As we celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the WSCCA Conference, it was an honor to be asked to write something for all the amazing attendees this banner year. I am not sure I understand why since I was just barely born when this conference started but I’ll give it my best shot. Haha!

I’ll say that I truly am honored and thank Tara for reaching out, especially knowing I couldn’t physically be there this year. I am there in spirit in every way – celebrating all the incredible accomplishments of WA Cheer teams and programs this year – locally, regionally, and Nationally.

To say I’m amazed at the changes to WA Cheer in the last 25 years would be a true understatement! We have multiple State, National, and World Champions in our mix. That includes at many levels and in so many different divisions. We have Hall of Fame Coach and Program, Coach, Assistant Coach, and Rising Star of the year, and Rec Program Coach and Assistant Coach winners in our mix. We have individuals that have been recognized for their judging prowess at the local, regional, State, and National level. We have programs that have been recognized as being in the Top X of X in our mix. We have collegiate champions and Team USA competitors and champions in our mix. We have cheerleaders that grew into collegiate cheerleaders and coaches that are now training the next generation here and across the Nation. We have cheerleaders and coaches that have used their talents, skills, and all they learned in cheer to positively affect the lives of others in their professions of choice. We are Washington and we have made it clear in the last 25 years we aren’t going anywhere. Or maybe we areso watch out.

Everything I know that I, and those that stood beside me 25 years ago, dreamed of seeing Washington become continues to come to fruition. If they aren’t with you at the conference right now, it’s either because they are out of town (like me), they retired to enjoy life away from cheer (that can be a thing – just ask “the Beav”), they moved on to other avenues and passions, or they actually are beside you and maybe you don’t realize they were also one of the many that made this happen long ago. I know I can/will miss someone and please forgive me if I do but I can assure you that possibly sitting beside you are Kim Mayer, Kim Kawachi, Kim Westerberg, Cindy Pardee, Kathy Crowley, Serena Schoelkopf , Kellee Wallace, Nancy-Ellen Elster, the Brothers’ Rayam, and Kate Grieve…all of whom were also part of that initial push to create the State Championship and create this conference.

Back in the day, as we grew the WSCCA alongside the originator, Mrs. Pam Headridge, we knew we wanted to be a place where coaches could come together, put their “differences” and/or competitive natures (don’t lie…you ALL have it whether your program competes or not) aside, celebrate the year and each other, reignite for the new year, share ideas, and just have some fun together! When we first held this conference, it was in a school where we moved from classroom to classroom like we were in middle or high school again. I think we maybe had projectors or maybe we just wrote on the whiteboards before they became those fancy ones. We sat in small circles because we were small and we simply chatted like we were all at lunch together.

As the conference grew, so did our ambitions on where to have it and who to bring in. Mr. Jim Lord has known me for longer than he probably wishes and I remember having dinner with him the first year he came to present, warning him about where we were at that point and what we needed from him to keep growing. Be honest friends…we needed to have that conversation back then! We have continued to bring in phenomenal people through the years, including the amazing individuals that are gracing the conference this year to help continue to teach and inspire all of you while you also teach, inspire, and connect with each other…the latter truly being the most important.

Granted, though everyone else believes we all do it for the pay (lol!), we all know the true reward is in the passion and heart we have for this athletic activity and the kids that come through our programs. When they hit that stunt, when they get that dance just right, when they get complimented by their community, when they nail that tumbling pass, when they walk off the competition floor knowing they gave their heart, when they decide they want to cheer in college, when they decide they want to coach…we do it for them, for those kids that become part of an extended family we never imagined we’d have and yet can’t imagine never having been part of creating.

You are all so special and so important – more than you know and more than you may ever believe. Most of you know I have four kids that grew up in cheer in WA State. They spent their lives hearing their Mom (and Coach too since I did both) talk about them spreading their wings beyond Washington eventually…but Washington is where they first learned what family meant…the good, the frustrating, and everything in between. They had many, many Cheer Aunts, Siblings, Friends, Cousins, and more. Many of you in the room right now helped shape them through the years and watched them grow up. And they watched you too. I can’t speak for them but I know I will forever carry every Washington coach and program I’ve ever known, worked with, helped, coached, choreographed for, judged, or simply watched, in my heart forever because you were part of MY family growing up. You were part of my family’s life, our history, who we are, and who we became. I coached a few of you in this room. Just ask those that still have nicknames for 15 plus years ago they are still called. Even more telling, for some of you, I coached your coach. The history and lineage in WA State for 25 years is deep, telling, intrinsic, and truly so incredible.

We truly are Washington. A different breed, a special breed, and one that continues to grow, evolve, and come into its own. Though we don’t celebrate “All Stars” at the WSCCA anymore, when we started, we did. We can’t celebrate who we are without also giving massive kudos to the programs around the State that work with high school teams, train high school cheerleaders, and also support local schools and communities in all they do as well. Just as we would tell All-Stars never to take the high school programs for granted, I implore you all to do the same. Work with your All-Stars, support those athletes, support those programs, and know that at the end of the day, we are all in this for the same reason – to support and encourage our cheer athletes to always do and be their best at all they do, at every level, and in every way! We have WA athletes and coaches now spanning the globe as athletes, coaches, mentors, and trainers. It’s mind blowing, it’s incredible, and it’s because of each and every one of you. Never forget that.

As everyone that knows me knows, I could easily continue for another 100 pages, hours, or however long you’ll let me espouse about WA cheer then and now, the winding path we took, the obstacles overcome, the challenges faced, the successes found, the celebrations had, and more than anything – the friendships formed.

I was specifically asked that “as one of the original coaches that took the initiative to create a place where coaches could receive training and come together as a community to share their love of cheer, and as we approach the 25th Anniversary of the WSCCA, is there anything you would like to share with our membership?” I was, am, and will always be honored to have been asked as I have truly given my heart and soul to WA cheer for the last 25 years. That won’t change no matter where I am or where I go. I think I have given a synopsis of the history and hope that I have rightfully honored those that stood beside me during that time. We may not have always held hands, but we did always hold hearts and that means even more sometimes.

I would say, as we all head into the next 25 years, let’s never forget that we are family. Just like other families, we may want to strangle each other now and then and yet we may want to hug, hold on, and never let go. We may want to beat each other on the floor but then high five and celebrate off the floor. We may have differences of ideas and opinions. We may agree, disagree, and we may have to agree to disagree. We may judge one another and yet at the same time support each other. Just like a family, there will always be ups and downs. Never, ever forget though that our end game is the same no matter who we are, the colors we wear, the name on the front of our uniforms, or the name of the school. We don’t do this for us. We do this for them…

The kids that want to feel the lights on Friday. The kids that want to hear the roar of the crowd. The kids that love the sounds of the bleachers in a gym. The kids that love igniting community spirit. The kids that bump chests and then set up on the big blue mat. The kids that travel the U.S. to represent. The kids that want to cheer in college. The kids that want to coach and follow in YOUR footsteps. The kids that want to have an experience and make friends they never knew they could have. The kids…period.

We do this for them. We do this separately but in these moments we remember we do this together…even if from afar. We created this conference to make connections, create networks, learn, grow, evolve, and become the type of team you ask for your teams to be. Get numbers, keep in touch, and keep that network ever building, growing, and evolving. You’ll never know the people that could be part of your reason, season, or even lifetime until you do.

Congratulations to everyone on an amazing year! Celebrate this weekend, congratulate each other, cherish the moments, and remember that we truly are family…then, now, and always.

Let’s go WA Cheer…continue to put this PNW gem on the map on every level!! If you ever need anything, most know where to find me via phone, email, website, or more. If you don’t, just find one of my kids in some way – they will find me for you. 😊

Always in cheer and beyond –

Ronda Thomas