

# Nicholas Mannos: 1921 - 2008

*By Melissa Isaacson | Mar 29, 2008*

[Originally published by the Chicago Tribune](#)

Nicholas Mannos was our high school principal.

That meant two things in the '70s: We were scared of him. And we knew little more about him than that.

Oh, we saw him on grainy WGN telecasts each spring, one of those guys with the mustard-colored blazers handing out awards to state champions as a member of the IHSA Board of Directors. If we had really stopped to think about it, that might have impressed us.

But all we knew was that he stood in the corner of the Niles West gym with his arms crossed during basketball games, same position in his trench coat during football season. You didn't want to see much more of him than that.

We knew he was stern and you probably didn't want to cross him.

We did not know he was our best friend.

By "our," I mean every girl who ever dreamed of playing varsity sports in the state of Illinois, but until the mid-'70s had to be content playing intramurals for a 50 cents-per-year dues fee and something they called "postal tournaments."

Why "postal"? Because in a sport like swimming, for example, an announcement would be made over the p.a. system in the morning informing all girls interested in being timed in various events to show up at the pool after school. Those times would then be written on postcards and sent to the IHSA, and the participants would find out the results -- who "won" -- a month or two later.

Kind of took the drama out of it.

Mannos had been fighting it since the late '60s. He had two daughters, Suzanne and Denise -- who knew he had a family? Denise was in high school at the time, a natural

athlete who had to be content cheerleading while her brothers Tim and Peter excelled in soccer at New Trier.

By the '70s, Mannos was getting impatient. Title IX passed in 1972, a law that would technically ensure that no person in the U.S. be excluded from participating in federally funded educational activities on the basis of gender. Realistically, that meant little to us girls. If asked, most of us wouldn't have known what Title IX was.

Mannos certainly knew. And he continued to work in earnest. He got the head of the girls' P.E. department, Lee Anne Heeren, to work on proposals for the inclusion of girls' varsity sports that he could take to the IHSA.

He fought for badminton and tennis first, knowing basketball would have been turned down because it used up valuable gym space during the winter and because many people thought the sport was simply too rough for girls.

He would return to school after these meetings, shaking his head and sharing stories with his teachers about some of these crew-cut men who could barely conceive of girls playing competitive sports.

I didn't know any of this until a few years ago, when in the course of doing research for a book I learned of his amazing contribution. I could hardly wait to interview him.

"You might have trouble," I was told.

Mannos was suffering from a form of dementia not unlike Alzheimer's.

My heart sank. One more person with so much to share but no longer the ability to share it.

I called his wife, Dena. "He's having a good day. I think he'll be able to talk to you," she said hopefully as she handed over the phone.

I braced myself for the worst. But it was the best. Catching him in a lucid moment, he recalled with clarity those days that would change our lives.

"That was one of the goals I had set forth -- that girls deserve a break, and now we have women wrestlers," he said with a chuckle. "I made the motion for girls to be allowed to

participate in basketball and there was serious doubt in some people's minds that this isn't going to work.

"Even from those whose intentions were good, there was a threat in their minds, but we convinced them finally. I took a stand. 'Hey, the train is moving, fellas, get on it and help us out.'"

Nicholas Mannos died Thursday at age 86, a veteran of World War II, a father of four and grandfather of nine, the first principal of Niles West, where he served for 27 years until his retirement in 1989. He will be buried Saturday in Skokie.

"He was a very fine gentleman, a great high school principal and the lightning rod for the start of girls' athletics in the state of Illinois," said Jerry Turry, former athletic director at Niles West under Mannos and now mayor of Lincolnwood. "Every now and then you look back and say, 'These were the pioneers,' and Nick was."

His daughter Denise calls her dad a "feminist," which may have made him blush.

"He was always for equality and justice and the right and fair thing to do," Denise said. "He just felt girls and women should have opportunities that reached beyond what people at that point thought they should have."

All I know is I still have my varsity letter. And I know every other girl on our basketball team does as well.

Exactly 29 years ago Friday, we stood at midcourt at Illinois' Assembly Hall as Mannos, a member of the IHSA board, presented us with the trophy as the newly crowned girls' state basketball champions.

A bigger smile I had never seen on our principal's face. We were proud we had won a state title for him.

Little did we know he had won it for us.