

A father lifts his game beyond self-healing

Thursday, February 23, 2006

Nearly every father of a little girl probably has a framed picture like the one Tom Daley gently places on the dining room table. Nose to nose, baby and daddy -- she's 4 months old and smiling in that tentative, endearing way, a smile, more of eyes than lips, that shows delight in knowing the big face next to hers is one she recognizes and loves.

A few weeks after the picture was taken, Shannon Daley was dead.

"Right in front of me," says Tom Daley of that night at Saint Peter's University Hospital in New Brunswick in 2000. "They pushed me away and they were working on her. I still hear her screaming for breath."

It is both his agony and his balm that he spends a lot of time -- maybe too much, he concedes -- remembering Shannon. Every year, he says, he endures the same cycle. An anniversary of her birth, Feb. 16, and of her death from cardiac myopathy, July 25.

Not because he wants to be morbidly fixated on her life and death. The opposite -- because, to try to heal himself, he turned a boyhood fixation, pick-up basketball, into what he calls "the best way I know to honor Shannon's memory."

He grew up in Elizabeth, went to St. Mary's, where he wasn't good enough to make varsity, but it didn't stop him from playing every moment he could on bumpy asphalt courts near home. Then to Seton Hall and permanent residence in its fandom.

Still playing two or three nights a week with the Readington Township Men's League, the group that rescued him from a grief that made him physically ill, hospitalized with episodes of breath-stealing panic that mimicked heart attacks of his own.



"The guy who ran the league suggested I could do charity games. You know, benefits. I could do something with basketball to honor Shannon's memory."

And, so, in 2002, was established the Shannon Daley Memorial Fund, an organization that has attracted the support, not just of the five dozen guys who play pick-up each week in the Hunterdon County town, but also of guys with bigger names.

Like Jayson Williams, before his own life met disaster. The Hurleys -- Bob the father, coach at St. Anthony in Jersey City; Bob the son, famous from Duke and the Sacramento Kings, and Dan, another son, coach at St. Benedict's. Jerry Walker from St. Anthony and Seton Hall. Kevin Boyle, from St. Patrick, Elizabeth. New York Giants posing as hoopsters. They've all helped Tom Daley and his fund.

To raise, in the last four years, more than \$250,000, all given to children and their families whose lives are consumed by catastrophic illness. Kids with cancer. With heart problems. With developmental delays.

"We give families what they need," says Daley. "Things not covered by insurance. Sometimes they need money to make mortgage payments because a parent has to stay home and care for a sick child. Or we retrofit a van. Buy a wheelchair. "

Daley, who sells computer systems, runs two fund-raisers a year -- the basketball game between the Readington All-Stars, his hometown buddies, and whatever group of better known people are willing to help out. And a golf outing.

The game is coming up March 30 at Hunterdon Central. The golf in early summer, in June or July. "See the dates?" he asks. "That's what I mean by living through her birth and death every year. I'm in the middle of organizing the basketball game when it's her birthday. Involved with the golf outing about the time she died."

He picks up program books -- most money is raised from advertising. "How many fathers who lost a child see their kid's name like this all the time?"

This makes his wife, Darlene, worry. She grieves, too, but wonders whether he is a glutton for punishment, doing this. And Tom worries about his daughter, Devin, 10.



"Sometimes, I'll be working on the fundraiser and she'll ask me to play with her. And I say, 'Daddy's busy now' -- but then I have to stop myself. What am I doing living in the land of the dead when I have this beautiful child I should be spending time with?"

Not too much should be made of the healing power of his activities. Yes, basketball takes him away -- as it took him away from other tragedies. The death in Vietnam of his brother Dan. The accidental death of his sister's husband.

"Basketball is the greatest sport. You don't stop thinking for an instant. It's so fast. You make decisions in a second. Go there, go here, change, move suddenly from offense and defense."

So, basketball saves him. As does the community that friendship created. His friends in the league, joining him, working with him. Just guys. Buddies, like a neighbor named Paul McGill who runs the financial end of the charity. No reward but friendship.

"They saved me."

Still, when it's over, and everyone goes home and Darlene and Devin are asleep, Tom Daley is left alone with his picture and he thinks of that pediatric ICU unit with the machines beeping and Shannon crying and doctors and nurses pushing him away.

"It's not a cure. Nothing is. Nothing can ever be."

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