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Kansas freshman Tyshawn Taylor benefited from Big Brothers

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LAWRENCE | Tyshawn Taylor wanted someone to take him to an amusement park and buy him something cool.

Jeanell Taylor wanted help. She had moved to Clearwater, Fla., from the Hoboken, N.J., housing projects that she had known her whole life, and she was trying to hold down a job for the first time as a single mom with two kids at home.

When Jeanell went to register with Big Brothers Big Sisters, a community-based youth mentoring organization, she was asked to give her preferences for Tyshawn's potential big brother. The man's race was not important. She didn't want the man to have pets or own guns, and she didn't want him to drink alcohol or smoke. Her only requirement was that he would have an unlimited supply of time for her 8-year-old.

Each potential little brother had to go through a photo shoot. Jeanell dressed Tyshawn in a burgundy shirt and khaki shorts, and the photographer shot him using a variety of poses and themed backdrops. All Tyshawn had to do was smile.

Tom Spencer was walking through the Countryside Mall before Christmas in 1998 when he saw a Big Brothers Big Sisters booth. Hurried shoppers sped around him, looking for holiday bargains, but all Spencer could see were the pictures of those children, their faces advertising a life-changing experience.

That this happened in a mall was ironic. Spencer was in his early 50s and had made enough money off the 1990s technology boom that he was already retired. He'd gotten two of his boys to college, two more would be on the way in the next few years, and he was searching for a new start far away from materialism. He felt selfish. He'd figured out all of these things by going through a spiritual rebirth, but he still needed an outlet.

So Spencer signed up for Big Brothers Big Sisters in a shopping mall. Soon, he'd receive a mailing with five or six pictures of kids who could be a good match. One boy stood out immediately. It was the smile.

Tyshawn Taylor, the 18-year-old Kansas basketball player, still wonders why Tom Spencer decided to care.

"I never really asked him the question," Taylor says.

Taylor probably didn't want to jinx it. Because it's highly unlikely that Taylor is a freshman guard for the Jayhawks, scoring 26 points in a win over Oklahoma on Monday, without the help of Spencer or someone like him.

Jeanell Taylor did her best, but her goals for Tyshawn were limited by her own experience. She would often tell him that she just wanted him to graduate high school.

"Now I sit and think about it is she crazy?" Tyshawn says. "I need college. I see where she's coming from because she never graduated high school."

Jeanell became pregnant with Tyshawn at 18, which is why she dropped out of school. She would raise her son in the same projects where she grew up without support from the child's father, who showed within the first few years of Tyshawn's life that he wasn't to be counted upon. Three years after she had Tyshawn, Jeanell had a daughter with another man who also wouldn't stick around.

In New Jersey, Jeanell supported her family through government assistance. She admits that she wasn't really living like an adult. She was ready for something different, and her sister who lived in Florida kept telling her that she needed to come down and join her.

For Jeanell, it was a big step. She found work as a grocery store cashier, sometimes working as many as three jobs at once. Still, the Taylors struggled. Tyshawn was 7 when they moved to Clearwater. He would come home from school and his mom and sister would be sitting in the dark with candles lit because they couldn't pay the electric bill.

"I'd come home and feel like, 'Dang, lights off again?' " Tyshawn said.

Tyshawn got used to hearing the same thing on Christmas and on his birthday.

"I wanted outrageous stuff, I wanted all the toys from all the commercials, and she couldn't get it for me," Tyshawn said. "She'd say, if you wait a couple more weeks you can have all that. I can get my income tax and have a nice check. I heard that so many Christmases."

Tyshawn knew that his mom was trying, but he would still talk about his father.

"Tyshawn was the most loving child that I had," Jeanell said. "He always asked about his dad, tried to reach out and touch his dad."

When Tyshawn moved to Florida, as he remembers it, his father stopped calling and didn't bother to send letters. It was time for a big brother to step in.

"It didn't have to be a specific type of person," Jeanell said, "as long as the person was a role model like Tyshawn needed."

Through Tyshawn Taylor's eyes, his big brother's house seemed like a mansion. And maybe it was. Tom Spencer and his family had a movie theatre in their house. They had a basketball court, a tennis court and a swimming pool. Tyshawn had never gone swimming before.

"He was always excited to come over, and he always wanted to bring his friends," Spencer said. "He was kind of in awe of it. He had never been exposed to the kind of lifestyle that we had at the time."

Now, at least Spencer could share it with someone who'd truly appreciate it. Tyshawn was quiet during their first few meetings, taking it all in. It was one thing to be enamored by the boy's genuine smile in a picture. It was another to get the boy to talk.

"What are you interested in?" Tyshawn remembers Tom asking.

"I like playing basketball," Tyshawn said.

"That's all you like to do?" Tom asked.

Tom took Tyshawn out to the basketball court, where they would play one-on-one. Tom told Jeanell the kid had talent.

"I knew he could play," Jeanell said, "but I never watched him play."

Tyshawn learned to play on the courts of the Hoboken projects, but he had not experienced organized basketball. Spencer entered him in the Clearwater Youth League, where Tyshawn was the leading scorer on an awful team. That didn't stop him from beginning to dream of the NBA and having a house just like Tom's someday.

It was Tom's job to make sure Tyshawn understood exactly where all of those nice possessions came from. Tyshawn didn't care about school, particularly after his basketball career had started to take off.

"I was a troublemaker in school," Taylor says. "I just went to school to talk to girls."

Tom was the first person to ever pose the obvious question to Tyshawn: What will you do if you get injured and can't play anymore? Tom told him that he had to make good grades to be able to play in college, but it would take something more than that to make Tyshawn perform in school.

Tyshawn loved money. He just never had any. Tom promised him that he would give him \$10 for every A on his report card, \$5 for every B, \$50 for making the honor roll and \$100 for making the dean's list. Tyshawn never made the dean's list, but he made the

honor roll consistently in middle school.

"He'd always make sure he got his mother to fax his grades or get a copy of them for me," Spencer said. "It motivated him just knowing that somebody was interested in how he was doing."

Most of all, Spencer became a great escape from the brutal realities of Tyshawn's home life. One summer, Tyshawn came home from an AAU trip to see that Jeanell had been beaten by her boyfriend.

"My mother had a swollen face," Tyshawn said. "I started crying. I'm like, I can't do this anymore."

Tyshawn took the problem to his aunt, and soon the Taylors were living in a domestic violence shelter in Tampa. When it was time to leave, they didn't have anywhere to go, so they moved on to a homeless shelter.

"I hated it," Tyshawn said. "I cried every night."

Tyshawn couldn't live with Spencer because the rules of Big Brothers Big Sisters prohibited it. So he moved in with his coach, Stephanie Crawford, whom he had met through Spencer years before. Jeanell moved back in with the man who had abused her. Tyshawn wanted no part of it, but after nearly a year with Crawford, he rejoined his family and his mother's abuser.

"I didn't know what kind of man I would be," Tyshawn said, "but I knew what kind of man I wasn't going to be. The men around me were not good men."

With one notable exception.

"Every time Tom came around and got me," Tyshawn said, "it was like a weight off my shoulder."

The summer after his freshman year, Tyshawn was in New Jersey visiting family, and he went with his cousin to an open gym at St. Anthony High in Jersey City.

Tyshawn was blown away by the level of basketball being played. He began to worry that he wouldn't get enough exposure to play at the Division I level in football-crazy Florida. Bob Hurley, the legendary coach at St. Anthony, showed an interest in Taylor, but Taylor told him that he lived in Florida.

When Taylor returned home, the wheels started turning. He told his mom that his aunt said that he could live with her in Jersey. He told his aunt that his mom said the only way he could move back was if he lived under her roof.

"I kind of set the whole thing up," Taylor said.

Jeanell was not ready to leave Florida, but she was willing to let Tyshawn live with her sister's family for a year to see how it went. If things went well, she would follow the next year. The only snag, of course, was money. St. Anthony was a private school, and the scholarship the school offered Tyshawn would only cover so much. Tyshawn went to Tom Spencer, who said that he would pay the rest.

"He almost didn't go," Spencer said. "It was hard for him to leave his family and go up there. I encouraged him to go because of the opportunity. You can't play for Bob Hurley down here."

Playing for Hurley was certainly different. Taylor found out very quickly that his act wasn't going to cut it.

"I always kind of had a bad attitude," Taylor said. "I was always kind of grumpy and mean because I never really had that much to be happy about besides playing basketball. I didn't care about anything. Coach Hurley was the first man to yell at me."

Tyshawn's St. Anthony experiment nearly fell apart. He was acting out, breaking curfew with old friends who led him down the wrong path. Taylor got in a couple of fights, and his aunt and uncle threatened to kick him out and send him back to Florida. Tom Spencer got wind of the situation and boarded a flight to Jersey.

Through their entire relationship, Tom's role had been to sweep Tyshawn away from his problems. Tom was coming to the rescue again, but this time, they weren't going to a movie or some place fun. Spencer forced Taylor to confront the problem.

"Listen," Tyshawn remembers Tom saying, "I'm helping you go to school here, and I want you to be successful. But you have to do the right thing. These people opened their doors to you. You can't be doing this."

Tom's visit was a seminal moment for Taylor.

"That's when I really started getting serious about basketball," Taylor said.

Two years later, Taylor led St. Anthony to a 32-0 record, a state championship and a No. 1 national ranking.

This past summer, Tom Spencer visited Tyshawn Taylor in Lawrence. The two old friends - more like a father and son than big brother and little brother - walked through the Kansas locker room inside Allen Fieldhouse and couldn't help but think big.

Tyshawn showed Tom the jerseys of all the NBA players that are KU alumni, which hang on the walls in the hallway.

"That was pretty awe-inspiring," Spencer said.

Everything seemed possible, Tyshawn's NBA dream and Tom's hope that Tyshawn would someday have enough to give back to others as he had. Deep down, Spencer wanted to start a cycle.

"It's just been rewarding for me because I believe in giving back," Spencer said, "and I think that's what we're here on the Earth to do is to help other people. Knowing that I made a difference in his life is extremely satisfying, and I hope I have a friend for life."

Tyshawn thinks often about what he has overcome to get here. He has started writing things down so that he'll remember.

"Sometimes, I want to say I made it, but I really haven't," Taylor says. "It's just my first step."

Jeanell Taylor and Tyshawn's two sisters wait in Jersey City for the day that Taylor's name is called at the NBA draft. Jeanell likes to talk about the five people who will join Tyshawn in the green room at Madison Square Garden. She always includes Tom Spencer.

"Do I feel pressure? Yes, I do," Tyshawn says. "I gotta succeed, in order to take care of my family. That's why I play basketball every day, to try and take care of my family."