

Live like JT: Gone but never forgotten

"If you want a role model, look at JT Townsend's life."

— Jacksonville Mayor Alvin Brown

Liltera R. Williams

Special to The Recorder

There is not much solace that can be found in a final farewell. Although my dear friend and local hero, JT Townsend, was taken away from us much too soon on the late evening of June 4, he served his purpose — and exceeded all expectations.

When I first heard the news, I was devastated, left wondering why his life would end so early after he had made many successful strides, but then I remembered something JT said to me the first time I interviewed him for the Recorder: "Everything happens for a reason."

He was always optimistic, always grateful and always smiling. So, a memorial service that was frequently referred to as a "celebration" was more than appropriate for a job well done.

Many sentiments were shared during the 90-minute celebration of JT's life, with two hours reserved beforehand for the viewing. The JT Townsend Mass Choir, assembled in less than 24 hours and orchestrated by local music director Chris Epps, sang three selections: "Yes Jesus Loves Me," "Awesome God" and "Total Praise" as guests continued to fill the UNF arena.

Host Nick Loren maintained the order of service by introducing a few board members from the JT Townsend Foundation, including Board Chairwoman Judy Zitiello who informed those in attendance of JT's early decision to become an organ donor.

"Even after his death he continues to give," she said.

JT's nurse also delivered a moment of reflection and serenaded us all with "One Hallelujah," a song that she wrote, which was inspired by JT's unwavering spirit.

Though many of the musical moments were memorable, Maurice Griffin's beautiful rendition of "Hear Us" seemed to capture everyone the most. He encouraged the audience to sing along as mourning easily transformed into worshipping, just as JT would have it. Despite everything he endured, JT never lost his faith. He continued to press on and truly lived life to the fullest.

Jerry "JT" Townsend Jr. was born on February 7, 1987, to mother Carmen and father Jerry Townsend Sr. As a young boy, he quickly fell in love



Townsend Family

JT Townsend graduated from the University of North Florida in April with a degree in Sports Management. He was slated to begin working with Jacksonville Jaguars this season as a graphic designer.

with sports and was offered an athletic scholarship to play college football at Florida State University, but he suffered a spinal cord injury during his senior year of high school.

Most people are already familiar with JT's story post-incident; and his accomplishments were often publicly noted. They include, but are not limited to: The Episcopal High School Foundation Award for Excellence of Character, Best

Athlete of Episcopal High School 2005, Four-Year Bright Futures Scholarship and the City of Jacksonville HandsOn Willing and Able Award.

JT graduated from high school on time and even had his football and basketball jerseys retired in 2009. Soon after his recovery, JT enrolled as a student at the University of North Florida to study Sports Management. He received his Bachelor of Science degree

on April 26.

In 2011, he founded the JT Townsend Foundation, which strives to "better the lives of children and adults with disabilities on the First Coast by providing financial assistance, adaptive equipment, and research funding." In just two short years, the foundation has raised close to \$150,000 and has as-

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sisted 60 families on the First Coast.

As a close friend, I was blessed to be able to witness JT's strength during a few one-on-one visits. He was fueled by the negativity surrounding his condition — constantly wanting to prove people wrong. And he did, on numerous occasions.

JT personally taught me how to believe, how to never give up and how to walk in my purpose. Many others learned a lot from JT as well. My newsfeed on Facebook was filled with condolences on the morning of June 5, when the media made the announcement of JT's passing. He inspired a whole community, even those he had never even met.

But there was one special person who he was directly inspiring to keep the faith, John Marcus, a 27 year-old Jacksonville native who was paralyzed after being involved in a car accident on December 12, 2003.

John and JT met six years ago at a Jacksonville Jaguars game, exchanged stories and formed an instant connection. John remembers reaching out to JT just a few weeks ago. He told him that he was thinking about giving up and wasn't sure if he would ever be able to walk again.

John recalls JT telling him, "You can't give up because you inspire me to keep going." Now that JT is no longer with us, John hopes to help carry on JT's legacy by volunteering with the JTTF and possibly starting his own foundation someday.

"JT taught me that you can accomplish anything you put your mind to," he said, "and when you start something try to finish it."

As we grow closer to accepting the fact that JT has physically departed, we will never lose sight of the powerful example he set. He would want us all to move forward; to continue dreaming and accomplishing individual goals. JT was looking forward to watching his favorite NBA team, the Miami Heat, win their next championship and becoming a Jaguars employee this upcoming season. Most of his dreams had already come true.

On Monday, I received the following message from one of JT's family members on a Facebook status update: "On behalf of JT, thanks for all the love and support. Thank you for attending the memorial service. Remember, you did not say goodbye — you said see you later."

See you later, JT. I hope we make you proud.

Please visit www.jttownsendfoundation.org/ to find out more about the JT Townsend Foundation and help fulfill JT's vision of giving back to First Coast families.



Townsend Family photos

JT Townsend with his favorite basketball player Dwayne Wade of the Miami Heat.



John Marcus with JT.



JT wearing his favorite number FSU style.

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