

(

COLLIERVILLE

Mother OK with \$4,000 annual tab for daughter's competitive cheerleading

By *Daniel Connolly* of *The Commercial Appeal*

Posted: *June 27, 2016*

Ashby Brown's cheer practices would start with running, pushups, squats and other conditioning exercises. They lasted about an hour. Then the real work would start: drilling stunts and gymnastics, bringing complex routines closer and closer to perfection.

Ashby's role on the Collierville High School team was "main base," which meant she'd help hoist another girl into the air and spin her. She recalled driving home after three-hour practices. "I feel like a noodle ... I have to put the music on really loud or else I almost fall asleep in the car."

The team practiced 10 months per year. What kept her going? The chance to perform each year under the bright lights of a big competition in Orlando. "Just for those two minutes and 30 seconds I have at nationals to try to be the best I can be. And get my team to be the best we can be."

Many parents in Collierville and Germantown are paying roughly \$4,000 per year for their daughters to have experiences like this.

In inner-city Memphis, meanwhile, school employees sometimes have to pay out of their own pockets to buy sport shoes for young athletes.

Competitive cheerleading in suburban Memphis reflects a tendency for parents in wealthier districts to encourage their children not just to compete, but to do so at an elite level. Competitive cheer also illustrates the widespread phenomenon of "pay to play" in school extracurriculars, a practice that's drawn criticism from people who say it drives out poor kids from activities that can teach them valuable skills.

Collierville's school board recently approved a list of fines and fees, formalizing a practice of charging money that has existed for many years. Football costs families \$300 before fundraising offsets. Softball costs \$1,200 and baseball, \$1,600. But by far the most expensive sport was competition cheer: \$3,550 per year, and a variation called competition pom: \$3,850 per year.

The fee covers expenses including outside coaching, travel and the costs of using a private gymnastics training center. Cheerleading and dance are likewise the school activities that charge the biggest fees in Arlington, Bartlett and Germantown.

Now 18, Ashby Brown graduated from Collierville High in May after three years in middle school cheer and four years competing at the high school level, including a senior year as captain.

Her mother, Melissa Brown, 46, tells a story to show the sport's value. Ashby was a high school freshman, and the team was competing in the worlds in Orlando.

The night before the competition, Ashby was suffering from an energy-sapping illness. "Literally couldn't even stand up in the shower, she was so sick," her mother said.

If Ashby pulled out, her teammates would have to adjust their routine at the last minute. If Ashby went onstage, her sickness might make her fail and hurt the team. The mother let her daughter decide what to do.

Ashby decided to go on. She says she was so ill that she barely recalls performing, but muscle memory kicked in, and she did her part. The

team won.

Her mother draws a lesson.

"The point is now she knows beyond the shadow of a doubt, that no matter what challenge she faces in her life, if she puts her mind to it and mentally decides 'I am going to do this,' she knows that she has the mental toughness to be able to succeed," she said. "And that is worth every penny I've ever put into this program in seven years."

Ashby said the sport trained her to lead others, to get outside her social circle, overcome shyness and face high-stakes situations that seemed terrifying at first. She and her mom say the sport helped in other aspects of life, like academics.

She took an array of honors and college-level courses in high school and scored a 32 on the ACT, better than 98 percent of kids in the U.S., and she's heading to the University of Alabama on a scholarship.

Her days of competitive cheerleading are probably over, she said, though she might coach younger students.

"I can't imagine what I would be without cheer," she said.

Her mother works as a recruiting manager for a health-care company and her father is CEO of a medical group. Melissa Brown says that for any family, cheerleading is pricey, though participants can offset costs through fundraising and activities such as selling concessions at sporting events.

Some Collierville school board members have expressed concern about high fees. Collierville is an affluent community, yet state data say 15 percent of students in the school system are economically disadvantaged.

Superintendent John Aitken has said he'd like the school system to cut fees and make the activities more accessible to all. But he said parental demand for top-level programs makes that difficult.

"I probably could offset it at a basic level," he said recently. "But if we want this type of program up here," he said, holding his hand high in the air, "and the best facilities and the best fields, then it's going to require more from the parents."

At a recent Boston conference for education reporters, Harvard public policy professor Robert Putnam said charging fees for extracurricular activities stops poor kids from learning skills that they need to succeed in life, like teamwork and grit.

A Pew survey last year found that 84 percent of affluent parents said their children had participated in sports in the past 12 months, compared with 59 percent among lower-income parents.

In Tennessee, students poor enough to qualify for free and reduced lunch don't have to pay fees for courses like band, though they're not exempt from fees for extra activities like sports. And some middle-income families not poor enough to qualify for fee waivers would still have trouble finding the hundreds of dollars extra.

Recognizing this, Collierville High's band program allows struggling families to pay the \$600 annual fee in installments. Sometimes they stretch the final payment all the way to graduation day, said Michael Wilson, the band director who's on leave as he recovers from cancer.

The band program also gives discounts to families that have more than one child in the band, cutting the price to \$300 for the second child and nothing for a third, Wilson said.

"So \$900 was the max that anybody was going to pay ... That's been one of my biggest things since I've been there. I don't want money to stop any kid from being able to do band."

In some other Memphis area schools, administrators know many parents can't pay fees, and they look for other ways to raise money for activities.

The Shelby County school system doesn't have an overall fee list and can't provide dollar figures, spokeswoman Kristin Tallent said. She said she contacted staffers at Raleigh-Egypt High and White Station High and they told her that for most extracurricular activities, fees are minimal.

"In cases where students can't afford shoes to compete in sports, school staff members chip in to help make sure the child has the shoes necessary to compete," she wrote in an email. "With more than 80 percent of our students being economically disadvantaged, our coaches, teachers and administrators are constantly digging into their own pockets to help support our children."

At the Soulsville Charter School in South Memphis, staffers got creative when they launched a rowing program during the 2014-2015 school year. One of the founders was Kathryn Adamus, a speech language pathologist who had rowed in college.

Adamus said organizers got permission to use equipment owned by Rhodes College and raised funds through techniques including candy sales, a basketball tournament and a grant from a foundation. They received a donated boat and practiced on the Wolf River lagoon, near the Pyramid, though they haven't competed against anyone yet. The program recently completed its second year with about 15 students from Soulsville and other charter schools.

The coach said the sport teaches leadership and responsibility. "If you don't show up, the team doesn't go ... If you don't pull as hard you can, you can't win."

The students don't pay anything. Adamus said she doesn't want money concerns to stop young people from joining a sport that could change their lives, win them a college scholarship or maybe even a shot at the Olympics. "You never know how or what an impact one thing can have for one kid."

**About Daniel Connolly**

Daniel Connolly is a Memphis native who graduated from White Station High School and Kenyon College in Ohio. He joined The Commercial Appeal in 2006 and now covers Collierville. He's a member of the professional association Investigative Reporters and Editors and the author of "The Book of Isaias," a nonfiction work on children of Hispanic immigrants growing up in Memphis, scheduled for publication by St. Martin's Press of New York in fall 2016. In his spare time he enjoys long-distance running, jiu-jitsu and judo.

 [@danielconnolly](#)  daniel.connolly@commercialappe...  901-529-5296

Find this article at:

<http://archive.commercialappeal.com/news/suburbs/collierville/why-high-school-cheerleading-costs-parents-roughly-4000-per-year---and-what-it-says-about-the-soci-3-384386751.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.