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Monday, February 25, 2008

## Former U-D center Jackson turns pain into others' gain

### Humbled star tries to keep youth from making his mistakes

Terry Foster / The Detroit News

**DETROIT** -- Keith Jackson is blind in his right eye, undergoes dialysis three days a week because of kidney failure and has a titanium rod implanted in his left leg to stabilize a shattered ankle that requires he wear a bulky brace and special shoe.

Migraine headaches, stomach pain and the mental anguish from the death of his father, Joe, three years ago are daily companions.

The good news is, Jackson has been out of jail for more than 10 years and is drug-free. He turned his life around through religion and is attempting to save others as a mentor and counselor.

Advertisement

The spry, athletic center who helped the University of Detroit basketball team to two of its finest seasons in program history is long gone.

The Titans were 25-4 and advanced to the second round of the NCAA Tournament during the 1976-77 season. Jackson redshirted the following year and helped U-D (22-6) to another NCAA spot in 1978-79. His job was to rebound, block shots and shoot putbacks.

"I just played," he said. "I did not have much basketball training."

Neglect of his body stripped him of any athleticism.

Now, it's a struggle for Jackson to pull his 6-foot-8

frame out of bed. Chronic pain keeps him awake at night.

"My head hurts 24 hours a day," Jackson said in the living room of a small West Side home he shares with his mother. "I am like, 'Do I have to go through this?' I would cry out to the Lord. 'Can you just give me a little bit of relief? You don't have to cure me. I am not asking that of you. I don't deserve that. I just need a little bit of relief so I can get a good night sleep.' And he do."

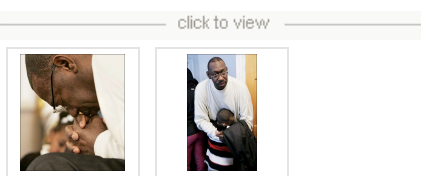
Jackson sits on a couch with his legs outstretched to relieve pain. He's ashamed of his past and wants no pity or sympathy. But Jackson wants to share his story to help others.

#### Falling from the heights

He said he had an opportunity to better his life because being a member of the Titans in the 1970s was like being a rock star. Terry Tyler, Terry Duerod, John Long and Dennis Boyd were every bit as popular as any Pistons player.



Keith Jackson, an athletic center for the University of Detroit in its glory days, prays during services at Community Fellowship Church. (Robin Buckson/The Detroit News)



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So what happened to the guy who tried to out-leap Terry Tyler in practice? Where is the guy that college roommate Earl Cureton called "the intimidator"?

Drugs, alcohol, too many fistfights and, eventually, prison stripped him of his potential. Now, he's haunted by that past.

Jackson is so embarrassed by his past that he nearly skipped the reunion of the 1977 Titans at Calihan Hall earlier this year.

While the Titans were the toast of the town, Jackson toasted a few too many.

"I don't want any kid to go through what I went through," Jackson said.

That is why Jackson speaks at least once a month at Christian Fellowship Church in Detroit. He also mentors Stephen Lee, 15, a promising freshman basketball player at Madison Heights Lamphere, who is the son of a longtime friend.

Deborah Lee, Stephen's mother, is appreciative of Jackson. She knows the daily fights with her son are not always easy. But Jackson refuses to give up.

"It is coming along," Deborah Lee says, laughing. "Stephen needs that father figure in his life. There are things he can teach him that I cannot as a woman."

A lot of Jackson's problems, he says now, were born from ignorance and fear.

"I was frustrated because there were a lot of things I just did not know," Jackson said. "The mistake I made is, I did not carry my butt to class. That is where I blew it."

Today he lives on \$700 a month disability.

"I tell young people at the church, 'I don't want you to be how I am. I don't own anything. I did not take advantage of what was given to me. School was about the party. And it was about fun. You don't go to college to have fun. It is not designed for fun. It is designed for learning,'" Jackson said.

#### **Inner demons**

In his younger days, many feared Jackson because of his size. He says he was scared, too, and acted out by hitting people.

"They used to call him Bullwinkle," his best friend, Raymond Dungen, said. "Man, he hated being called that. I think everybody wanted to challenge him because of his size."

Vitale said he was unaware of Jackson's problems until recently and wants to reach out to him.

"I remember a kid who was very physical and very aggressive," Vitale said. "He had a world of potential. But the road he took was not the way to get ahead. I hope and pray that he sees the light and he can make something of his life."

After U-D, Jackson served briefly as a practice player with the CBA's Detroit Spirits.

But fights were routine and one day Jackson found himself dirty, smelly and laying in his own vomit.

"I did not know how to talk out my problems," Jackson said. "I would react before thinking about it. My dad would say, 'You got to think about what you are doing because 15-20 seconds is going to cost you 15-20 years to get out of that trouble.' In other words, you are going to prison."

#### **Religion made difference**

His father was right. Jackson was locked up in the Wayne County jail in 1996 following assault charges. His life turned around when he found a tattered Bible in the jail library. One of the elders from his church surprised him with a full copy of the Bible. Jackson said he read it all in less than three months and began preaching inside jail.

"I made a promise to God that if you help me, I won't leave you again," Jackson said.

He spent about a year in jail and was released in 1997. That was his last brush with the law. He does not drink or smoke and is not tolerant of bad language, according to Dungen.

"I want to be useful. I don't want my life to be a total blank," Jackson said. "I've messed up an awful lot, but God can still use me. So by extending myself to these kids I feel a sense of worth. I tell these kids I want to be here for you as long as there is breath in my body."

Deborah Lee did not know the old Jackson. She blushes when talking about the new one.

"He is a gentleman. He really is," she said. "And is full of wisdom. I love it."

Said Jackson: "I feel as if God is leading me into this direction. I am not going to stop because the boy needs somebody in his life. Everybody need somebody to know they are loved. That is a basic human need. God gave me the type of parents that gave me everything I needed and then some. I didn't really appreciate

it. Now this kid is in a similar situation. He has a mother who works hard but does not have the total picture. I think I can help. I know what he is going through."

Jackson smiles. He believes he has turned his life around. But his health problems linger. Jackson used to fear death.

Those days are over.

"I thought I was going to leave here. I was so scared," he said. "But what is there to fear? I am saved. What is the fear? Basically all my life I have been afraid. A lot of things I did was because of fear."


The fear is gone but the pain is not.

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