

Dear Mark,

2-28-08

The story that I'm now giving you in writing is the story that I have shared with many people over the years. However I must confess that I have been remiss in not writing to you before now so that you might know how a seemingly insignificant act on your part has been used by the Lord in many significant ways. I will ask you in advance to forgive me for the length and circuitous nature of this letter. I hope that by the end of it I will have expressed to you what has happened in my life since the day you knocked on my office door at Briarwood in the spring of 1992.

I was sitting at my desk and planning an upcoming Christian Basketball Camp that I was working on as the Recreation Director at Briarwood. I heard a tapping at the door and you popped your head in and told me that an evangelistic crusade was coming to town. You were involved in helping with the logistics of it and you asked if I would like to help. The event was the John Guess Crusade. You gave me the run down of things and then proceeded to ask me to join you the next day and go with you to hear another speaker associated with the event, a fellow named Joseph Jennings. You told me that Mr. Jennings was an ex-drug dealer that had been on the FBI's ten most wanted list and had gone through a radical transformation and was now a great evangelist. He was going to be speaking at a local high school tomorrow and you wanted me to go with you. I said sure. But then you asked me a question that would be the beginning tipping point of rocking my white, secure, WASP world. "He's speaking at Phillips High School; do you know how to get there?" I'm sure I didn't do a very good job of hiding the fear written on my face. I said, "Mark, I know that you're not from here but that's not in a very good part of town." You just wryly smiled at me and said "I'll pick you up at nine in the morning."

All night long I dreaded going to this high school that was, in my mind's eye, located in the middle of a war zone in foreign territory, territory that I wanted no part of. I had never considered myself racist, quite the contrary. My parents taught me from an early age that all people were God's children and I knew from reading the Bible itself that God was no respecter of persons. But yet I had been raised in a "cultural apartheid". I had black "friends" that I had played sports with and talked with occasionally but our interaction only went so far. I really didn't know them at all. We never went over to each other's house or went to the beach together or any of the other things that I regularly did with my white friends. I remember my sister telling me one time that a black girl she knew at school thought I was cute and had a crush on me. I was flattered but I knew with certainty that it would only be a curiosity and that nothing would ever manifest in reality. It was just understood that the two worlds were not meant to crossover.

When you picked me up the next morning I had decided to make the best of it and try to hide the fact that I was afraid. I knew that it wasn't macho or very Christian of me to have this fear. I vividly remember pulling up at the school and taking in the strange surroundings. The grounds were not neatly manicured; the paint on the building was drab and the overcast gray sky cast a pall over the entire scene that fit my inner mood. So, with outward false bravado and inward apprehension, I followed you into the

building. I remember being slightly more impressed with the interior of the building. I was surprised to not find any graffiti on the walls and the halls were cleaner than I had expected. I was also astounded that the students assembled in the auditorium listened attentively to Joseph Jennings and didn't seem hostile to my presence. One nice girl even asked me if I would like a piece of gum.

After the event was over we had an hour break before heading over to Tarrant High School for another program that afternoon. We decided that we had enough time to grab a quick lunch. It was then that I insisted that we go through a drive through. I told you that I just didn't feel safe going into any restaurants on this side of town. We looked around for several minutes and could only find a Church's Chicken, and to top it all off, it didn't have a drive through! I remember thinking to myself, "this is just great, we're going to be the first white people in America to ever go into Church's Chicken and I know all they're going to have cooked are wings and thighs and I hate dark meat. They are going to resent our presence and may even mug us during lunch. Reflecting back, I am ashamed that I felt this way but at the time these emotions were palpable. Sure enough, when I put in my order for white meat chicken nuggets, they had to be cooked so you went ahead and sat down while I continued to wait on my "special" order.

It was then, on this seemingly insignificant day in the middle of a seemingly insignificant act of waiting on chicken nuggets that my life would be radically changed. "Sir, the young black girl behind the counter called, "the nuggets are going to take a few minutes to cook, would you like a complimentary coke while you wait on your order?" I was dumbstruck. A complimentary drink while I wait? In a fast food joint? In a "bad" part of town? By a young black girl that I had never met? With a pleasing and articulate voice? Inexplicably, I began to cry and then outright weep. Despite being embarrassed and surprised, I could hardly contain my emotion. I tried to gather myself as I looked at the young girl's bewildered face. I suddenly felt time stop and like I was the only one standing in the restaurant. The Lord had my attention and he was speaking to me and I was ashamed at what he was telling me. "Your fear is not rational, you think you have a handle on this white/black thing but you don't, I'm going to show you some things about yourself that you're not going to like, but I am doing this because I love you and I'm going to use you as I see fit."

As I snapped out of this "providential intrusion" I was confused. Although God had not spoken to me in an audible voice, nothing could have been more loud or clear to me. "But Lord", I thought, "I was raised Methodist and now I'm Presbyterian, do you have me confused with someone else?" Although I didn't know what to make of all this, the nuggets were ready and I had to look like I was hungry so that you wouldn't ask any questions about the strange look on my face. So, I picked up my order and went around the corner to sit at your table. I wolfed down the nuggets and we were off to Tarrant High.

I don't remember much about the speech at Tarrant, but I do have very clear recollections about what happened in the library after the speech was over. Any students that wanted follow-up after Jennings's talk were invited to convene in the library. As I awkwardly

milled around and hoped that no one would ask me any questions a young man out of the corner of my eye got my attention. He was a black kid that appeared to be about 15 years of age. He didn't appear to be part of the follow-up group because he was busy working on what appeared to be a research paper of some kind. I couldn't shake him from my mind. I began to have a strange feeling come over me that sort of resembled my experience back at Church's Chicken but only different. "Okay Lord, what are you up to now? Are you toying with me or what? Why are you focusing my attention on this kid? He's gonna think I'm weird or some kind of pervert." I hesitantly approached him and made a little small talk about what he was working on and in a few minutes we were gone and back on our way to Briarwood and its beautiful, manicured grounds. I was glad to be home.

That same evening, the John Guess Crusade was wrapping up its week in Birmingham with a final event at the Civic Center downtown. Of course I felt obligated to attend but with everything that was stirring in my soul this week I had mixed emotions about going. When my wife and I got there the place was already packed. As we got seated I noticed that something was different- the arena was filled with about a 50-50 split of white and black. This in itself was different from events of this nature that I had experienced in the past. I'm sure the music was great and the talk by John Guess that night was powerful; however, I don't remember any of it. My mind was somewhere else. I was strangely consumed with the serendipitous conversation I had had with the young man in the Tarrant library earlier that day. Why couldn't I shake him from my mind? Where were these thoughts coming from? I confessed to my wife that I was bewildered by these thoughts of having to go back to the school and find out about this kid even though I wasn't sure why. I remember thinking, "how in the world am I gonna do that?, even if I find him what am I gonna tell him?, he's gonna think I'm strange.

As the crusade drew to a close, hundreds of people came forward to accept Christ. The entire week had been a great success. As we made our way out of the coliseum, I couldn't believe my eyes! The young man that I couldn't shake from my mind was approaching me. To my further surprise, he even gave me a hug. Now my mind was really racing but it came to a screeching halt. "OK, Lord, I give up. I don't care if I look foolish or if any of this makes sense, I'm going to obey you." I stood there awkwardly for a moment and then we introduced ourselves. His name was Eric Lige I then told him, "I don't know your circumstances but I think that I'm supposed to help you and be your friend and be some kind of advocate or something." I had no idea what kind of response I was going to get. I had no way of knowing anything about him. To my amazement he said, "I've been praying for two years that someone like you would come into my life."

My wife and I began to develop a great friendship with Eric that brought us a lot of joy. The friendship also gave us insight into a world that we had previously known very little about. Eric was a very polite, articulate and clean cut young man but despite his outward appearance, he had a lot going on in his life. He had little or no contact with his biological father, his step-father had been in and out of prison. His mother struggled to support the family. We helped Eric with some obvious things like clothing and

occasional spending money but he was always grateful and restrained in accepting our help. In my mind, we really didn't do all that much except encourage him.

The following year when Eric was about to graduate, he was allotted four tickets to his graduation service due to limited seating. Roxanne and I were honored that we and his parents were the four he chose to invite. After the ceremony we were invited to a party being given in his honor by a friend of the family. This friend turned out to be a local pastor that had a children's ministry in the Gate City Housing Project. As I talked with him at the party I told him that I was in the process of recruiting kids for a Christian basketball camp. (The **same** one I was working on the day you knocked on my door!) I explained to the pastor that this camp was a dream that was possibly about to be an embarrassing nightmare.

I grew up infatuated with all sports but especially basketball. As a small child I found an old rim that I nailed to the wall of an old wooden barn. I would play for hours despite having to stop every few minutes and nail the rim back up on the wall. Any chance I got I would sneak off down the street to an older neighbor's yard to shoot baskets until his dad came home and ran me off. As I got older and my dad put up my own goal, I would spend hours upon hours playing basketball. Later in life I played on the Jr. High and varsity teams. My high school team won 76 games and lost only 7 but never quite won the state championship. After graduation I continued to chase the dream at several different colleges including Auburn University until I realized I was a step too slow to be a good college player. I began to wonder, "Why would God give me all this passion for something without the talent to go with it?"

This question haunted me even after I had graduated from college and had gotten married. I majored in speech communication at Auburn because it was the only major I could find that for some reason didn't require any math. So a year after getting married Roxanne was working in an architectural firm and I was selling cars. I began to pray about what I was going to do with my life and the only thing I really felt led to do was start a Christian basketball camp. What an absurd thought! I had never even heard of such a thing. I didn't know what one was let alone how I would possibly make a living at it. When I finally mustered up the courage to tell Roxanne, I was surprised that she didn't laugh me out the door. Instead she took me seriously and asked me how I would do it. (What a wife!) We decided that if I was going to have a Christian camp I would have to be a coach. In order to be a coach I would have to go back to school and get a degree in education. In order to go back to school I would have to quit my full time job, get a part-time job and lower our expenses significantly. Within a few days I quit my job and we moved into the spare bedroom in my sister's apartment. (so much for wedded bliss)

I enrolled at Ga. State University in a program designed for people who had a bachelor's degree but didn't meet the requirements to teach. The program would take a year for me to complete but there was one hitch: the admissions counselor informed me that you had to have a 2.5 g.p.a. to qualify for the program. As if you haven't deduced by now, I wasn't the greatest student in the world. I had a 2.3 g.p.a. at Auburn so it didn't look as if

I could get in. Now I was really in a pickle. I thought, "Lord, why have you brought me this far only to end this thing now?" Then the counselor said, "hold on a minute, this program requires 15 hours of preliminary credits, let me check something." So, he gets out his calculator and determines that if I have a 4.0 (straight A's) in the preliminary courses, it will raise my over all g.p.a. to a 2.52 and I can get in. I didn't know whether to be happy or sad. At least I now had a chance, but I had never even come close to making straight A's. What if I didn't? Would tuition, three months in school, quitting my job and moving in with my sister be all in vein? Well, with Roxanne's blessing I decided to go for broke. I'll never forget the angst of receiving the letter and rolling on the floor in delirium when I saw that I had made a 4.0. The following year I graduated with a 3.92 g.p.a. and moved to Birmingham to look for a teaching job.

A friend of my father-in law was a retired principal and he tried to help me get a job. We tried several schools in Birmingham, but no one was hiring a coach that taught English. We were about to give up the search when he mentioned a school named Briarwood. I had never heard of it but he said that he had been the principal there for a few years after he had retired from the city school system. I was hired by the school and for three years taught English and coached football, tennis and girl's basketball. Every year I would ask for permission to do a basketball camp and was turned down every time.

In what would have been my fourth year, we moved to Auburn to help my mother recover from a stroke. The following year we returned to Birmingham and Briarwood hired me to start a recreation ministry. As part of the recreation ministry, I started having an "open gym" on Sunday nights following the evening service. A lot of guys, mostly black started coming from all over the city to play. It only made sense to use this forum as an opportunity to share the gospel with these guys. One night a rare occurrence happened, a white guy showed up to play. As I was locking up after play that night we began to talk. His name was Mike Barnett and he had just moved here from Indiana as a sales rep for Champion Products. We really hit it off and talked for two hours in the parking lot. As we were about to leave I told him that my dream had been to do a Christian basketball camp using basketball as the bait with the hook being the gospel. I'll never forget the look of excitement in his eyes when he told me that he would help me and he had just the friend to bring in to make it happen. His friend was a high school basketball coach in Indiana named Ed Schilling.

Little did I know how right Mike was going to turn out to be. For you see, Ed wasn't any ordinary basketball coach. Ed Schilling was the co-director of the world famous Five Star Basketball Camps! As a player he was a high-school all American, the all time assist leader at Miami of Ohio and had played in two NCAA tournaments. A severe knee injury probably kept him from playing in the NBA. And best of all, he was a dynamic Christian! A few days after Mike introduced us Ed drove to Birmingham and talked Briarwood into funding what we later named The Right Stuff Basketball Camp.

As I told this to the pastor at Eric's party he seemed interested in helping me find kids for the camp but admitted that "sports is not my thing." He did however say "you should get

in touch with a man named Sam Dansby in the Collegeville Projects. The following day I set out for Collegeville.

As I meandered through the back streets of the project looking for the gym, I was taken aback by all of the abandoned cars and broken glass. The entire project looked like a prison because it was surrounded by a heavy iron fence that had been built to "protect" the neighborhood. I remember nervously parking my car and approaching the gym when I came upon some guys playing on an outdoor goal by the back door of the gym. It was then that I spotted the man that I knew had to be Sam Dansby. He was an imposing figure with a barrel chest and a great smile. He gave me a big hug and started telling me about all these young men in his ministry aptly called "Bibles and Balls."

Sam almost single-handedly brought the near two hundred kids to that first Right Stuff Basketball Camp. Through his connections selling Champion uniforms Mike Barnett helped me recruit many of the best coaches in the state to that first camp. Ed's good friend, Steve Alford, an Indiana All American, ex-Olympian, and NBA player flew in to share a powerful testimony with the kids. The camp was more than I could have ever imagined. But the climactic moment of the entire week came when you came to share the Gospel and invite the young men to accept Christ as their Lord and Savior.

The night before the Lord had impressed upon me that more than 100 kids were going to respond to the Gospel that next day. I told Ed and a few other coaches so we got out all the registration cards and prayed over each card one by one for about five hours until about three in the morning. As you reached the end of your talk and invited them to come forward it was like a flood! More than 100 young men came to Christ that day. It was one of the happiest days of my life as I reflected on how faithful the Lord had been.

The camp continued for nine more years and almost 1,000 kids came to Christ. Ed went on to become an NBA asst. coach and a Division One head coach at Wright State University. Other coaches went on to further their careers such as Todd Lickliter at Iowa, Steve Alford at New Mexico, Mitch Cole at Birmingham Southern, Roosevelt Sanders at Miles College and Andy Kennedy at Ole Miss. Otis Hughley and Frank Tolbert have won state championships at the highest level in Alabama. But most importantly, many young men have gone on to become good husbands, dads, and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

Because of my involvement with the camp and more and more inner-city ministries I later was chosen by Briarwood to become their first Director of Urban Missions. Also, out of my friendship with Eric's pastor, I met another young man named Lagarious Milton that Roxanne and I informally adopted for almost ten years. He is now 25 years old and is like a son to me. Eric, by the way is doing well and lives in California and sings professionally in a Christian group.

I left staff at Briarwood in 2000, and the camp ended a couple of years later. I have been in business for myself since I left staff but this past September I got an e-mail that caused an electrical jolt to go down my spine. It was from Tom Cheely, the Missions Pastor at

Briarwood. It read: "Don't know what you're doing these days but "The Right Stuff" basketball outreach wasn't handled properly at the end. I believe it was an act of God and God will use it again. Let's meet for lunch." I immediately called Ed Schilling and he said that he felt the same jolt I did and he would love to help me "resurrect" the camp. Well, since that time I have formed a board and have started raising money and coordinating with ministries that will bring kids to the camp. Just this past week I had lunch with Sam Dansby and he is fired up. By the way, his son Karlos is out your way playing linebacker for the Arizona Cardinals! You should look him up and invite him to church. As soon as I get some dates lined up I will contact you to see if you can fly in to share the keynote lecture at the end of the camp.

I warned you at the beginning of this letter that I had a lot to say to you. I'm sure this is the longest letter that I've ever written. I just wanted you to know that you impacted my life more than you will ever know. By the way, you also used to encourage me to have kids and six years ago we adopted Sarah Beth. She is now the most beautiful, bright and loving little girl you have ever laid eyes on. I hope you can meet her this summer.

God bless you Mark!

Bobby Nix
1616 Windsor Lane
Leeds, AL 35094
205-218-8728