

The words on the walls of Villanova's campus practice facility are nothing remarkable.

Attitude. Defend. Rebound. Run. Execute.

College basketball players at elite programs across the country are bombarded by the same subliminal mantras in their own gyms. Maybe the message sinks in. Maybe it doesn't.

Play with Pride. Play Smart. Play Together. Play Hard.

What has made Villanova different - at least to the extent that the entire program, and especially the players, actually live the words - is the guy who put them on the walls in the first place.

"We know we have to get guys who really want to be part of Villanova basketball and not just guys who love playing basketball," Jay Wright said.

Wright, 54, is in his 15th season as head coach of Villanova. This weekend, the Wildcats are in the Final Four of the NCAA tournament, completing a four-year climb from an ignominious 2011-12 season in which Villanova finished 13-19.

The current Wildcats are, by Wright's standards, a classic from the Villanova mold, a roster of players who might not be as individually talented as some others but who collectively form a team that has a great chance to win the national championship. It all gets back to the words on the walls of the Davis Center. And to the man who didn't just put the words there but put the walls there, too.

"Fifteen years ago, he was in my office, talking about the things we needed to do for the program and talking about a practice facility. This was before he won a game here," said Whitey Rigsby, the former player who is now director of development for athletics. "They were sharing a gym with the volleyball team at the time. I'm thinking, 'Howard Porter used to change in the hallway and wore a T-shirt to practice.' Well, who was right and who was wrong?"

The Davis Center, which houses separate facilities for the men's and women's basketball teams as well as a fitness facility for the rest of the campus, opened in 2007. The \$18 million cost was raised entirely through private donations, with Wright acting as the tip of the spear in that fund-raising.

"I tell people all the time that there are a lot of really good basketball coaches out there," said Vince Nicastro, the Villanova athletic director from 2001 to 2015. "But you wouldn't find a better person to be the basketball coach at Villanova than Jay Wright."

Saying the right things, putting the right words on the walls, is the easy part.

Finding the players who will accept the philosophy, and making that philosophy actually work on the court, is the hard part.

"The two important things in coaching is that the kids have to believe what you tell them and what you tell them has to be right," said Rigsby.

The words that were left off the walls - words like *win* and *score* - are as important as the ones that are there. Players good enough to be regulars in a top Division I program are almost always the products of an AAU experience in which the score and the scoring were in the boldest print, and the college game is viewed as an intermediate step to somewhere better. Wright tries to recruit against that culture and succeeds most of the time.

"What he has done, and how he's had this program set up, is he gets the right guys to come in and play hard and not worry about themselves," said freshman guard Jalen Brunson. "No one on this team is self-centered. No one cares who scores the most points or gets the best stats. As long as we play hard and play defense, everybody's OK with that."

Everyone agrees that there was a hiccup in the program four years ago when the Wildcats missed playing in the postseason for the only time since Wright became coach. It was a team without senior leadership, a team that didn't have the usual close bond, and one that was taller than most of Wright's teams, lacking the deep

well of guards that is usually a Villanova staple.

That season broke a streak of seven straight 20-win seasons and seven straight NCAA appearances, including four trips to the Sweet 16, one that extended to the Elite Eight, and another to the Final Four. The disappointment came directly after Villanova had been upset in the opening game of the previous season's NCAA tournament by George Mason. There were even subtle rumbles that Wright needed to turn things around quickly.

"It was interesting, just watching him," said assistant coach Baker Dunleavy. "He certainly didn't change a lot. There were subtle changes, but we became even more committed to our core values. He was very patient and worked hard, and it certainly didn't happen overnight."

What did happen, and can't be overstated, is that Wright welcomed a freshman class that included guard Ryan Arcidiacono and center Daniel Ochefu, who formed the backbone of a team that was built around them. The words on the walls might as well have been theirs.

"Players like to win. Players like to score points. But if you just play the game for the score, there are going to be games where you're up 20 points, and you realize that it doesn't matter what you do. You're going to win," Wright said. "It's hard to teach them, but when they really get it, then you'll be able to play well in the [NCAA tournament] game against Kansas because you played well in the game against FDU in November. For 18- and 19-year-olds to get that is hard."

Because Arcidiacono and Ochefu developed into surrogate coaches on the floor and in the locker room, Wright's job became easier. The hardest part was continuing to find players who were both exceptionally talented and willing to subordinate that talent to an extent for a common good, which is a pretty good trick.

"Jay has great confidence in his abilities. I don't mean that he is arrogant or cocky, but he is self-assured about how he wants to lead his program," Nicastro said. "He came back and really doubled down on the type of players he wanted to recruit and the type of teammates he wanted to put together in the locker room. I don't know if he felt it got away from him a little bit, but there was clearly a doubling down on the values and principles he had established."

The payoff arrived quickly. Villanova won 20, 29 and 33 games in the next three years, although the rising tide was halted suddenly in the NCAA tournament each of those seasons. Some of it was bad luck - running into a hot Connecticut team on the way to the 2014 title or into a taller N.C. State team that was a bad matchup in 2015 - but some of it was the fact that the rebuilding didn't yet include the final touch of resolve to make the words on the wall come to life.

"You don't get here unless they really want it. When things get rough, you've got to want it bad," Wright said. "Our Elite Eight team in '06 wanted it bad, and they ran into the national champion in Florida. Our Final Four team in '09 wanted it bad, and they ran into the national champion in North Carolina. This team wants it bad. You can tell by the things they do."

Before they left for Houston, the 2015-16 Wildcats had two last practices in Davis Hall. Wright decided to take the team to the Final Four a little later than he had in 2009. He wanted to keep them in that familiar setting and hone the fine edge until it was even sharper. He wanted them to still feel where they came from even when they were many miles from home.

"Everything we have on these walls, everything we preach every day," said junior forward Kris Jenkins as he looked around the gym, "that always stays the same."

The man who put it all there - the words, the walls and the players who look at them - hasn't changed much, either.