

Kennedy high gym renamed in honor of ‘Dolly’



About 300 packed the gym in honor of Dolly Felix. (Robert Rogers/RichmondConfidential)

By: [Robert Rogers](#) | January 15, 2012 – 11:12 am

Dolly Felix made a difference, and now her name graces the building where she touched so many lives.

About 300 people packed the John F. Kennedy High School gymnasium Saturday for a ceremony dedicating the hardwood floor facility in the former teacher and coach’s honor. The building was officially dedicated the “Coach Dolly Felix Gym.”



(Robert Rogers/RichmondConfidential)

A teacher and coach whose career in public education in Richmond spanned more than 50 years, Felix died in June, 2011, after a battle with Lou Gehrig’s disease. She was 79.

“We all know that Dolly’s heart and soul are in this gymnasium,” County Supervisor John Gioia, one of a series of speakers during the ceremony. “The gym has always had Dolly’s name on it in spirit, and now it’s going to have its name on it in letters.”

The audience—mostly former students and co-workers—cheered loudly.

Felix, whose birth name was Delores but went by “Dolly,” began her career as a physical education teacher at Harry Ells High School in 1956 and was part of the group of educators who opened Kennedy High in 1967.

Until her retirement in the early 1990s, Felix taught classes, mentored students and coached high school sports, including softball, basketball, tennis, gymnastics, baseball, tennis and volleyball. Early in her career, she was a steady proponent of increasing athletic opportunities for girls. During the 1960s and 1970s, Kennedy gained a reputation for excellence in its girls' team sports and academic performance, an ascent led in part by Felix and track coach Johnny Holmes, who was in attendance Saturday.

Eventually, her passion turned to badminton, and that became the sport she coached through her later years, including after she retired from full-time employment.

Saturday's ceremony included an hour-long reception, where alums and employees, many wearing their rich-red Kennedy Eagles T-Shirt, traded stories and signed memorial placards with thank you notes made out to their departed coach, teacher and mentor.

Mike Felder, Kennedy High class of 1979 and a former Major League Baseball player for 10 seasons, said he remembered Felix as a small and silver-haired dynamo who wore a protective wrap around one knee. As an excellent athlete in more traditional sports, Felder admitted that he didn't hide his disappointment when the physical education schedule called for indoor sports, like Felix's beloved badminton.

So she challenged him to a match.

"I had my shot at Mrs. Felix right there," Felder said, pointing to a spot on the hardwood floor. "Next thing I know, I am diving here and diving there."

In recent years, after her retirement, Felix continued to support Kennedy High, a commitment that was clear in a table arrangement Saturday that featured memorabilia and photo slideshows of Felix's life. The arrangement was decidedly Eagle Red.

In 2007, Felix joined Peritz and others to establish the [Eagle Foundation, a nonprofit group that builds support and raises funds to help sustain Kennedy High School](#), which has faced increasing strains from budget cuts and reduced enrollment in recent years.

On Saturday, before the gym's new name—painted high on the east-facing wall—was unveiled, attendees heard from Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, local business leader John Ziesenhenne, Felix's sister Teresa Felix and others. City Councilman Corky Booze also attended.

Gioia, whose voice faltered as he struggled against his emotions, remembered meeting Felix when he was a young boy. Gioia's father, E. John Gioia, was a civics teacher and, along with Felix, one of the founding faculty. "She was always checking in on my dad, always ready to help," Gioia said.

Mike Peritz, a longtime colleague, said Felix's greatest gift was her ability to touch and positively influence others.

"We each thought that Dolly was our Dolly, and that's why we're here today," Peritz said.