



Cheer moms Angela Johnson, Berta Vela, Susan Thiele, and Tania Rhea know the difference having a supportive parent can make in their daughters' lives



Angela Johnson supports both her Katy High School cheerleader Leah and West Memorial Junior High cheerleader, Lacey



Koryn Luna, a cheerleader for Cinco Ranch High School, with her biggest supporter, her mom Berta Vela



MOMS

Behind the

MEGA

PHONES

Katy moms have what it takes to cheer their cheerleaders to victory

Written by Susan Perini | Select photography by Sara Isola

In the early days of cheerleading, one word was often used to describe the participants: big. Cheerleaders had big voices, big smiles, big personalities, and, yes, big hair. The ability to do gymnastic tricks and dance routines was optional. Today, cheerleading has evolved into a highly competitive, year-long activity that require dedication, hard work, athleticism, and determination. The intense training and enormous time commitment requires strong family support - and that's where cheer moms come in.

Laura Anne Thiele, captain of the Katy Tigers cheer squad, is grateful for her mom Susan's support



Tania Rhea loves watching her daughters Ema and Amy perform as WoodCreek Junior High cheerleaders



What Is a Cheer Mom?

Cheer moms have sometimes been stereotyped in movies as pushy women who are forcing their children to be cheerleaders. In reality, most of these moms are behind-the-scenes heroes who become chauffeurs, seamstresses, social directors, tutors, fund-raisers, and cheerleaders themselves, all in an effort to support their children's passion.

Balancing Act

Sandra McKinley's daughter, Hannah, has cheered for Katy Youth Football (KYF) for five years, McMeans Junior High for two years, and the competitive cheer team Prodigy All-Stars for five years. McKinley admits it is tricky to balance all the practices with homework and other activities. It's particularly tough when she and her husband have to split their time between their two children, which they playfully call "divide and conquer." However, she says that it is worth it because cheerleading has taught Hannah many life lessons - especially about teamwork. "When you are part of a team, it can't be all about you. You have a personal responsibility to support your team through your actions and your training," McKinley says.

This same sentiment is echoed by many Katy cheer moms. "These girls are not all at the same level with their skills, so they learn to have patience with each other, motivating and encouraging each other to help make the whole team better," says Cynthia Grace, whose daughter Ariel cheers for Cinco Ranch Junior High. Grace attends all the games and records the team's performances. She will compile all the footage into one video to give to each of the girls at the end of the year.



Sandra McKinley believes that cheer has taught her daughter Hannah many life lessons



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It's All Worth It

Tania Rhea has twins who both cheer at WoodCreek Junior High, and one of them also cheers for a Prodigy competitive team. Rhea attends all the games and says there is also a commitment to out-of-town traveling for competitions. Cheerleading takes enormous dedication from both the girls and the parents. "One thing I like about school cheer is that the girls have to sign a contract acknowledging that they are accountable for their actions," Rhea says. "They must promise to keep their grades up, not engage in bullying, and just be responsible. If they break the rules, there are real consequences."

It was never the intention of Mary Priddy to have all three of her daughters involved in KYF and school cheer, but she wouldn't change a thing. As a KYF cheer team mom of 10 years, this supermom has planned countless fundraisers, Halloween parties, snacks, pictures, and awareness drives and has also sent weekly emails to other team members - all while juggling the schedules of her own girls. "It's all worth it," Priddy says. "It has been a positive experience for all of them, teaching them leadership, responsibility, and how to be accountable for your actions when you are in a uniform representing your team."

A Learning Experience

Angela Johnson is definitely not the stereotypical cheer mom. "I'm rough around the edges," laughs the former softball player. She was surprised when her two oldest daughters gravitated toward cheerleading, yet she wanted each of them to follow their own path. "I knew cheerleading would teach my girls new things, but it taught me, too. It has opened my eyes to these amazing kids, the work they do - it blew my mind," says Johnson. One way she supports all three of her girls and their activities and teams is by keeping a big bag in her car filled with T-shirts representing each school and team. Often she attends back-to-back games, and she simply dons a new shirt in the car between games.

Cheerleaders in Disguise

Like any parent, cheer moms all agree on the pride they feel when they see their girls work with determination and tenacity for their accomplishments. "One of my proudest moments is when I see Hannah struggle with a particular skill, and instead of giving up, she continues to work hard until she succeeds," says McKinley. Cheerleading may have helped teach the girls this determination and dedication, but their moms, working behind the scenes, are the cheerleaders in disguise. They are the ones who foster these qualities throughout their children's lives.

These amazing women give a glimpse of how the world of cheerleading has evolved for the athletes and for those who support them from the sidelines. "Big" can still describe cheerleaders today, but now it refers to commitment, devotion, and hearts - descriptions that apply to their moms as well. **KM**

SUSAN PERINI lives in Katy with her loving husband and three wonderful children.

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Ariel Grace, a cheerleader for Cinco Ranch Junior High, loves having her mom Cynthia at her games



Cheer mom Mary Priddy has three daughters involved in different levels of cheerleading

Sisters Emily, Lauren, and Alexis Priddy



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