



The Star-Ledger

Izenberg: Bradley center thanks moms

Friday, November 24, 2006

BY JERRY IZENBERG
Star-Ledger Staff

Zach Andrews spent Thanksgiving yesterday at a teammate's home in Peoria, Ill. There was turkey and cranberry sauce and, probably, apple pie.

It was Thanksgiving like it ought to be for all of us.

But Andrews, the center on the Bradley University basketball team that plays Rutgers tonight in the Chicago Invitational, did not take it for granted.

The first Thanksgiving day Zach Andrews remembers there was no turkey ... no coat to shield the four of them from the chill wind that blew across Oakland, Calif., that day ... no father around and a mother that left them with a friend and went off on a bender.

He was 3 years old, and as the four of them huddled on the stranger's porch, they were told to wait for their mother, while the stranger climbed into a van and went off to celebrate the holiday.

When his oldest sister, Shante, who was 10, tried to climb into the van, the woman pushed her in the chest and said "you get back on that porch and wait."

"We didn't get to eat this morning," Shante said.

"That's your mother's problem," the stranger hollered back as the van pulled away.

Because he was so young and such memories when formed at age 3 can be a red-hot psychological spear, it is his sister's contention that he blocked much of it out. But she recalls that when darkness rolled in, she had to do something.

"We started to walk to our grandmother's house," Shante said. "She had cancer, and we barely knew her. It took us more than three hours. We were freezing and starving and we had no money. One of my sisters and I went into two convenience stores that day and took what food we could without being caught."

That was Andrews' first Thanksgiving of memory.

They lived for a year in a shed behind their grandmother's house. Finally somebody called the California Division of Child Protective Services and they became wards of the state.

They were separated and dispersed to a series of foster homes. For a brief time, Zach was placed in a state home. He doesn't talk about that but Shante says, "I know he remembers. I know he does because he was the one who told me how other kids burned his skin with hot pennies."

Zach finally wound up with caring foster parents, the Wrights, who were co-pastors of a small church. They had two kids. For a blink of an eye, life was what it is supposed to be. Zach Andrews felt he was where he belonged.

Then his biological mother came back.

Incredibly, the State of California gave her back all four children in addition to the other two she had during her absence.

"When I think of my mother," Zach says, "it is to remind me she was never my mother. She was simply there -- sometimes."

After 11 years in the California foster care system he was back in the nightmare that started it all. They lived in public housing in Sacramento. Shante recalls that they moved a lot because her mother never paid the rent. As soon as she turned, 18 Shante left. The others were stuck. The drinking, the arguments, the shrieking pushed Zach out of the door in a different way. He became the teen-aged transient of the housing project, crashing with friends.

First there were the Bolten Bothers, Marcus and Maurice, who lived with their dad. He still sees them when he goes back to Sacramento these days. Finally, there was Valerie Lopez, a single mother with a great sense of caring. Her son, Steve, and Zach were teammates on the Cordova High School football team.

He began eating at Valerie's. Then he began to wash his clothes there. Most nights he slept there. But hanging around the projects, he and Steve appeared to be headed for trouble. At the same time, their grades slipped.

That's when Valerie Lopez read them both the riot act. It was the first time somebody cared.

Around the same time, a teacher named Ms. Peterson, he does not recall her first name, kept him after school to talk. She was what a teacher should be. She told him he was too bright for his lousy grades. She wanted to know what was wrong. Zach broke down and told her the whole story.

He pulled his grades up. Valerie and Ms. Peterson demanded it. But they were not enough to fill yet another gap in his search for maturity and stability. His biological father lived on the other side of the country and had no interest in him. His mother's new husband ignored him.

Enter, a man named Doug Cornelius.

Cornelius coached basketball at Yuba Community College, in Marysville, Calif. He saw Zach play basketball. At 6-8 he liked what he saw -- and for good reason. As a freshman he would grab 21 rebounds in a single game.

And like every other good thing that finally surfaced in Andrews' life, Zach was determined to make it work. When the coach bought each kid a pair of sneakers, Zach wrote him a thank you letter. In all his career, Cornelius had never received anything like that.

Neither had his wife, Vicki, who picked up the maternal baton as a replacement for Valerie Lopez and Ms. Peterson.

Cornelius also had a connection in Peoria.

The year before he had sent a player to Jim Les, the Bradley coach, who has built the Braves into a mid-major power that last year reached the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament.

Les took the bait and today Andrews -- all 6-8, 225 pounds of him -- is all the size in the starting lineup. Bradley starts four quick guards along with him, and he operates out of the pivot. Measured against the quick movement of the far smaller guards that surround him, he stands out like Gulliver in Lilliput.

This week, he was named the Missouri Valley Conference Player of the Week after averaging 17 points, 13.5 rebounds and 1.5 blocked shots in two games.

When he talks about the long journey that took him to Thanksgiving 2006, there is a kind of wonder in his voice. But after all the searching, he has come to a place in his life where he knows who he is and what he will value forever.

In the Bradley press guide under "personal," he lists Valerie Lopez as his mother. Each Mother's Day and every Christmas -- and a lot of unscheduled days in between -- he calls Lopez, Ms. Peterson and Vicki Cornelius on the phone. On Mother's Day, the calls are so dependable, the three women could set their watches by them.

Yesterday was Thanksgiving and all it should mean -- as if Zachary Andrews had to be reminded.

Jerry Izenberg appears regularly in The Star-Ledger.

© 2006 The Star Ledger

© 2006 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.