

'JERRY SAVED MY LIFE'

By Melissa Isaacson | Jun 8, 1997

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At 15, he taught her to take a charge. Implored her to plant her tall, skinny frame and bony knees in front of oncoming traffic when she barely had the skills to dribble.

She listened, of course. "I would run in front of anybody every chance I got," she remembers. "And he would pick me off the floor like a rag doll, slap me on the back and I'd go do it again."

The lesson would serve her well for a life that seemed to knock her down every time she looked up. Now, 20 years later, all she wants to do is thank him.

"Very few people in life make an imprint on your heart, and he was one," she says softly. "Jerry Sloan saved my life."

It has been four years since the Utah Jazz coach wrote her a letter, sent her a bookmark and made the phone call that allowed her to believe there was any hope at all. Made her believe that someone cared. Her voice would become an alcoholic blur by the time they had finished talking some two hours later, but his was a voice that still made her smile. Made her remember the little girl who fell in love.

"My mom had read about his girls basketball camp in the church newsletter and took me to Angel Guardian Gym on the bus," she recalls. "I loved basketball, but I wasn't very good. I was cut from the 7th-grade, 8th-grade and freshman teams, but I still wanted to play."

"My mom was a single mother, struggling to get by with three kids, and she went up to Jerry and told him, 'All I have is \$20 with me, but I get paid next week. Is there any way I can pay you in installments?' I remember he looked me right in the eye and said, 'Do you want to play ball?' I, of course, said, 'Very much,' and he said, 'Forget the money. It's no problem.'

"So my mom says, 'Now I don't get off work until 5. Can she sit in the gym for an hour until I pick her up?' And he said, 'Don't worry, I'll take her home.' And that's how it started with Jerry and I."

She would ride home in his Lincoln Town Car. "I thought it was a limousine," she says. And he would teach her basketball.

One of the toughest competitors ever to lace up sneakers, Sloan had a soft spot for female athletes. "I played on the same team with three girls in grade school," he says. "And it was an unfortunate thing because when we all went to high school, they couldn't play anymore. That was before Title IX, and those girls had to become cheerleaders and pom-pom girls. They were very, very good players, but it was all over for them. I always felt bad about that, and I always appreciated women's basketball because I thought they deserved the same opportunities we had."

Sloan ran one of the first girls basketball camps in the Chicago area, and when he befriended the skinny little girl whose life he would change forever, the former Bulls star was technically out of work. "Sometimes you think it's the end of the world when you don't have a job, but everything usually works out," he was saying the other day, before his Utah Jazz would take the floor for Game 3 of the NBA Finals.

The little girl was hardly a mission when they first met. But he would drive her to camp and often bring her home to Northbrook to play basketball with his son Brian as his young daughters Kathy and Holly looked on. He hired her as a counselor at his camp. And every so often, for no particular reason, he would pick her up at her mother's apartment and bring her to Bulls games. "It was just me and him," she remembers. "And I was in shock the entire time. He just knew how much I loved the game."

She wasn't really gifted athletically, but like her hero, she had heart and desire and the discipline to become the leading scorer on a state-championship basketball team, winning a scholarship to a major-college program.

Sloan would go on to coach the Bulls and their paths would diverge. Life was good for a time. Basketball was still a passion. She was not, however, prepared for it to end.

"You go from being a star to being nothing again, and I guess that was part of it," she says.

Her eligibility ended. A series of unfulfilling jobs followed. "And somewhere in there, when I had barely picked up a drink before, I started drinking more than I should have," she says.

Alcoholism ran deep in her family, but it would not sink its teeth into her until her early 20s. It would not take long to bring her down.

When her mother finally asked her to leave, a seedy motel became home, and a stranger became her confidante. "He took care of me like a father," she says. "And he gave me liquor."

He also gave her a son, several broken ribs, and little reason to want to live. One day, as she nursed her baby, he put a gun to their heads. "He told me, 'I'm going to kill myself and take you two with me.' "

He fired, but the shot missed. She and her baby escaped. Soon after, she found out, he committed suicide.

"I drank even more after that," she says. "His family said I killed him. I didn't think my mother was very supportive and I thought I should end it all. I really didn't care if I died."

Not knowing where else to turn, her mother would write to Sloan, who by then had taken his current job in Utah. He responded immediately with a long letter, a bookmark that said "You are a gift from God" and a phone call.

"I was so nervous and embarrassed talking to him that I kept drinking during our conversation," she says.

He urged her to come live with his family in Utah, where he would place her in treatment. "I care about you," he told her. She asked him why.

"If I do go into treatment, can you say hello to me on TV?" she remembers asking, thinking of an upcoming national telecast. When he said he wasn't sure if he would be interviewed, she said, "OK then, can you wear a certain tie on television? Then I'll know you'll be doing it for me."

She would see the blue-and-burgundy number she had requested from a bar down the street, and she would boast to strangers that Jerry Sloan had done that for her. They nodded and poured her another.

She promised herself she would heed Sloan's advice. But by then the disease that entrapped her was killing her. Periodic seizures followed attempts to quit. She developed problems with her pancreas and vomited so often she could barely stand up straight.

"I was so angry at myself," she says. "Everything he taught me about discipline I had followed. I was a great college athlete. I did 100 pushups a day. So why couldn't I beat this disease?"

"Jerry told me I could do it if I got help, and I blew him off. They say you have to hit rock bottom, and it was true."

An ambulance transported her to the treatment center. On June 21, she will have been sober four years.

"I think about Jerry all the time," she says. "The way I look at life, the way I raise my little boy, the way I go on job interviews, I got from him.

"My philosophy in life was always negative, always cynical. But he always taught me that if you work hard enough and want something badly enough, it can happen. He gave me self-esteem. He gave me hope."

She watches him on TV now and smiles as she hears him speak the words she has heard so many times. She goes to AA meetings four to five times a week, and knows how close she is to going back. "There is no other side of life for me," she says. "I'm never going to be cured. I had a roommate who was 18 years sober who is now back in treatment. I can't be cocky about that."

One of the steps to recovery is making amends to people who, in her words, "you have screwed over. When I look back now with a clear mind," she says, "I know how much he cared for me. I took his letter to treatment with me."

And now, she says, she just wants him to know.

"I'm still embarrassed about not getting back to him," she says. "I want to tell him I'm sorry. And I want to tell him that even though I don't have basketball, I will carry his philosophy about the game with me always."

She will watch his team play the Bulls on Sunday. And she will root for the Jazz. Root for Jerry Sloan. It has been a long time since he taught her to take a charge. "And I thank God every day that he did," she says.