

Tearful Leonard Hamilton Joins Cancer Crusade At Dick Vitale Gala

By Joey Knight
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SARASOTA — Composure is an annual casualty at the Dick Vitale Gala. It dissipates with each account of a kid's chemotherapy struggle, and with each eulogy of a pubescent guest of honor from a prior year.

And sometimes, when the dignitaries in attendance reflect on how cancer's scourge has ravaged their own inner circle, it can vanish altogether.

So it was Friday evening with 69-year-old FSU basketball coach Leonard Hamilton. One of three honorees at the 13th annual event at the Ritz-Carlton in Sarasota, he mentioned losing his parents, grandmother and two younger brothers — both of whom he adopted as teenagers — to various forms of cancer.

And one of the most stern, sullen, stoic figures in the business began weeping.

"This means an awful lot to me to be here to have an opportunity to participate," Hamilton, his voice breaking, said during a pre-gala press conference. "And I'm in. ... I'm so happy that (Vitale) gave me the opportunity to be a part of this. I'm gonna be a soldier for the cause."

With the indefatigable master of ceremonies presiding, the cause forged onward Friday. Dozens of sports celebrities mingled with guests at a \$1,000-per-plate affair to raise funds benefiting pediatric cancer research for The V Foundation.

Susan Braun, the foundation's CEO, said \$25 million has been raised through the galas alone. Not good enough, insisted Vitale, whose crusade for pediatric cancer research essentially continues year-round.

If it were sufficient, Vitale said, kids such as Tony Colton would've been among the dozens of young cancer conquerors in attendance Friday.

A devout Tampa Bay Lightning fan diagnosed with a rare childhood form of cancer in 2011, Colton developed a bond with Lightning coach Jon Cooper, appearing at the coach's own cancer fundraiser — a fishing event — two autumns ago.

Colton passed away last summer at age 17. On Friday, Vitale sobbed at the memory of his final hospital visit to Colton.

"He was laying in bed with tubes all over him, morphine to kill the pain," Vitale said.

"I vowed to him as I sat at the bed, 'Tony, I promise you, I promise you to my last breath, I'm 78 years old, I feel I've got the energy of a 25-year-old. There's nothing that will stop me from begging and pleading (for funds).'

"We need dollars, people. I can't tell you enough.

The personal stories arrived in somber succession.

ESPN personality Mike Greenberg, another special honoree Friday, mentioned how all proceeds from his first novel (*All You Could Ask For*) went to The V Foundation. The funds were earmarked specifically for breast cancer research in honor of his wife's best friend, Heidi Armitage, who died from the disease in 2009.

Fellow honoree Jim Harbaugh mentioned Chad Carr, grandson of one of his Michigan coaching predecessors, Lloyd Carr. Chad was stricken with Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma (DIPG), a highly aggressive brain tumor, and died in 2015 at age 5.

Then there was Hamilton. Raised in Gastonia, N.C., he adopted younger siblings Willie, Barry and Pam upon graduating from the University of Tennessee-Martin.

"Our circumstances were very difficult at home," he said. "I really didn't have much choice. In order for them to survive, I had to find a way, so I had to be successful to give them an opportunity to be successful."

Barry died of lung cancer at age 54 in 2010. Two years later Willie, whose cancer had originated in his prostate, passed away at 57. Before that, his father John also died of cancer at age 76 in 1999. His mom, Bennie Ruth, also ultimately succumbed to cancer, though she lived into her 90s.

"You can't find words to express the challenges of going through those experiences, and trying to come up with a solution and an answer," said Hamilton, who led the 'Noles to the Elite Eight in March.

"I've been so fortunate in my life, maybe 12, 13 or 14 conference championships, three Final Fours (as a Kentucky assistant), had a lot of great moments. This is probably the most important event that I've ever had the opportunity to participate in, because it's such an ugly disease."