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.
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-rick) 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 BE

er, who loved him, encour-
aged 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 his death,
Johnson was lifting weights
with the other football play-
ers. An assistant coach, who
is white, walked up to John-
son, who is black, and said:
"I'm sorry about your mama.
I know you're going through
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
told a tug on the back of
his shirt. It was Johnson, a
5-foot-8, 185-pound
linebacker.

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
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 wait-
ing for him to say 'forget this'
and move on. But he just
locked 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."

"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, John-
son moved in with the
Everetts and their daughters
— 4-year-old Ada Grace and 2-year-old Alannah.

"Yes, it is eerily similar to
The Blind Side, the block-
buster 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,
more likely sign a multi-
million dollar NFL contract.

One big 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 fam-
ily taking in the black football
player. But they carry no
weight with the people who
can count the most in Johnson's
life — his new family, which
includes Jamie's and Court-
ney'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 wide 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
good friends. And we're
good friends of Tariq. And we're
good friends of Jamie and Courtney
for taking him in."

"We get some strange
looks when we go to Wal-
mart 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
we're there with these two
black kids climbing all over us. So people are
curious."

Jamie and Courtney shrug it
off.

"All I know is, I don't think
I've slept at night if we haven'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 devastat-
ed when he goes off to col-
ge," Courtney says.

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

"He's way more responsi-
ble than most 17-year-olds I
know," Courtney says. "He
cleans his own room, does
his own laundry, from 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, Sr., 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 making off
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
dad thinking to hold tight 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 cate-
gories: School, football and
personal.

A few examples. Make all
As. Be a leader for his team-
to. Make sure his mother's
garden always has flowers
on it. Meet his real father.

"He's somewhere in Flor-
da," 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
chores and cleaning the
crown. He's also been
recruited to his team,
people coming in to tell him
goodnight, Courtney buying
his little things like skin
lotions for no apparent reason
and showing him how to
bedroom

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

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

"Just say something real
simple. "Thank you, Lord."

To comment on this story,
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