



## Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame

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15 West Third Street - Jamestown, NY 14701

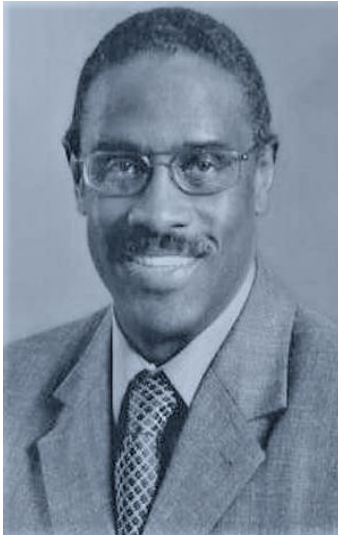
May 2023

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### RON GRAHAM

1948-2023



Ronald L. Graham, 74, of 1598 Orr St., died Thursday, Feb. 2, 2023, surrounded by his living family at home. He was born April 27, 1948, in Corinth, Miss., a son of the late Willie and Ilean Walker Graham.

He was a 1966 graduate of Jamestown High School, earned an associate degree from Jamestown Community College in 1968 and then a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Baldwin Wallace University in 1972.

He was employed by Zion Covenant Church in facility maintenance.

His 50 years of service to others include the development of numerous youth and young adult programs, most notably the Chautauqua Striders Youth Development Program and Infinity Visual and Performing Arts. Mr.

Graham dedicated his life to helping others and is fondly remembered by countless people whose lives he touched through coaching, mentoring, and friendship.

Surviving is his wife, Helen Brostrom Graham, whom he married Oct. 20, 1978; five children: Charles (Alise) Gibson of Ashville, Tamu (David) Reinhardt of Jamestown, Rahsaan (Michelle) Graham of New York City, Faith Graham of Jamestown and Lee Anne Graham of Charlotte, N.C.; eight grandchildren: Sarah Gibson, Olivia Reinhardt, Terrence Graham, Eliana Graham, Natalie Reinhardt, Briana Hodnett, Marcus Graham and Annaka Graham; numerous bonus children; several nieces and nephews, several cousins, and a sister-in-law, Rachel Graham of Bemus Point. Besides his parents, he was preceded in death by two brothers: John and Lonnie Graham.

Graham was inducted into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 2005.

# Impact Felt By Many

By Scott Kindberg, *Post-Journal* (Jamestown) , February 7, 2023

The photo, dated July 27, 1987 and filed away in The Post-Journal sports department, shows Chappale Burton seated at a desk, holding a phone in his left hand and a pen in his right, while wearing a cap with “Pitt Track & Field” written across the front of it.

And, of course, he’s smiling.

If you know Chappale, he’s always smiling.

But when I came across a video he posted to Facebook last week, the Jamestown High School graduate (Class of ’86) had an entirely different countenance than the one I had grown accustomed to.



In a sometimes halting voice, Chappale — wearing a Chautauqua Striders Track Club T-shirt and a University of Pittsburgh cap — paid tribute to his “father figure” and “my first coach,” Ron Graham, who passed away last week after an heroic battle with cancer.

“He’s the reason why I’m wearing my Striders stuff and my Pitt cap,” said Chappale, while wiping tears from his eyes. “He’s the one who (asked) me, ‘What are you doing after high school? Where are you going to college?’”

The question, Chappale said, caught him off guard, because his plan had always been to enter the military upon his graduation from JHS.

“The only college I thought about was Pitt,” he continued.

Ron’s response? “Well, that’s where you’re going.”

Noted Chappale: “He just started getting me ready for college, getting me ready to take the SATs and that type of stuff.”

And by Ron doing so, Chappale was just the latest card-carrying member of what I like to refer to as “Ronnie’s Army.”

“I’m just grateful for the impact he had on my life, and he was such a father figure to so many,” Chappale said. “So many went to college who wouldn’t have gone to college if it wasn’t for him.”

Melody (Prunty) Peach knows that to be true.

A 1985 graduate of JHS, Melody ran for the Striders and went on to Michigan State University where she was a member of the Spartans' track & field team.

"The impact he had on this county and Western New York is something that is unbelievable," she said. "His legacy is something I don't even know how to explain. It's very special. He was a very special guy who had a huge impact on me and so many other kids. Hopefully I can live up to that, but I don't think so."

Ron was inducted into the Chautauqua Sports Hall of Fame in 2005 in recognition of his formation — along with Dan Feather — of the Striders in the late 1970s. Graham was also instrumental in getting Strider Field built, and he established the Infinity music program and a host of other endeavors that were focused on youth development initiatives.



But Ron's true passion was always track & field.

My favorite memory in all the years I've known him came in June 1986. That's when Jamestown native Karen Bakewell was running in the NCAA Division I Track & Field Outdoor Championships in Indianapolis. Competing for Miami (Ohio) University, Karen broke the meet record in the 800 meters. Her time of 2:00.85 was just ahead of crowd-favorite Tina Parrott of Indiana. Karen and Parrott, timed in 2:01.02, both were under the old meet record of 2:01.20.

The report I received that night came from Karen's father, Gene, who witnessed in person his daughter's brilliance. Ron could not be in Indy because — surprise, surprise — he was on the road with a bunch of his Striders kids and had no idea in the pre-internet/pre-cellphone era how Karen had done.

So Ron called The Post-Journal to find out.

When I told him that Karen, a former Strider, was an All-American and a Division I champion, there was silence on the other end of the line.

Ron was so moved that he couldn't speak for what seemed like 30 seconds.

"I tell you, he was just so motivating and encouraging and you always wanted to do better," Karen recalled in a phone conversation Saturday night. "You always wanted to show him what you could do. He was there with you in the race. He would be running with you along the sidelines and you'd hear your name being screamed. At the end of the race the thing I cherished was his hug. He would give you this hug like you were the only person there. It was so important and meaningful. I've carried it with me all my life."

Early last fall, I received a phone call from Ron, inviting me to his house for a time of food and fellowship. Upon arrival, I was greeted by several dozen of his friends, and for nearly three hours we all enjoyed each other's company.

Ron was in his glory.

And, not surprisingly, his family was there to support it all, just as it's been doing every step of the way in his personal and professional journey that spanned decades.

"He had all these kids of his own and we were so lucky to have him care for us like we were his own," Karen said. "I feel lucky that his kids shared him with me."

Kids, of course, matter to the Graham clan.

Years ago, Ron and I sat in the bleachers at Strider Field as we discussed his life's passions. One of the stories I'll always remember is the one he heard for the first time at a youth symposium in Washington, D.C. in the mid-1990s.



During the program, Ron listened as a speaker talked about the importance of saving America's youth. The story went like this:

It seems a man was walking along a beach when the tide was out. As he walked, he discovered many, many starfish that had been washed up on shore. Realizing they were going to die, the man began throwing as many back into the ocean as he could. As he worked, he was approached by another man.

"Why are you doing it?" the newcomer asked. "You can't save them all."

The man picked up another starfish, tossed it into the ocean and turned to his companion and said, "Well, it matters to that one."

"I approach every kid I work with," Ron told me that day, "like one of my own children."

Ron's funeral is scheduled for 11 a.m. Friday at Zion Covenant Church on Fairmount Avenue in West Ellicott. Karen, who lives in Fairport, just outside Rochester, plans to be there.

"He was such a special person," she said. "There's no one who will be able to replace him."

Randy Anderson, the president of the CSHOF, said Ron "had a heart as big as all outdoors."

"Sir Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scouts, once said, 'Try to leave the world a little better than you found it,'" Anderson said. "Our community is a better place because of Ron Graham."

Added Chappale at the end of his Facebook video: "May he rest in power, and thank him for all he's done, not just in my life, but in many, many lives."