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SUNDAY

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The Rebound

Teen from a rough Chicago neighborhood who has lost both parents finds new life with a Dubuque family

BY MICHAEL SCHMIDT
TH staff writer • mschmidt@ucinet.com



JEREMY PORTJE • *Telegraph Herald*
Stewart, 19, keeps the remains of his mother, who died of cancer, next to his bed so that she is always close by.



KORI NEWBY • *Telegraph Herald* file
Fans hoist up Stewart after a victory in 2008. He met Blum while playing for Dubuque Senior.

Shots rang out in the Chicago neighborhood. Chaos ensued. Malcolm Stewart was frozen. His brother and sister scurried to a nearby porch, but the young Stewart stood and watched as the drive-by shooting escalated into a firefight. "I didn't know what was going on," Stewart said. "I was just staring in the midst of everything. "Just living through all that, you develop a strong heart. I'm fortunate to be here."

The violence of his youth is a world away from the life Malcolm Stewart lives today.

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Malcolm Stewart (from left), Rod Blum and Taylor Blum joke during dinner. Stewart, who has lost both parents, was raised in a rough area

of Chicago. He recently was taken in by his former basketball coach Rod Blum and his wife, Karen, in rural Dubuque.



JEREMY PORTJE • *Telegraph Herald*
Stewart tries to sing along with Sophie Blum.

'The Blind Side' connection

Recently, the Blum family had one of those "art imitating life" experiences.

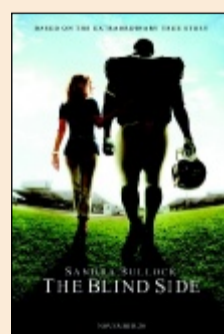
"The Blind Side," starring Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw, has amassed \$238 million at the box office as of Jan. 31, according to the Internet Movie Database Web site. The movie centers around a high school student named Michael Oher, who becomes homeless and is taken in by the Tuohys, a wealthy family in the Memphis area. Oher thrives under the Tuohys' care and eventually earns a football scholarship.

Based on the buzz surrounding the movie, the Blums decided to see it.

"We knew it was an African-American athlete adopted by a rich, white family," Rod Blum said. "We had heard from everybody that it's an awesome movie."

It didn't take long for the family to realize a similarity between the movie and its situation with Stewart.

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today's TH

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Great Things Happen!



Malcolm Stewart reads his daily affirmations and reminders in his bathroom at his surrogate parents' home. His former basketball coach,

Rod Blum, ran into Stewart shortly before his mother died of cancer, which eventually led the Blums to take Stewart into their home.

JEREMY PORTJE • *Telegraph Herald*

Rebound: Moving to Dubuque, in need of guidance

Continued from Page 1A

Stewart, 19, has persevered through the trials of his early childhood to find an identity in the Dubuque community.

The 2008 Dubuque Senior High School graduate and former football and basketball player for the Rams also discovered a family to bring him in when he needed guidance the most.

HARD KNOCKS

Stewart couldn't place the state of Iowa on a map, let alone the city of Dubuque, when a relative tried to persuade his family to move to the Key City when he was 10.

At a young age, Stewart was sure of two things: He wanted to leave the rough Chicago neighborhood, and he sought to be with his mother, Angela Stewart. Even with her transgressions.

Stewart remembers watching his mother's crack addiction unfold before his eyes and feeling helpless to stop it.

"It scared me watching my mom do that and her reaction to it," Stewart said. "It was kind of pushing me away from her."

"I couldn't open up as a child of hers and tell my feelings and emotions inside."

Stewart's school grades dropped, and he took his anger out on other students.

The family had trouble maintaining a residence, as well. Angela and her three children lived in vacant buildings and used insulation to keep warm in the winter.

"It was hard to live like that," he said.

Then, at age 13, Stewart's life became even more tragic with the murder of his father. Stewart doesn't like to discuss his father's demise, saying only that he had drug problems of his own and that the father-son connection was relatively absent.

"He would always tell us that he wanted us to do good," Stewart said. "He was never able to do that himself. I wasn't close to my father."

Stewart's family came to Dubuque for a better life, an adjustment that Malcolm had trouble with at first.

"Coming here, I noticed people here had a lot of money," he said. "I always thought the white people wanted to keep their money to themselves and were stuck up."

"Meeting somebody that went the opposite direction, out of their way to make sure this African-American boy is successful in life, shows a lot of character."

RELATIONSHIP BLOSSOMS

Karen Blum called, but the cell phone rang and rang without answer.

Finally, her husband, Rod, picked up and explained where he was.

It was the final stop on the "bus route," as the former Senior sophomore basketball coach liked to call it.

Stewart was the last kid out of his car as Blum dropped off kids after practice.

The coach and player found themselves engaged in conversations long after the car pulled into Malcolm's driveway, with some of the chats lasting about an hour.

"We just talked about life," Rod Blum said. "He was always asking me about being successful and about business and coaching."

"The other players, whether they were intimidated or what, didn't ask those questions."

It was an awakening for Stewart, who had trouble disclosing information about himself.

"I still had a big wall up against everybody, so I wasn't really open-minded to meeting new people," Stewart said.

Stewart's friend and teammate, Elliott White, noticed Blum had a genuine interest in being a mentor.

"Rod was just helping somebody that needed help and looked up to him," White said. "He has a lot of respect for people that work hard, and Malcolm has proved himself in a lot of different ways."

Blum believed in discipline during his tenure as a coach. He had strict rules for his players, expecting them to arrive to practices and games on time.

"They knew they wanted to play basketball, and if you were going to play basketball for me, these are the rules," Blum said.

That regimen and coaching style became the foundation on which Stewart's relationship with Blum grew.

Stewart went on to play varsity basketball, and Blum coached sophomores for two more years. It wasn't until after Stewart graduated and Blum ended his coaching tenure that their paths crossed again. In May 2009, it was a chance meeting at the Olive Garden restaurant in Dubuque that brought them face to face again.

"We had worked all day in 90-degree heat, and we were exhausted," Blum said. "I came in and said, 'Screw it, let's go to Olive Garden tonight.'"

"We walk in, and guess who is busing tables that night? Malcolm."

Stewart and Blum caught up with each other and exchanged cell phone numbers.

Little did the pair know that Malcolm would face another tragedy just four days later.

'COACH, I'M AN ORPHAN'

It was a Thursday, and Stewart was looking for somebody to turn to.

He sent a text to Blum explaining the loss in his family.

"Coach, I'm an orphan," Stewart wrote.

Angela Stewart, 42, died of cervical cancer on May 13. She worked at Mount Carmel and Walmart during her stay in Dubuque.

Stewart and Blum met for lunch shortly after Angela's funeral in Chicago.

"I can remember saying to him, 'Do you want me to be a part of your life?'" Blum recalled. Stewart replied, "Yes."

Blum asked Stewart to come to his 80-acre property near Key West and work during the summer.

Stewart's schedule quickly filled out, between working at Olive Garden, at the Boys and Girls Club and for the Blum family.

The relationship between the Blums and Stewart grew.

One day over the summer, Karen Blum asked Rod if Stewart could stay over after work.

"I was constantly going to pick him up," Karen Blum said. "I said one day, 'Let him

spend the night one night.'"

Rod had always wanted Stewart to stay at the Blum home, but decided to let the rest of his family get accustomed to having Malcolm around.

"I thought that we should have him work here and have Karen warm up to the idea," Blum said.

Rod and Karen eventually decided to invite Stewart into their home to stay. He has lived with the family since the end of August.

"I've never lived in a place like this," Stewart said. "You always see stuff on television and dream about having something like (the Blums' home)."

"To live in a place like this is a dream come true."

It was a transition for both Stewart and the Blum family.

Stewart was bothered initially by Rod and Karen Blum's insistence on making sure he spoke in the correct way.

"I've never had somebody correct my English," Stewart said. "But I saw it as bettering me. I know him pretty well, so I know that he wants to help me be successful in life."

The Blums' politically conservative viewpoints also sparked discussion.

"I'm not saying I'm a Republican, but I can hear the other side," Stewart said. "I had never watched the news before."

Blum strongly considered a run for the 1st District Congressional seat held by Rep. Bruce Braley, though now Blum says that's not likely to happen.

Though he has strong desires to forward the conservative cause, Blum doesn't want to spend 95 percent of his time raising money, which the GOP said would be necessary.

MOVIE CONNECTION

Recently, the family had one of those "art imitating life" experiences.

"The Blind Side," starring Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw, has amassed \$238 million at the box office as of Jan. 31, according to the Internet Movie Database Web site.



Stewart holds a picture taken after his second-grade graduation, and he ponders how his life would've turned out had he not made positive changes.

The movie centers around a high school student named Michael Oher, who becomes homeless and is taken in by the Tuohys, a wealthy family in the Memphis area.

Oher thrives under the Tuohys' care, and he eventually earns a football scholarship to the University of Mississippi and is drafted by the NFL's Baltimore Ravens.

Based on the buzz surrounding the movie, the Blums decided to see it.

"We knew it was an African-American athlete adopted by a rich, white family," Blum said. "We had heard from everybody that it's an awesome movie."

It didn't take long for the family to realize a similarity between the movie and its situation with Stewart.

"We were sitting there, hitting each other, literally saying, 'Oh my God, Oh my God!'" Blum said. "We said, 'This is just like what's happened here.'"

Stewart thought the wife, Leigh Anne Tuohy, played by Bullock, had some characteristics of Karen Blum's personality.

"The woman actually acted like (Karen) does," said Stewart, which elicited a laugh from Rod and Karen.

PLANNING THE FUTURE

A stable home life has translated to success academically for Stewart.

Stewart is carrying a 3.0 grade-point average at Northeast Iowa Community College and works 70 hours per week at his job.

Originally, Stewart wanted to get his associate's degree at NICC, but his plans have changed.

Stewart has been accepted for the fall semester at the University of Dubuque. He's leaning toward a career in business or education.

"I always like putting suits on, so I kind of want to be a businessman," Stewart said. "I've always liked physical education, too."

He might even join the basketball team. He could have one teammate who's like family. One of the Blums' sons, Taylor, 21, is a standout junior point guard for the Spartans.

Rod Blum said he would be ecstatic if Stewart and his son both donned UD colors. "It would be beyond words if (Malcolm) and Taylor could be on the same team," Blum said. "That would be so cool."

Stewart's boss at the Olive Garden had a solid first impression of him during the hiring process.

"He seemed like a good kid," said Jeremy Wloch, general manager. "Always happy, and he gets along well with other people."

"He's always in a good mood."

Even Stewart's old friends have seen the change.

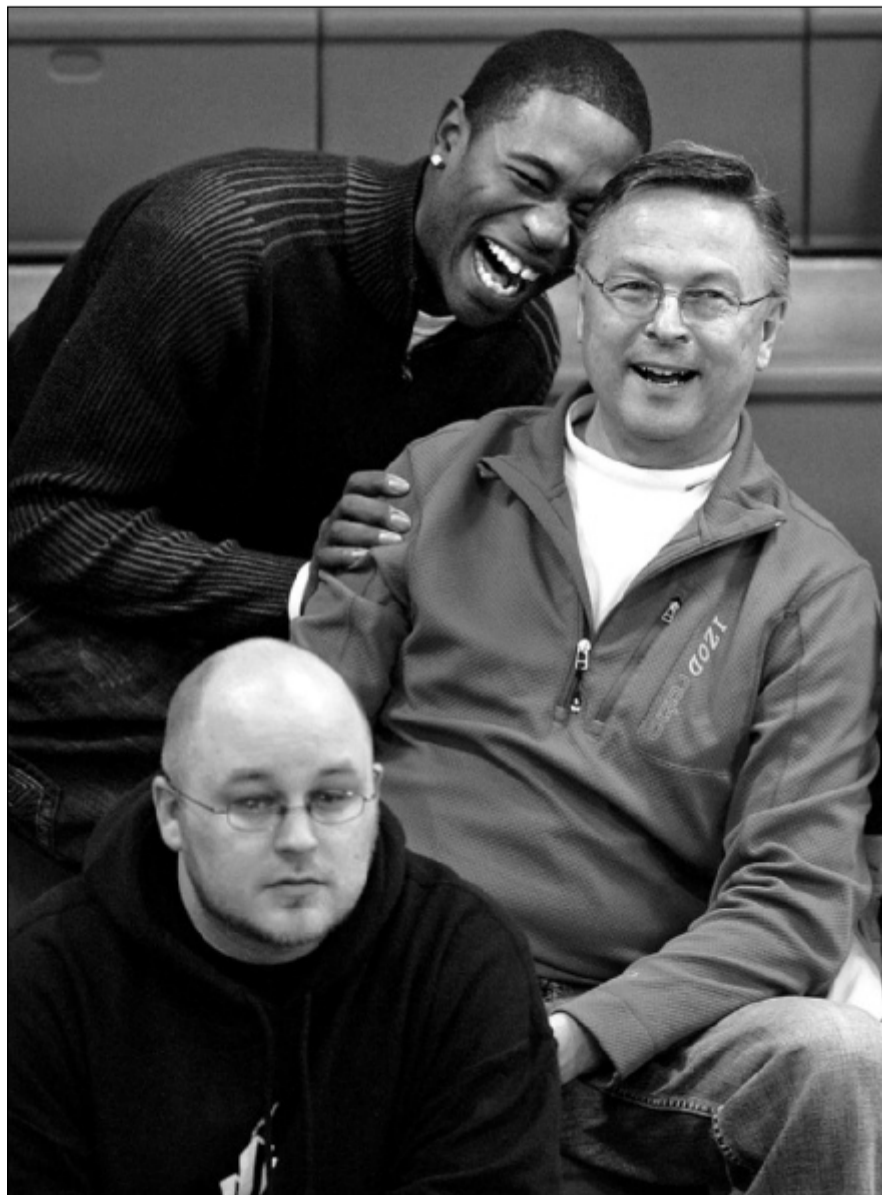
White, now a student at the University of Denver, bumped into Stewart last summer.

"I'm amazed at the amount he's matured and found direction in life," White said. "He wants to help other people. He sees what is being done for him, and he wants to take it to the next level."

It's been a long journey for Stewart from the streets of Chicago, when tumult reigned and stability was nonexistent.

But as Stewart reflected in the kitchen of the Blum home, pausing for a few seconds, he wondered what his late mother would think of his life.

"I know she would be happy for me," Stewart said, "and thankful that these gracious people took me in their arms and wanted me to be successful."



Stewart and Blum react to a play by Blum's son, Taylor, during a University of Dubuque basketball game.