

Benko offers "fatherly" advice at Avco Family Tournament banquet

(John Benko, vice president of General Bowling Corp., and a 1989 inductee into the NCABA Hall of Fame, delivered a short, emotional—and most memorable—speech at last month's awards banquet for the Avco Family Tournament participants. What follows is a major excerpt.)

"...And as I watched that first match unfold, when we got near the end of that first game, I saw little Joey Greer [of the Louisiana Prep Division team] double—I believe in the seventh and eighth frames. I watched as that match evened up, and then he left the 3-10 split, which could have passed the lead over to the Stillions family [Paige, 9, and Thomas of Alexandria—see related story next page]. That little kid went up there with such intensity, eyeing those pins—totally unaware that two or three hundred of us were watching—rolled that ball, picked up that split, turned around, slapped his hand, and gave the high-five—to himself! That's when I knew that the competitive factor of this event was a complete success.

But it really didn't hit me—at least what did hit me—until it was all over. When the last match was won, and all eyes were on Melissa and Linda [Thomeczek of Kansas, Major Division champions], they stood in the bowlers' area—two or three hundred people watching—and spontaneously looked at each other, smiled, grabbed each other, hugged, kissed, and shed a tear—and that's when I knew the Family Tournament was a complete success.

At that moment I thought back to the most significant moment in my life, and I want to tell you about it.

I grew up in a really tough neighborhood with a dad and mom who raised us, I think, quite well, but my older brother, younger brother, sister, and I were very macho. And what Linda and Melissa did, we would never do.

We were tough.

On March 30, 1984, my father sought me out in a very crowded room—just like this—and spoke to me in a way that he had never spoken to me before. The content of that conversation was very private, but when we ended, we embraced, we hugged, we kissed, we cried, we smiled. And we said to each other, 'I love you very, very much.'

The most significant thing about that night was the next day my dad died.

And when I saw Melissa and Linda do that, and I realized that this was a family tournament, I felt that if everyone here could take home that one message.

Learn from a guy who made one day in time.

I can tell you that my mom's still alive, and I tell her regularly, 'I love you,' and I hug her and I kiss her.

I have three kids, and the most successful measurement of my life is that I guarantee you there isn't a week that goes by that I don't kiss and hug each one of them and tell them that I love them.

And if I'm good, they tell me the same thing!

Don't make the mistake I almost made, kids—and parents. Learn to do what Linda and Melissa did. Regularly. Learn to cast aside any macho feelings you might have, and I'll tell ya, you'll be a lot better off for the rest of your lives."