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Mary Stewart is the real champion at Michigan

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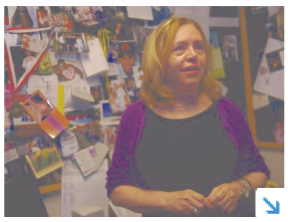
Mary Stewart talks about the students she has helped during her career at the University of MichiganClarence Tabb Jr

Rod Beard, The Detroit News *5:30 a.m. EDT July 10, 2015*



(Photo: Clarence Tabb Jr. / Detroit News)

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Ann Arbor — Her business cards read: "Manager, Conference and Event Services."

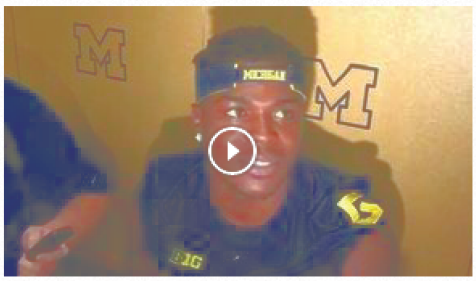
But to hundreds of former athletes and students at Michigan, Mary Stewart represents more.

Her office is tucked away inside the student Union, but plenty of students have known how to get to her when they need to solve a problem or someone to talk to.

A quick look around her office at the photos and notes adorning her walls is a shrine to former Wolverines she has helped: Derek Jeter, Lloyd Carr, Chris Perry, Mike Hart, Denard Robinson and Devin Gardner.

"What you see are not pictures — they're relationships," Stewart said. "There's a piece of everybody on this wall who is a dynamic person."

TOP VIDEOS



Michigan players at media day
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Today marks the end of a 42-year career at Michigan for Stewart, who went beyond the call of her job description. She was an unofficial counselor and mentor to a litany of students.

The news of her retirement reached Jeter, the Yankees great who retired last year. He responded by sending Stewart a signed photo, reading: "To Mary, Congratulations. Retirement: It feels good. DJ."

She spoke with the pride and appreciation as she pointed at each picture in her collection, which she will donate to the Bentley Historical Library.

"You can talk to her about relationships or problems at home or whatever," said Robinson, a former football player. "She was an outlet for us so we didn't have to use the guys at Schembechler Hall or at the academic center."

Stewart admittedly doesn't know much about sports, so her office conversations ranged from academics to relationship advice to just coping with being a minority on campus.

"That's what makes her so special — that wasn't her job description but everyone in the know who needed someone to talk to or advice went and talked to her," said Jarrett Irons, an All-America linebacker in 1996. "It goes to show what kind of person she is — there was a need and she wanted to fill that gap.

"That's why so many former players and other students love her so much and appreciate what she's given to them."

Many in the university community are familiar with Greg Harden, the director of athletic counseling who was featured on "60 Minutes" last year.

Stewart is a different case. She's not officially connected to the athletic department, and her reach extends well beyond.

"She was a star in university community with these students," Harden said. "If they were in any kind of organization and she had to do something to organize an event, the next thing they knew, they had a friend through whom they could get an internship or meet people."

Lifelong bonds

In the late 1980s, Stewart noticed there were few events at the Union for black students, who didn't have any fraternity houses to host events.

"I went to my director and he said they don't have any money and their alumni doesn't fund them or help them," Stewart said. "I started calling credit card companies and asking them if they wanted to advertise their credit card in the Union, but they had to pay the student organizations."

That benefited Omega Psi Phi, and other organizations began asking Stewart for help. She began developing lifelong bonds with students before she ever began working with athletes. But eventually, Carr heard about her.

"You don't have to know her long to appreciate that she has a caring and nurturing way about her," Carr said. "Mary is a champion. She has a great love and passion for Michigan."

Carr wanted her to become a mentor for the football players, but Stewart initially declined, focusing more on other students.


Teryl Austin talks defense
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Beard and Katzenstein at Lions camp
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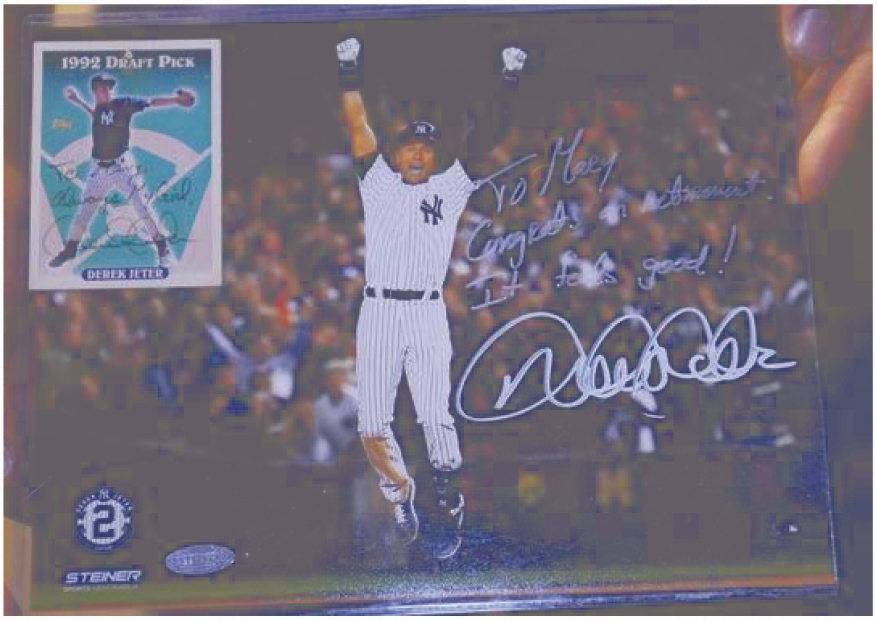
Harbaugh at Michigan media day
01:02

Finally, she agreed to a meeting.



Recently retired himself, Derek Jeter sent Mary Stewart an autographed picture upon learning of her pending retirement. *(Photo: Clarence Tabb Jr., Detroit News)*

"They said he's a great kid from California and we want to connect him with you," Stewart said. "I said I'd come for the lunch. I met Calvin Bell — and that was it. He was the most amazing person."

Bell started a steady stream of football players going to Stewart's tiny office, including his roommate, Perry, an All-America running back in 2003.

At times, her voice cracked and her eyes welled up as she recalled the times Hart would drop in to chat or Perry would stop by to update his mother's health status as she battled cancer.

"She designed her chemotherapies around Chris' away games," Stewart said. "While he was away, I would go over and help her. "She was very weak after chemo, so Saturdays I would go stay with her and watch the games, but most of the time she slept.

"It was a very emotional thing I had with him and I knew what his mother meant to him."

Sounding board

Beyond the students, Stewart also forged relationships with their families that lasted long after they left. She still gets invitations to weddings and plenty of thank you notes and Christmas cards, which she posts on her walls or keeps in baskets and boxes around the office.

Bobby Dishell, the outgoing student government president, used Stewart as a sounding board during a stressful year.

"I felt cared for when I walked into her office," he said. "I could stop by once a week, whether it was university or student government related or any aspect of life," he said. "The remarkable thing is that she never asks for anything in return."

Stewart recognized her office sometimes was the last resort for students. Sometimes, when groups needed funding or students needed money to avoid dropping out, she made calls to alumni to come up with the money.

For some football players, her office was just a sanctuary from the stresses of the team or somewhere to go and talk after a bad game.

"You could feel that they wanted to get away," she said. "They knew they could trust me. They never talked sports and they told me not to talk sports."

That offered a haven for Gardner during a tumultuous time after taking over as the starting quarterback for Robinson.

"When you go into Mary's office, it doesn't matter how good you played; she's like your mom — she wants to help in any way she can," Gardner said. "It was hilarious that she pretty much didn't know anything about football. How do you have all these connections to so many football players and you never thought to learn about football?

"That's why it's so easy to talk to her, because you know she's not there just because you're an athlete; she's there to help."

Finding strength

But in many cases, the relationships with students also helped Stewart. When her uncle died, Hart visited her to help her grieve.

"He came in, shut the door, pulled up a chair and said, 'Mary, open your heart.' " she said.

Stewart said she got strength from watching Gardner handle his turbulent senior season with grace and dignity, despite the team's struggles.

"We're not winning and he still holds his head up," she said. "He's 21 and I'm 60. He has taught me so much. ... I used to worry about everything, and he said, 'You can't change it, Mary. Just walk with your head up.

"I'm taking advice from someone who's 21 — but it was the best advice of my life because I watched him and what he did and it was remarkable."

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