

Style

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When a North Pike High School football player lost his mother to cancer and saw his life at a crossroads, he turned to the one person who offered to help. True to his word, assistant coach Jamie Everett — a husband and father of two little ones — did not turn his back.



Ada Grace and Ainslee Everett, North Pike High assistant football coach. The Everetts are now Johnson's legal guardians.

NO HOLLYWOOD SCRIPT

■ Student embraces offer of help following mother's death

By Billy Watkins
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SUMMIT — He was an angry teenager. Always looking for a fight, friends say. On the edge of taking the path to nowhere, or worse.

He had been that way since riding to McComb's Southwest Regional Medical Center with his two older siblings on Sept. 9, 2008, running from the car to the hospital, ignoring the elevators and sprinting up the stairwell to the third floor only to find people he knew hugging and crying.

He raced past them, into his mother's room. And there she lay. Forty-two-year

old Sandra Magee. Dead of the cancer he had convinced himself did not exist inside her body.

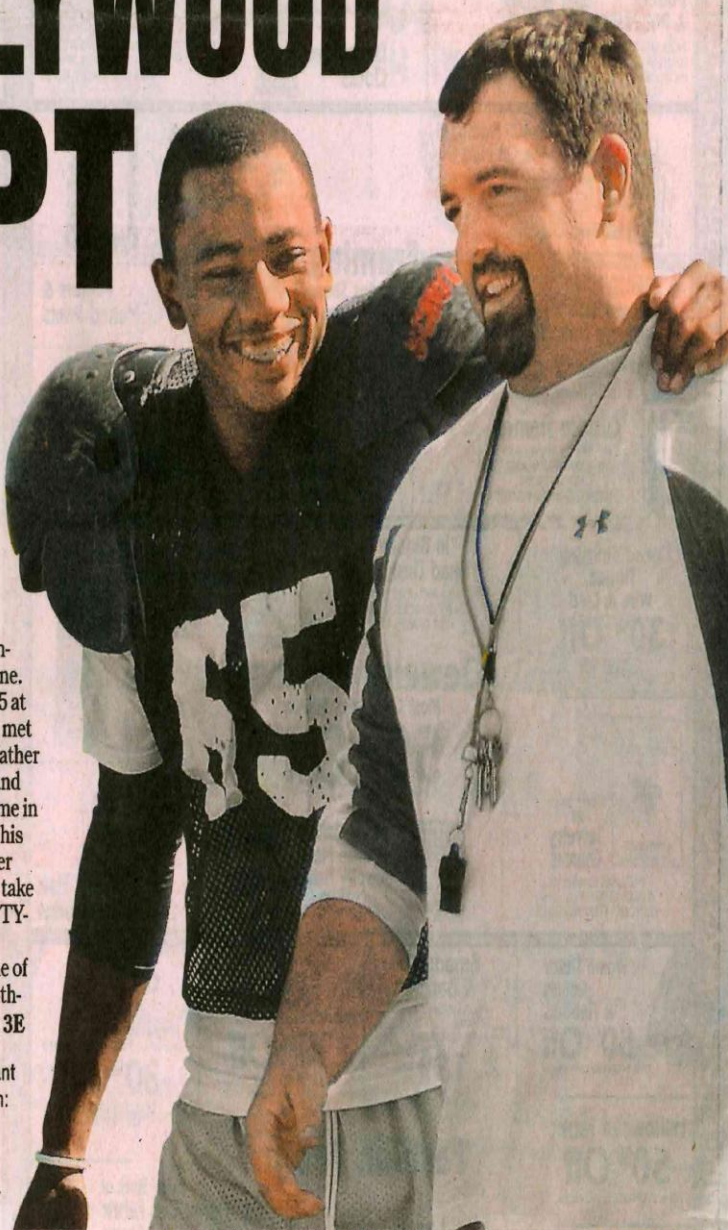
He took off running again, down the stairs until he collapsed to his knees, screaming. Broken and alone.

Tariq Johnson, 15 at the time, had never met his father. His stepfather was a truck driver and spent most of his time in Texas. And neither his brother nor his sister was in a position to take Tariq (pronounced TY-reek) in.

What would come of him without his mother?
See FOOTBALL, 3E

Says James Everett, father of North Pike assistant football coach Jamie Everett (right) of Tariq Johnson: "He's the real deal when it comes to being a man."

Vickie D. King/The Clarion-Ledger



Football: Hopes to become a U.S. marshal

From 1E

er, who loved him, encouraged him and could always make him see the importance of doing the right thing?

The answer could make a Hollywood script.

In fact, in some ways, it already has.

Soon after he returned to Summit's North Pike High School following her death, Johnson was lifting weights with the other football players. An assistant coach, who is white, walked up to Johnson, who is black, and said: "I'm sorry about your mama. I know you're going through a tough time. If you ever need anything, I want you to come tell me. I'll do whatever I can."

"You say those things to kids," recalls the coach, Jamie Everett, who played guard on Delta State's 2000 national championship team, "but none of them ever really do."

Standing in that same weight room in January, some 16 months later, Everett felt a tug on the back of his shirt. It was Johnson, a 5-foot-9, 185-pound line-backer.

He said, "Coach, I'd like to move in with you."

Everett, married with two young daughters, thought he was joking and walked away.

"But when I looked back, he was still staring at me. I could tell he was serious," Everett says. "I went over and asked him if he was in some kind of trouble, and he said no. Right then, I read him the riot act. I said, 'If you come live with me, there will be rules. And if you don't abide by the rules, there will be consequences.' I was waiting for him to say 'forget this' and move on. But he just looked me in the eye and said 'Yes, sir.'"

A few days passed, and Everett's cell phone rang. Johnson was staying with his godmother, who was not related to him. And several other people lived there, too. Johnson told Everett:

"Coach, I've got to come live with you. Now."

Everett asked him why. "Coach, I have no privacy here. I think about my mama all the time, and the only place I can go and be by myself is the street — and I don't need to be out there because I'm gonna wind up in trouble if I do."

Everett phoned his wife, Courtney, a part-time nurse at Southwest Regional who is taking graduate school courses through Nashville's Belmont University. "I trusted Jamie. He's with those kids every day and he knows them. Plus, I'm in the health-care profession, and I guess it's part of my nature to want to help people."

So in late January, Johnson moved in with the Everetts and their daughters — 4-year-old Ada Grace and 2-year-old Ainslee.

Yes, it is eerily similar to *The Blind Side*, the blockbuster movie about a white couple in Memphis — Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy — taking in a homeless high school football player, Michael Oher.

Two big differences: The Everetts are not millionaires and Johnson, even though he is the second-leading tackler on North Pike's 5-1 team this year, will probably never play Division I college football, much less sign a multi-million dollar NFL contract.

One huge similarity: They have made it work, gaining legal custody of Johnson on April 9.

There have been the predictable whispers of disdain around Summit and nearby McComb, where the Everetts reside, about the white family taking in the black football player. But they carry no weight with the people who count the most in Johnson's life — his new family, which includes Jamie's and Courtney's parents.

Johnson calls Jamie's folks — James and Katherine — Pop and Kat. "We find him after every game," James Everett says, "and he hugs my wife's neck, shakes my hand and we talk about the game. For us, it's just like it was when Jamie was playing

high school ball. We're really proud of Tariq. And we're proud of Jamie and Courtney for taking him in."

"We get some strange looks when we go to Walmart and Jamie's not with us," Courtney says. "I don't look old enough to be Tariq's mama or young enough to be his wife or girlfriend. But there we are with these two blonde-headed kids climbing all over us. So people are curious."

Jamie and Courtney shrug it off.

"All I know is, I don't think I could've slept at night if we hadn't taken Tariq in," Courtney says.

"I hope to go to heaven one day," Jamie says, "and I've already got enough stuff to answer for. I dang sure didn't want ignoring this kid on the list, too."

Ada Grace and Ainslee battle for Tariq's attention when he arrives home from football practice. "My Tariq!" they yell and leap into his lap.

"The girls will be devastated when he goes off to college," Courtney says.

One of the major factors in making this transition smooth has been Tariq, a senior who hopes to become a U.S. marshal.

"He's way more responsible than most 17-year-olds I know," Courtney says. "He cleans his own room, does his own laundry, irons his own clothes. He's already looked up college majors, what degrees you need for what job. He's very driven about his future."

While he was nearly always an A and B student, the change in his demeanor is obvious.

"The IQ is there," says Joe Campbell, 58, who teaches Johnson advanced math. "But before, he would be on his game one day, then tired and distracted the next. He's consistent now."

Says A.J. Jefferson, a star junior fullback-defensive end and Johnson's best friend: "Since moving in with Coach Everett and Miss Courtney, Tariq is a better player and a

better teammate. He's got a new start, and he's happy for a change."

Adds James Everett: "His mama did a good job with him, that's obvious. He's the real deal when it comes to being a man."

Jamie and Courtney view him as their son.

"I saw that for myself a couple of Friday nights ago," says North Pike head coach Chris Smith. "Tariq got a 15-yard penalty for mouthing off to the opposing players. I looked up, and Jamie was 10 yards out on the field. He wasn't thinking like a coach at that moment. He was a daddy headed to get hold of his son."

On his bedroom door, Johnson has what he calls his "2010 goals" typed on a white sheet of paper. They are broken into three categories: School, football and personal.

A few examples: Make all A's. Be a leader for his teammates. Make sure his mother's grave always has flowers on it. Meet his real father.

"He's somewhere in Florida," Johnson says. "I don't know ... I just want to see him."

He admits it has been an adjustment, blending into a new family. He has chores like everyone else. His is yardwork and helping clean the kitchen.

He has also had to get used to having his own bedroom, people coming in to tell him goodnight, Courtney buying him little things like skin lotion for no apparent reason and placing it on his bedroom desk.

"I'll be lying there in the bed at night, and it'll suddenly hit me just how blessed I am," he says.

The emotion of it all causes him to get out of bed and drop to his knees. But there is no angst, no screaming now.

"I just say something real simple. 'Thank you, Lord.'"

To comment on this story, call Billy Watkins at (601) 961-7282.