

Igniting The Fire

A man only has so many memories in his life.

Although time plays tricks on us all, where certain days feel like an eternity while a year can fly by in a few minutes, we all only have a few distinct memories.

Close your eyes. Which of your memories can you truly see and feel?

What about the first time you tasted your favorite food? The tingles you got during your first kiss? The excitement rushing through your body as you tried to capture that state championship in high school? The way the words looked on that college admittance letter? Or what about the sights and sounds of your first child being born?

For me, memories of these events will never fade. These are the special days that I cling to as reminders of just how fast time rushes past. Even if I can't remember what I ate for lunch today, I always have these precious memories.

But through all the crazy twists and turns and triumphs and tragedies of my life, there is one memory that replays in my mind on a daily basis. I couldn't turn it off, even if I wanted to. It is the one memory that drives me in everything that I do. It is the spark that cast a new light on my life. It is the day that I decided to find my son.

November 20th, 2009. On paper there was nothing remarkable about this date. It was a Friday. Thanksgiving was around the corner. I was living in Seattle. The weather was cold, but dry—a rarity for Washington in November. Looking back, the only thing of note about November 20th, 2009 was that a new movie was coming out that day called *The Blind Side*.

I didn't know much about the movie other than it was about the true story of an African-American boy adopted by a white family who eventually became a football star.

Normally I don't rush to buy movie tickets on the first day a movie is released, but something about the previews for this movie struck a chord with me.

I knew all too well the struggles that an inter-racial couple or mixed-race family could experience, even in the 21st Century. I remember the movie poster had this huge, hulking, black football player walking next to this tiny, white woman. Just looking at that poster made my pulse race and my hands clench into fists as I thought how simply sitting next to my white high school girlfriend had caused ignorant people in our hometown to ooze hate toward us.

I also wanted to see the movie because I loved sports. In fact, most of my life revolved around sports, whether it was playing basketball, running track, coaching youth, or simply watching sports. So a football movie was right up my alley.

Then, of course, I knew that adoption played a central role in the movie. More so than sports, adoption had defined my life up to this point. From the day I was forced to give away, or “place” my son up for adoption, I had spent every single day thinking about my baby boy. What was he

doing? Was he playing sports? Did he have a girlfriend? How were his parents treating him? What did his voice sound like? Did he ever think about me?

Unfortunately, walking into that movie theater, I knew the answer to that last question – or so I thought.

Since the adoption I had written countless letters to my boy. Throughout the years I had collected pictures, and bought gifts, shoes and clothing for my son. Yet his adopted mother had said he was not ready for a relationship with me. I played the excuses over and over in my mind, the many reasons I was prevented from meeting my child.

As I took my seat in the theater, I tried to erase my heartache and enjoy a few hours of entertainment. After all, I knew there was no way this movie wouldn't have a happy ending.

The lights lowered and I relaxed into my chair. As the movie unfolded and I watched Michael Oher grow into an amazing football player and integrate into the warm and loving Tuohy family. I cried more tears than I thought the human body could produce.

When the movie ended, I didn't get up. I was floored. I felt like I had stood my ground as Shaquille O'Neal charged through the lane on his way to a power dunk. Everything, both physically and emotionally, was drained out of me.

Right then and there, I knew I had to find out if my baby boy had blossomed into a star like Michael Oher or if he ended up on the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak. Infrequent letters from the woman I trusted to take care of my boy would no longer suffice. I had to find the truth. I had to find my son.

Like Michael Oher pancaking opponents in the movie, I would not be stopped. I'd run through a brick wall if I had to. I could not go on living without contact from him.

I had been promised the ability to meet with and communicate with my son, and I was going to make sure everyone lived up to those promises.

Through my years playing and coaching basketball, I always preached relentless defense.

“Never stop!” or “You got this!”

How many times had I screamed this in a gym? As I left the movie theater on November 20, 2009, I kept repeating those mantras in my head.

Never stop.

You got this.

I was on a mission to reconnect with my son and finally inject the open into my “Open Adoption.”

I knew it would not be easy—very little in my life had ever come easily for me.

I was undeterred, though. My journey as a birth father had been too long. I would give it my all to find my son.