

Thursday, March 9, 2011

KU's Thomas Robinson works through family tragedy

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The Kansas City Star

WASHINGTON, D.C. | Midnight is no time for a 7-year-old girl to be making phone calls. So when Thomas Robinson checked his voice mail on a cold January night and heard his baby sister's voice asking him to call her back, he did what any good son would do.

He called their mother.

Robinson dialed once. No answer. He dialed again. No answer.

Robinson, a 19-year-old basketball player at the University of Kansas, still needed to find out what was so important back home. He called the number his sister had left for him. Seconds later, he was on the phone with little Jayla, who was crying as she told Thomas that their mother, Lisa Robinson, was gone, dead at the age of 43, apparently from a heart attack.

Thomas and Jayla already had lost both of their maternal grandparents in the previous three weeks. But, even after their deaths, the center of their world was still intact.

Now, Thomas didn't know what to do. He had always pushed through the hardships in his life by thinking of his mother. He believed that he could make her life easier by making himself just a little bit better every day.

It was only Dec. 7 that Lisa and Jayla made the drive up from Washington, D.C., to New York for the Jayhawks' game against Memphis at Madison Square Garden. Thomas' star shined brightly that night on basketball's biggest stage, and he realized how close he was to making his and his mother's dream come true.

"She was the world to him," says James Ellis, one of Robinson's youth coaches who saw the family together that night. "The love that they had, the love between Thomas, his mom and his little sister was unlike anybody I'd ever seen."

As Thomas listened to Jayla cry, so many thoughts rushed through his mind. Who was going to take care of Jayla? Would he have to leave KU? He certainly couldn't give her the care she needed while going to class and playing basketball. There was Jayla's father, but he had not been a reliable presence in her life.

Robinson had no easy answers, but he knew one thing for sure: It was going to be up to him to figure it out.

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Thomas Robinson kept giving the men in his life a chance. And they kept letting him down.

His father was around off and on during his early years but disappeared entirely after his ninth birthday.

When Thomas was 10, his mother began living with another man, who would later father Jayla. Thomas warmed to him and felt like his life was finally becoming normal. But when Thomas was about 13, Jayla's father was incarcerated.

"I was mad," Thomas says. "I felt like I was back by myself again."

Lisa put in long hours as a social worker with mentally challenged children. Living in crime-ridden Southeast D.C., and eventually an even rougher area of Northeast D.C. called Trinidad, she worried about Thomas constantly. But who was going to worry about Lisa?

With Jayla's father out of the picture, Robinson felt pressured to help the family survive financially. Some nights, when electricity wasn't an option, Lisa would light about 20 candles, and they'd make do.

The lucrative option, Robinson says, would've been to start selling drugs.

"If I wanted to do bad," he says, "all I had to do was step outside."

Robinson was a confused teen. He played basketball, but he didn't have the vision to see where the game could take him. Still, Robinson says he decided not to sell drugs.

"I knew that would kill my mother to end up like that," he says. "I just had to be patient."

Robinson began to play regularly at Fort Davis Recreation Center a few blocks from his house. Before long, he was playing on Ellis' AAU team, DC Fever, and his adult league team. The older guys didn't take it easy on Thomas, but he kept coming back for more.

"He had skills," Ellis says. "But the best part about him was his heart."

It was that drive that sent Thomas out of his home in the southeast corner of the district many mornings to the massive hill a few blocks away. There, the wilderness of Fort Dupont Park would spread out to his right for miles, and the earth would practically disappear underneath him. The walk down was tedious but, hundreds of feet below, Robinson would begin the jog back up. It was all part of his plan to provide a better life for his family.

"I felt like I could be that man for her," Robinson says. "That was my main goal — to

give her everything she wanted in another man. Taking care of her. Making her happy. It was my whole purpose for waking up every day, my whole purpose for even wanting to touch a ball.”

Thomas’ devotion to the game led him to transfer from D.C.’s Eastern High to Riverdale Baptist School in suburban Upper Marlboro, Md., where he moved in with coach Lou Wilson.

When Robinson returned to D.C. on the weekends, he would want to go out with his friends; sometimes Lisa wouldn’t let him. Jayla was getting older, and Lisa wanted them to form a close bond.

“I know he’d be upset about that, but that was Lisa,” Wilson says. “That was her way of teaching her son that family is important.”

Robinson became a star at Riverdale, then played his senior year at Brewster Academy, a prep school in Wolfeboro, N.H., before accepting a scholarship offer to Kansas.

Robinson didn’t play much as a freshman, but as Lisa and Jayla watched him in December at Madison Square Garden, he was a part of KU coach Bill Self’s regular playing rotation. He scored 10 points and grabbed 10 rebounds, his most dominant performance as a Jayhawk to that point. The whole time, he couldn’t stop glancing at Lisa in the stands.

“The smile on her face when she was in the Garden, that was really memorable,” Thomas says, “just how happy she was, how proud she was of me. When she told me she was proud of me, that’s the best feeling.”

Thomas, Lisa and Jayla posed for pictures after the game, and then they parted ways yet again. For years, Lisa had talked about getting out of D.C. and moving to the Maryland suburbs. She was headed back to the district for now, but her son with the budding NBA talent was hell-bent on making sure she wouldn’t stay there much longer.

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The darkness of winter arrived too soon. Within a month, Thomas Robinson’s family would plan three funerals.

Lisa’s mother, Shirley White, died in late December, and her father died three weeks later.

Thomas returned to D.C. in early January for his grandmother’s funeral, filling the role he’d performed for the last six years: standing tall for the women in his life. He missed the Jayhawks’ game against UMKC on Jan. 5, with Self saying Robinson had no choice but to be the man of the house.

Robinson's best friend, Christopher Thompson, remembers spending time with the family after White passed. Lisa seemed herself — strong as ever — because Thomas was there. Thompson says Thomas showed no emotion.

“He kind of hid his feelings,” Thompson says.

Thomas left D.C. figuring his work was done, but three weeks later, Lisa's father died, too. This time, however, Lisa told Thomas to stay in Lawrence. He had already been through one funeral and she wasn't going to have him go through another. Plus, the basketball schedule was heating up.

The Jayhawks were undefeated and soared to a No. 2 ranking in the national polls, and Robinson was a huge part of that. They were set to play No. 10 Texas at Allen Fieldhouse in their first big game of the year.

Thompson had made a ritual of talking to Robinson on the day of games to wish him luck. But when Thomas' name flashed on his cell phone early on the morning of Saturday, Jan. 22, hours before the Jayhawks would take on the Longhorns, Thompson knew something was off.

His gut feeling was right. Thomas' mom had died Friday night — taken before he could make good on the promise he'd made to himself years ago, to buy her a house.

For the first time in his life, Thompson heard Thomas Robinson cry.

“Thomas always said he was doing all this for his mother,” Thompson says. “When he found out she had died, it just really shocked him.”

As tipoff approached, Robinson decided that he was going to play. Of course, his mother would have wanted that.

Robinson played just eight minutes, scoring two points and grabbing five rebounds. KU, sleep-deprived and emotionally drained after consoling Robinson for most of the night, tried to rally for Thomas and his mother but fell to Texas 74-63.

In the locker room after the game, the Jayhawks were left with a sobering reality: their teammate was going to another funeral.

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Thomas Robinson walked into his mother's apartment with Jayla at his side, feeling lost. All he wanted was to see his mom, but instead he had to help pick out the clothes that she would be buried in.

For so long, Thomas had been focused on supporting his mom. But now that she was gone, who was going to support him?

The entire Kansas basketball team attended the funeral. In another part of the sanctuary sat what seemed like most of Thomas' old neighborhood of Fairfax Village in Southeast D.C.

Since the funeral, some of Robinson's relationships have taken on new meaning. Lisa Gilbert is the mother of one of his good friends from AAU basketball. Thomas has been close to Gilbert for years — there is a lot of community mothering among Thomas' circle — but he has been contacting her more lately.

Robinson recently sent Gilbert a text that read, "Hey Ma, what are you doing? Sending love and kisses."

"I don't have my mom," she says, "so I explain to him if a person has their mother, they really don't understand the void that's in our heart right now."

Robinson's story has captivated KU fans around the country. And inside the walls of Allen Fieldhouse, Robinson is guarded by a band of brothers and care-givers.

A few weeks ago, Angel Morris, the mother of KU twin forwards Marcus and Markieff, called Thomas out of the blue and told him he had to go to Self's house. There, waiting for him, was the entire KU basketball family, including some of the other mothers, who surprised Robinson with a large framed picture of him, Lisa and Jayla from that evening in New York.

The border of the frame is white, and it's signed in blue ink by each of his KU teammates and coaches.

In the past six weeks, Robinson has realized that he doesn't have to worry about being alone.

"After my situation, I realize how special this town is and how special the people are here," Thomas says. "I'll never turn my back against the people here."

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Thomas Robinson tries to keep his mind on basketball as much as he can. This time of year, it's pretty easy to get lost in the game. But when Robinson is here, in his bedroom at Jayhawker Towers, his mind wanders more than a thousand miles east.

Hanging on his tan brick wall is a collection of framed pictures. There's Lisa and Jayla together, beaming down at Thomas. One is gone, and now Thomas wants to make sure he doesn't lose the other one.

All he has to do is glance at that wall to remind him of what's at stake: Jayla, the 7-year-old with the beaded hair and the love of dancing and singing. Jayla, the bundle of energy

who would someday like to become the next Willow Smith or Beyonce.

“She’s the liveliest 7-year-old you’ll ever meet,” Thomas says. “She’s very outspoken. She gets that from her mother.”

When Robinson was in D.C. for the funeral, he hired an attorney with KU’s assistance to set up a scholarship fund for Jayla in his mother’s name. He wants to make sure his sister will be able to go to college, no matter what happens to him.

Still, her day-to-day well-being is out of Thomas’ hands. She’s now in the care of her father.

“I know he’s going to try to do right,” Thomas says. “He has no choice. He’s going to try to do right for his daughter.”

Thomas and Jayla talk just about every day. In a perfect world, he’d be with her right now, but he says he can’t truly take care of her until he leaves KU. Ironically, his own promise as an NBA prospect — and the security it would bring — keep them apart.

Lisa would not want him to sacrifice his goals for Jayla, but now, those decisions are his.

“She’s gone now,” Thomas says, “and now it’s Jayla, the only reason I wake up every day, the only reason I want to do stuff every day. I love playing basketball, but it’s more than that to me now.”