

Angelo Plaia, coach, trustee

BY COLLIN NASH
Newsday Staff Writer

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Angelo Plaia lived by a deeply held belief: That each and every one of us has a God-given responsibility to serve - our community, our country and our church.

In every aspect of his life, Plaia, a former village trustee in Mineola and arguably one of the most adored and respected high school coaches on Long Island, led by example, relatives and friends said.

Plaia's wife, Mary Anne, said the hundreds of people who attended her husband's wake were a testament to the impact he had on the lives of his charges in the classroom, on the gridiron and on the baseball diamond.

Plaia, 79, died of congestive heart failure July 28 in an East Northport hospice. He was buried July 31 at Holy Rood Cemetery in Westbury.

"He had such a manner with people, you immediately liked him," Frank Januszewski of Rockville Centre said of his late colleague, a revered coach of football and baseball at Oceanside High School for more than 30 years. "As a coach and teacher, he had no peer."

Plaia was born in Manhattan to Italian immigrants from Sicily, Vincenzo Plaia, a carpenter, and Antonina Guarino, a seamstress. He grew up in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn.

He graduated from Lafayette High School, where he was a two-sport athlete, playing linebacker and catcher. Plaia, a recipient of the Lou Gehrig award for outstanding sportsmanship and courage, attended New York University on a full athletic scholarship from 1945 to 1949.

He graduated from NYU in 1949 with a bachelor's of science degree. He enlisted in the Army, where he served two years as a medic during the Korean War. After his discharge he earned a master's degree in education from Columbia University.

Plaia went on to teach science and physical education at Lafayette, where he also coached football and baseball until 1956.

That same year, he married the former Mary Anne Gerace, an English and speech teacher he met earlier while teaching at Lafayette.

His "magnetic personality" attracted her to him, Plaia's wife said. "He was a man of great integrity, warmth and caring."

It was 1956 that also marked the beginning of Plaia's 34-year career at Oceanside, during which he was athletic director for five years. His coaching career at Oceanside produced more than half a dozen baseball championships for the Sailors, including one county, three division and four league titles.

Plaia served three two-year terms on the board of trustees in Mineola, where he lived for almost 50 years.

As well as being "community minded," his wife said, he also had a strong sense of civic duty. He was an active member of Corpus Christi Roman Catholic Church in Mineola, where he was a lector and served as board president of the Corpus Christi School board. He also presided over the Nassau County Baseball Coaches Association and held memberships in the Knights of Columbus and Toastmaster International.

In addition to his wife of 50 years, he is survived by daughters Nina Petersen of Commack, Katherine McNaught of Waldwick, N.J., and Mary Ann Doyle of Kings Park; a son, Vincent Plaia of Nanuet, N.Y.; and 10 grandchildren.

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Oceanside 'treasure' remembered Plaia, 79, memorialized for coaching skill and humor

By JOSEPH KELLARD

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Angelo Plaia, a beloved former Oceanside High School coach who died last month at age 79, was fondly remembered by colleagues and former players for the many titles, as well as laughs, he produced.

A baseball and football coach, Plaia led the Sailors to three division crowns, four league titles and one county championship on the diamond during the 1950s and '60s, and during his 34 years in the school district his dry, self-deprecating humor brought smiles to the faces of students and staff alike.

"He was a great teacher and was always funny," said Frank Januszewski, a former OHS basketball coach. "He made you want to come to gym or try out for a sport."

For William Jackson, a junior shortstop on Plaia's team that won a county championship in 1959, his coach's sense of humor stood out. "He made practices fun," Jackson said recently from his Wantagh home, recalling a game when an umpire threatened to eject Plaia if he kept stepping outside the coach's box. "And then Coach stuck a toe just outside the box," Williams laughed.

"He had a tremendous sense of humor," said Andy Scerbo, who succeeded Plaia when he retired from coaching in 1962.

Scerbo remembered how, in gym class, Plaia performed acrobatics on the trampoline despite weighing 300-plus pounds. "The kids would be hysterical, and he loved to put on a show for them," he said. Plaia arrived in Oceanside in 1956, when he was hired as a health teacher, baseball manager and football line coach at OHS. During his coaching tenure, he was among a group of title-winning coaches that included Januszewski, who led the basketball team to two county championships in 1959 and 1962, Jack Hay in wrestling and Roy Kesnick in football.

"They all set a tone of excellence and pride when [OHS sports] was really at its peak," Scerbo said, "and Angelo was a big part of that." Plaia displayed outstanding motivational skills, and, above all, made it fun for the kids, Scerbo added.

Plaia was famous for his "eagle and the clam" pep talk. As Januszewski explained it, Plaia encouraged his students to be like an eagle soaring high above its prey, and not a clam sitting at the ocean's bottom and eating whatever comes its way. Januszewski recalled Plaia giving this talk before a football game against Baldwin, OHS's dominant rival, and the Sailors went on to beat the Bruins 25-0 that day.

Both Jackson and Paul Fardy, a first baseman and pitcher who was one of two All-County players on the 1959 championship team, described Plaia as a stickler for details, making players practice bunting, stealing bases and pickoff plays for hours.

"He made everything fun," said Fardy, a Point Lookout resident. "You can make things fun and not be so good, but that wasn't him. He still got the most out of his players."

In the locker room after each victory on the 26-2 championship team, Plaia had his players form a circular chain, putting their arms around one another's shoulders and doing a Mexican hat-like dance, as Fardy described it. "By the end of the season," he said, "it got out of hand, and we would all bang into and pile on coach Plaia. But it provided a lot of the fun and camaraderie that helped us succeed."

Plaia was born on July 21, 1927, in Manhattan, to immigrant parents from Sicily, Vincenzo, a carpenter, and Antonina Guarino, a seamstress, and he grew up in Bensonhurst. He graduated from Lafayette High School, where he played center in football and catcher in baseball, earning the New York Journal American newspaper's Lou Gehrig Award for outstanding sportsmanship and courage. In 1945 he attended New York University on a full athletic scholarship, and played center on the football team.

Ten years younger than Plaia, Scerbo grew up in the coach's neighborhood, admiring his athletic skills and the fact that he attended college. "I loved to play ball, and he was one of the few guys in the area who you could really look up to," Scerbo said. "The rest ended up in jail."

After earning a degree in science from NYU in 1949, Plaia returned to Lafayette to teach science and phys. ed. and coach football and baseball until 1956. In between he enlisted in the Army, and as a lieutenant, he served as a medic in Japan during the Korean War. After he was discharged he earned a master's in education from Columbia in 1953.

While teaching at Lafayette, he met and later married Maryann Gerace, an English and speech teacher. The couple moved to Mineola, and had their first of four children, Nina, in 1957.

"He was a man of great integrity who had a firm commitment to his church, community and country," Maryann said.

Plaia was a member of Corpus Christi Roman Catholic Church in Mineola, and was president of the parish's school board. From 1976 to 1982, he served three two-year terms as a village trustee in Mineola. He also presided over the Nassau County Baseball Coaches Association and was a member of the Knights of Columbus and Toastmasters International.

After retiring from coaching, Plaia served as athletic director for five years. But an office job that kept him apart from students was ultimately not for him. "He never stopped being in awe of the things that kids came up with," Maryann said.

"He had a way with kids and knew how to make them feel comfortable," Januszewski said. During the late 1960s, Plaia once again surrounded himself with kids, taking a job as a gym teacher at Oceanside Middle School, a position he held until he retired in 1990. While there, he created a team game his students later dubbed "Plaia ball," which involved trying to throw a kickball into a hockey-sized net.

In 2004 Plaia was inducted into the OHS Hall of Fame's Circle of Pride, which honors athletes and coaches who have achieved outstanding success in their careers at the high school and beyond.

"He became the most respected baseball coach on Long Island," Januszewski, a fellow inductee, said when introducing the coach at the second annual dinner. "All of us agree that Angie Plaia is an Oceanside treasure."

"Who could ask for more?" Plaia said in his speech's closing comments. "Terrific students, colleagues and the opportunity to teach in this fine school district."

Plaia died of congestive heart failure at Hospice House in East Northport on July 28, and was buried at Holy Rood Cemetery in Westbury. In addition to his wife, he is survived by three daughters, Nina Petersen of Commack, Katherine McNaught of Waldwick, N.J., and Maryann Doyle of Kings Park; a son, Vincent Plaia of Nanuet, N.Y.; and 10 grandchildren.

The Plaia family requests that donations be made payable to the Oceanside Hall of Fame and mailed to Sean Keenan at Oceanside High School, 3160 Skillman Ave., Oceanside N.Y. 11572.