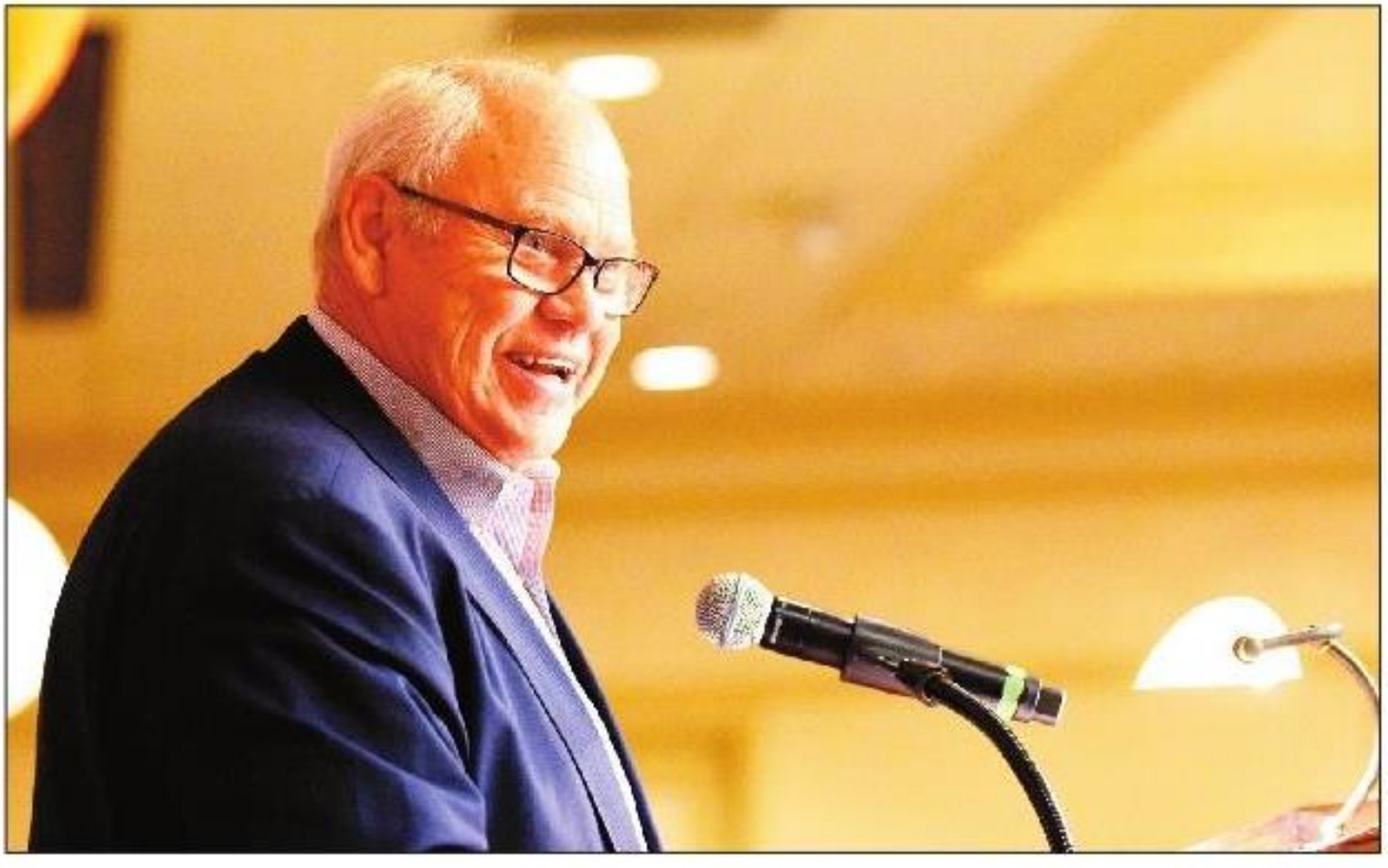
Coach: Guide The Young, Stay The Course

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SUN PHOTO BY DARREN REESE

Former University of Tennessee head football coach Phillip Fulmer speaks Monday night at the Holston United Methodist Home for Children's benefit dinner.

Former University of Tennessee head football coach Phillip Fulmer spent time Monday night reminiscing what it was like to coach the Vols from the sidelines each week.

At the Holston United Methodist Home for Children's annual Friends of Children Benefit Dinner, Fulmer shared why he got into coaching. He talked at length about the 1994 Vols, which he admitted was his favorite team.

He even took a humorous shot at everyone's least favorite former Vol, former head coach Lane Kiffin.

But Fulmer spent the bulk of his address for the event at the General Morgan Inn praising the work of Holston Home and those in the Greene County community who support it.

Fulmer, a National College Football Hall of Fame inductee who earned a 152-52 record at Tennessee, emphasized the importance of spending committed personal time with young people and the importance of an organization knowing why it exists. "Who are you, really?" Fulmer said. "What are you about, really?"

Fulmer pursued coaching because he wanted to work with young people, not to win accolades. "It was about touching young people because a coach and an administrator touched my life," he said.

Fulmer talked at length about what he called his favorite team. It wasn't the 1998 National Champion Volunteers, or the 1997 SEC Champion Vols.

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SUN PHOTO BY DARREN REESE

Holston United Methodist Home for Children board member Kent Bewley speaks Monday while Holston Home CEO Bradley Williams listens.



SUN PHOTO BY DARREN REESE

Greene County Circuit Court Judge Tom Wright emceed Monday's night dinner.

It was the 1994 Vols, a team he coached to an overall 8-4 record with a No. 22 AP ranking by the end of the season. Still in the shadow of legendary UT coach Johnny Majors, yet before Peyton Manning left his mark in Knoxville, the team's overall record was less than what Vols fans expected.

But Fulmer said the group was his favorite because it fought through adversity.

The year started 1-3 for the Vols, who were replacing famed quarterback Heath Shuler with a relative unknown in Jerry Colquitt. "I've never seen a team rally around a quarterback like they did that kid," Fulmer said.

In the nationally televised season opener against UCLA in the Rose Bowl, Colquitt injured his knee. Second-string quarterback Todd Helton — who would later go on to a successful Major League Baseball career with the Colorado Rockies — took over the reins at quarterback. Then, playing against Mississippi State, he tore up his knee.

Enter Manning, the third-string freshman quarterback. The Vols turned the ball over five times in his debut and by the end of the game were 1-3.

Fulmer went to then-Athletic Director Doug Dickey and said he didn't think the Vols could win anymore games that season. When Fulmer asked his mentor if he would still love him, Dickey reportedly said, "Phillip we're gonna love you, but we're sure gonna miss you."

Fulmer said the coaching staff rallied with each other, outlined a plan to make themselves better, then at a team meeting shared that plan with the players and asked them what they could do to make the team better.

The Vols went on to win seven of their eight remaining games, including a win over Virginia Tech in the Gator Bowl to close the season.

With that, the foundation was laid for the most successful years of Tennessee football in modern history including the 1998 National Championship, Fulmer said.

"It's the same things in these kids' lives," Fulmer said of the students at Holston Home. "If you've got the underpinnings and you've got the foundation, and you've worked really hard and you've stayed the course through that tough time, you're going to come out a lot better."

Fulmer referenced the film The Blind Side, in which he played himself, which features the story of a young man who grows up in an impoverished drug culture in Memphis, is eventually adopted by another family, then goes on to become one of the nation's most touted football prospects.

"That's on a grand scale of story, but when you lay your head on the pillow tonight, think about what you're doing," Fulmer said to the audience at the dinner. "We're making a difference in a young person's life."

Helping young people stand firm through adversity is one of the most important things any adult can do, Fulmer said.

"You adjust because you've been taught to do that; you've been trained to do that," he said. "That's what we're doing with our young people. I've been in some of the worst ghettos you can ever imagine, and I've come out of there with some of the best kids you could ever imagine."

Fulmer spoke fondly of his friend, the late Sen. Fred Thompson, recalling how people often confused the two, and also joked that the first two years after leaving coaching he worked as a studio analyst for CBS Sports in New York "mostly to get out of town while Kiffin was here," which earned him lots of laughs and some applause.

'BACK TO THE FUNDAMENTALS'

Holston Home CEO Bradley Williams highlighted four fundamentals Holston Home emphasizes with students there:

- "A real relationship with Jesus Christ"
- Education
- Work
- Recreation

Williams shared the story of a student, Dalton, who recently was court-ordered to complete a substance abuse program at another facility. Williams said a couple days after leaving for the program, Dalton showed up on the front porch of a residence hall at Holston Home — before he was supposed to come back. Dalton told Holston Home staff that he had a hard time adjusting to the new program and retreated to his room there, saying: "I sat in my room, and I looked and I'd been in there an hour and a half, and nobody had come to check on me."

So, he ran back to Holston Home.

Williams said the staff encouraged him to complete the program. But then he said the Holston Home staff will try to find a way to get Dalton back to Holston Home.

"Home is a place where you can blow it, you can be successful, but people love and accept you unconditionally," Williams said.

He covered other highlights, including the fact that of the 27 graduates from Holston Home's Beacon School last year, 24 pursued four-year degrees or technical school of some sort.

Last year, 450 Holston Home students were linked with some sort of extracurricular activity, which Holston Home sees as being a key part of the recreation component of its mission.

Holston Home's biggest mission is to "undo the lies" many kids hear that tell them they are worthless. Doing that is what "fertilizes the field so that learning and growth can take place," he said.

Greene County Circuit Court Judge Tom Wright served as master of ceremonies for the dinner, which was chaired by Debbie Oldenberg. The program also included Holston Home's Youth Choir performing a song, and many Holston Home youth greeting guests at the door.

Fulmer will also speak at an upcoming Holston Home benefit dinner in Knoxville later this year.

For more information about Holston United Methodist Home for Children, go to holstonhome.org.