

# Fabianich's love of students creates lasting bonds

By KAREN CAMPBELL  
Press Reporter

A self-described hugger, fixer, and “toddler at heart,” Danelle Fabianich’s official title at the University of Tennessee at Martin is Assistant Athletics Director for Academics and Student-Athlete Services. But her love of students has her playing a wide range of roles including substitute mom, truth-speaking counselor, sideline cheerleader, and provider of favorite snacks.

“Freshman go from ‘I HAVE to meet with Danelle today’ to ‘I GET to meet with Danelle today!’” said Diane Luthi, whose own varied resume features titles such as wife to Coach John Luthi of the UTM Rodeo team and administrative support in the rodeo office. “Her office is next to mine, so I see the lines of student athletes in all sports constantly outside her door waiting their turn.”

She recommended The Press feature Danelle in its annual rodeo round up because “she is a special lady in the athletic department, the team’s academic advisor and much more, who they all love.”

A few moments with the animated, dark-haired mother of two adult children, Ashleigh and Dominic, and it’s easy to become caught up in the enthusiasm she conveys regarding “my kids.”

“Even my own birth children refer to them as ‘my kids,’” she explains of the bonds she’s built with UTM students after 22 years on campus and four in her current, and favorite role, advising athletes about their academic course work.

“This is my dream job because I get to hang out with all the cool kids without being a creepy stalker,” she said, punctuating her comment with the humor that helps forge relationships with most of the 434 students who are part of some UTM athletic team.

Given that she often is solving problems and addressing academic issues, not all 434 frequent her office. “We’ve got a lot of smart cookies,” she proudly asserts. But when she does encounter them, she has a goal of remembering each by first name.

“They deserve to be called by their name. They deserve someone in the stands who loves them whether they win or lose, and my job is not dependent on who wins,” she said.

To assist those students who are at-risk academically or who come to her with a problem that arises



**BUILDING BONDS** — While Danelle Fabianich’s sign by her office door lists her official title, the walls surrounding her offer evidence of the many other roles she claims as she serves the hundreds of athletes at UTM. The UTM Rodeo Team claims a big part of the available real estate as both the championship team of 2014 and a shadowbox memorializing Coy Lutz are displayed prominently.

when living life independently of parents for the first time, she relies on her more than two decades of experience in the UTM system, the power of hugs and knowing who likes what snacks.

As students begin to trust her, she moves from advisor to a friend who calls Senior Day and graduation her least favorite days on the calendar. Both remind her that her time with those she’s come to cherish is short.

“It hurts my soul because I’m having to let them go,” she says. Evidence of her ties fills almost every available space in her small office. The walls are covered with framed photos students have shared. The shelves contain exotic mementoes from several of the international athletes’ home countries. And overflowing to the wall beside her office door is space for her to remember the highest highs and lowest lows of her tenure.

One photo shows the 2014 College National Finals Rodeo championship UTM team. While Danelle admits “about 95 percent of the time, if there’s a home game, I’m here,” she had not planned to attend the 2014 event in Casper, Wyoming. But Tyler Waltz caught

her at the crawfish boil that’s a tradition during UTM’s Rodeo Week and made her a deal. If the team won the rodeo in Martin, she would make the trip out west. Given that it’s difficult to pull off a win while simultaneously putting on a rodeo, she thought her future was travel-free. But that year, they won. True to her handshake and her word, she made plans for Wyoming. However, her flight got cancelled. With lots of pleading, she got the last seat on an alternate route, made it to her hotel in time to “fluff” her hair (because “it is the rodeo!”), and arrived at the arena. In a moment outside, awaiting the next contest, she looked up and saw a flash in the sky that might have been a falling star, but was definitely a spark of inspiration and, to Danelle, a sign.

“We’re fixin’ to win this National Championship,” she told Tyler as she gave him one of her all-too-familiar hugs. And they did. “It was the most incredible thing to be a part of,” she explained. “It’s not like basketball or football with the roar of the crowd because tallying the points takes time and it’s after the fact.”

Waiting on the news, she got a quick photo of a line of cowboys sitting on the chutes and in a rare moment of social media Snapchat-ed the photo and the proclamation — National Champions.

She now takes great pride in the fact that then UT President Joe DiPietro reposted her work.

“They weren’t cocky or boastful,” she says with her own measure of pride. “They were humble and so grateful for that win.”

Beside that photo is a reminder of the risks the young men and women she works with face as they enter stadiums, arenas and courts and challenge their bodies to excel.

There hangs a shadowbox of items reflecting the career of Coy Lutz, a 19-year-old member of the rodeo team who died in 2016 while competing at the Cowtown Rodeo in Pilesgrove, N.J., a little over 200 miles from his hometown in Howard, Pennsylvania. Coy was one of Danelle’s first students in her newly-assumed role and she had made a strong connection with him.

“Coy has a piece of my soul,” she acknowledges. Due to knee surgery, she was not able to at-

tend his funeral. So, the photo his mother sent her later with the note explaining that her business card was the first thing in Coy’s wallet is among her treasures.

“It sounds silly, like I have no life, but this is my life,” she shared. “You become a parent and, at some point, friends. It’s the best blessing. I get to come to work every day and leave knowing I’ve made a difference.”

Her experience with Coy is informing what she knows will be a special time on Friday night as the team pays tribute to Wyatt Cole, who died this year as the result of a traffic accident. She remembers taking a bus load of students to Wyatt’s funeral and the unusual silence that gripped the group as they traveled to Kentucky. After what she described as a wonderful celebration of a life lived “wide open with no fear” and remembering his offbeat humor and kindness, “it was like the veil lifted” she said, and the trip home was marked with laughter, storytelling, songs and cards.

“That’s why we have funerals,” she remarked. “To find a place to put your grief.”

A woman of faith, she points to the fact that team members formed a prayer group after Wyatt’s death and Coach Luthi, a man she praises as a “harvester of souls” meets with them.

“As competitive as he is,” she says, “he would trade winning any day for helping these kids become better people ... Nobody prays harder for these kids.”

While she suggests that her life is singularly focused on her job, evidence shows otherwise. A member of Pleasant Hill Baptist, she teaches 3rd-5th grade Sunday school. She’s the new Kiwanis president in Martin, works with Betty Giles and Cile Grassfeather in cheer camps in the summer and holds the honorary title of “director of rodeo operations” bestowed upon her by Diane Luthi because of the various tasks she assumes in the week.

All the titles and roles fulfill a desire that obviously drives Danelle. In describing her admiration of Coach Luthi, she stumbles upon a fitting observation of her own life. “My life is better because I know him,” she said.

“I live my life everyday wanting to make people better. When I’m gone, I want people to say my life is better because I knew her.”

With that, she was on to her next appointment and another hug.

## RIDE TODAY FOR ONLY \$85 TO \$105 A WEEK!\*



**2013**  
**Toyota Corolla** STK# 90823



**2012**  
**Chevy Traverse** STK# 110217



**2012**  
**Acura TL** STK# 008228



**2011**  
**Nissan Murano** STK# 64614



**2001**  
**Pontiac Sunfire** STK# 121204



**2016**  
**Chevy Cruze** STK# 180810



**Brandon Ash**  
Sales Associate

**FAST & EASY APPROVAL**  
We have a great inventory to choose from

**We're roping in the deals!**

**COUPON**  
**\$5000**  
EXPIRES APRIL 30, 2019. Limit One. Must Present Coupon.

OPEN MON-SAT 9AM TO 5PM

**731-281-7300**

249 N. Lindell St., Martin TN  
[www.cityautoplex.net](http://www.cityautoplex.net)

\*with approved credit



**CITY AUTOPLEX**

Premium Certified Pre-Owned Vehicles