several bad races and a doctor told me it would be best not to run for the rest of the season. Not being able to compete or complete the season had a domino effect that was so negative and so depressing that it was hard to remember that less than twelve months before I had broken a world record, that less than a year before that I had run a lap of victory with my country's flag draped across my shoulders with my three teammates celebrating Olympic Gold.

And that's usually what happens when you get discouraged, you take your eye off the prize and you start making decisions based on fear, not faith. Another bible verse I have drawn strength from is Romans 5:3 and 4 it says that we should "rejoice in our sufferings, because suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope." My success in 2014 was a direct result of the suffering that took place in 2013, I faced it, I took responsibility for it, and I learned from it. Now, I'm a better person and athlete because of it. Bad things will happen to all of us. Things won't go as we planned. That's life, that's just the way it is. But we can all take heart that we will get through it, learn from it, and that our faith will be stronger because of it.

Remember that there are no TESTimonies without TESTs.

So not only did I want to share some of my story with you today and to celebrate the opening of the track. I wanted to encourage you to continue nurturing the community

you've built here, to continue to persevere, and to always keep the faith. Those are three qualities that have not failed me in my life or in my athletic career and they will not fail you in yours. With faith, perseverance, and community we can all "press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us upward in Christ Jesus." I cannot say enough how much sharing this day with you means to me. Thank you.