

## **CHARACTER OF THE HIGHEST QUALITY**

How do you measure character? You might disagree with what best measures character, but after reading this story I think your life will be forever touched by the character of one man, Kevin Johnson. When the odds are stacked so high against you that only two doctors in the entire United States will even consider performing surgery on you, and your family is told in no uncertain terms that your situation could most accurately be defined as “life or death,” that is a character defining moment. In fact, some might say that a moment such as this might be the best measure of one’s character. Furthermore, it is during these character defining moments when you truly discover how many lives your character has impacted.

As a St. Gregory’s University basketball standout, Kevin Johnson, or “KJ” as he is known to his friends, helped the Cavaliers secure a spot in the 2000 NAIA National Tournament for the first time in school history. As a coach in the Sooner Athletic Conference, I remember too vividly the athlete whose heart and drive was at the center of that ball club. It was my John Brown University team that the Cavaliers beat in the last game of the regular season to break a 2<sup>nd</sup> place tie in the SAC, sending SGU to Tulsa and us home, short of making the post-season national tournament. A 6’7” chiseled banger, KJ was and remains to this day a warrior. You know the type. I can’t help but remember him wearing a full face mask due to a broken jaw bone which was received from the elbow of our center earlier that same season. Kevin was without question one of those players you could not break, could not get to back down, couldn’t get to give up, could never get to quit no matter what the circumstances. And, as you are about to read, this assessment of Kevin as a player continues to define his character even to this day.

Since graduating from St. Gregory’s University in 2000, KJ married his sole mate, Amanda Penix (now affectionately referred to as “AJ”), and over the past 10 years has coached on three NAIA coaching staffs; as an assistant coach and eventually the head coach at his alma mater St. Gregory’s University, assistant coach at Oklahoma Baptist University and most recently just this past season, he served as the head assistant coach at Fresno Pacific University. I believe that a coach, along with a teacher and minister, has the single greatest opportunity and responsibility of any profession to impact lives through his or her character. After you read about the last 45 days of Kevin Johnson’s life, I think you will agree that Kevin’s character has shined brightly, even in the darkest of days.

December 31, 2006, began just like any other day for the young 29-year old. Having recently chosen to change careers, Kevin was merely 6 months into his new job as a sales representative with Stryker Orthopedics. While working out at the local gym, Kevin developed a headache, something he very rarely, if ever, experienced. From this point in Kevin’s story, I will use passages and quotes from a blog site put together by Kevin’s 31-year old brother, Jeff, to relate Kevin’s story. Jeff began the website January 3<sup>rd</sup>, just three days into the journey, as a way to keep family and friends informed about Kevin’s condition. The following paragraph is an insert from Jeff’s first post:

Kevin (my younger brother) suffered a ruptured aneurysm. He is currently in Mercy Hospital ICU in OKC. The good news is that it has clotted itself for the time being and is currently not bleeding. He is heavily sedated and on a number of meds to keep his blood pressure down, but when he does wake up and talk there are no signs of neurological damage whatsoever. However, the doctors are very clear that surgery is needed.

What's complicating matters is a combination of the aneurysm's size (it was categorized as "giant"), its location (right at the base of the brain...a "basilar tip aneurysm") and lastly the shape (instead of just encompassing 1 artery, it encompasses 2).

The roller coaster ride that ensued for KJ and the Johnson family since that day can most accurately be summarized as a miracle. I must say that Kevin's faith in his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is at the center of his character and strength. Kevin's parents have served on several occasions as Baptist missionaries you see. Due to the complexity of this story, I will only be able to convey to you the highlights of this incredible story and merely scrape the tip of the iceberg when I speak to the awesome impact KJ has had on so many people. If you would like to read the story in its entirety, please feel free to visit KJ's blog site at <http://www.pbase.com/coachjohnson/kj>.

Over the past 45 days Kevin has knocked at death's door more times than I choose to count.

- He survived a life threatening med-flight to the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), many health professionals fearing that the airplanes increased cabin pressure could cause his aneurysm to re-bleed.
- He battled to stay alive and keep his vital signs at a stable level that the doctors were comfortable with to even proceed with the brain surgery.
- He survived a 9-hour brain surgery in which no assurance was given prior to the surgery that Kevin would even survive the operation. Furthermore, only 2 doctors in the entire country were even willing to attempt the surgery.
- He not only survived the surgery, but has amazed doctors at his miraculous recovery. That includes so many "wow" moments you will have to read them all for yourself by visiting the website.
- On January 26, he was discharged from UCSF and allowed to return home to Oklahoma via medi-flight to the Integris Jim Thorpe Rehabilitation Center in Oklahoma City.
- Feb 14<sup>th</sup>, Valentines Day, he is being discharged from the Integris Jim Thorpe Rehabilitation Center to go home. The following post gives you some insight to that awesome event:

**IT'S OFFICIAL!!! KEVIN JUST CALLED TO TELL ME THAT HE IS BEING RELEASED FROM JIM THORPE TOMORROW MORNING!!!** How awesome is that?!?!?!? I could hear the excitement in Kevin's voice, and he literally made me tear up when he told me, "*You've been a big part of this.*" Amanda said he's literally been dancing since receiving the good news...and has even threatened to start turning back flips. Thank you Lord.

Another fun/exciting update is that the staff at Jim Thorpe has enjoyed Kevin & Amanda so much and been so impressed by the strides Kevin has made since coming to the rehab center some 18 days ago that they have asked them to film a commercial...this Thursday! They've agreed to do this, so in effect, Kevin will be released from Jim Thorpe sometime tomorrow (Wednesday) morning...and return to Jim Thorpe Thursday morning for at least an hour or so to film some of his rehab there on site.

When I first heard this news, my thoughts immediately went to the latter part of the verse Ray Belcher shared with Kevin and the rest of us while we were in California, Habakkuk 1:5, which reads, "**For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.**" I literally get goose bumps when I think about being to the point in this journey where God is starting to "reveal" some of these "things" that He is going to do with/in Kevin & Amanda's lives...their testimonies...that we would never have imagined, let alone "believed," back on December 31, 2006...and this is just the tip of the iceberg!!!

Now that I have set the stage, I want to speak to the impact Kevin's character has had on so many lives. On Jeff's website, visitors are given the opportunity to post messages. I simply don't have time to count the number of posts, but I would guess that somewhere in the neighborhood of 2000 people who were moved to post words of encouragement over the course of the last 45 days. Many, including myself, are former players, coaches, classmates, and acquaintances of Kevin. However, the truly amazing thing is that many are complete strangers who have been impacted by both Kevin's character and the unwavering faith exhibited by this remarkable young man during his short lifetime. I will share just a few of the myriad of posts, along with my own post, to give you a taste of the impact KJ has had on his classmates, players, friends, fellow coaches and total strangers.

**POST BY HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE CLASSMATE**

As my prayer has continued throughout the entire day today - I have found amazing comfort in my thoughts. As I reflect on my precious memories of Kevin at Deer Creek and at St. Gregory's - I am warmed by the constant character that Kevin possesses. Every memory is filled with a constant gift from God - Kevin. He has always been solid - solid in his Faith - solid in his character. He has always been TRUE - a true man of faith, a true friend, and a true strength to so many. This testimony is the most humbling thing I have ever experienced. It is hard to even grasp the depths of the thousands of lives your family has touched. You and your family are a profound blessing. We are all so blessed to have you. My thoughts and prayers will remain with you all.  
Julie Johnson

**POST BY TWO OF KEVIN'S FORMER PLAYERS AT SGU**

Hey Jeff,  
Mich and I (Brad) are emailing you on Amanda's request. Attached are pictures of our new tattoos. They are the Chinese Kanji characters for courageous warrior. KJ instilled so many things into our lives....he taught us to be warriors for the Lord our God, our family, our friends, and everything we believed in.....he is by far an amazing warrior of God's army and we are so blessed to have been able to have him as such a major influence in our lives.....we are looking forward for KJ, AJ, (the whole johnson family) and your posse to return safely to OK because he still owes us a tattoo trip!...

*Exodus 15:3 "The Lord is a warrior, the Lord is his name."*

Continuously praying!  
God is Good!  
Brad Evans  
Mich Reeves

**POST BY MATT PADEN AST COACH AT LUBBOCK CHRISTIAN**

KJ you have always been a great source of encouragement for me as a young coach. I appreciate who you are and more importantly "whose you are." We will continue to pray for your healing and for

strength for you and your family. God bless.

Matt Paden and the LCU Basketball Team

**POST BY Jeff (Kevin's brother)**

Clark Sheehy, the guy Kevin coached with this past year at Fresno Pacific, and his wife brought dinner by for us this evening. He came bearing not only gifts of food, but also the gift of some very good news that would prove to be a very bright spot for Kevin. Some months ago, Kevin initiated talks with one of their basketball players concerning his faith and relationship with Christ. This kid was admittedly an unbeliever...but through many after-hours talks with Kevin had begun to acquire a desire to learn more about Christ. These seeds planted by Kevin more than a year ago were harvested 2 weeks ago when this young man accepted Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. My little brother is amazing. Those of you who know Kevin no doubt know this already. What an awesome testimony God is putting together for my little brother.

And finally, I want to share a portion of a post I personally left on the website. Let me briefly set the stage. Our John Brown University team had just won the 2005 NAIA National Championship Tournament. When I returned home from Kansas City, I was greeted by a message from Kevin on my home answering machine. I debated on whether or not to include this message in this article because the last thing I want to do is make this article about the accomplishments of John Brown University. However, I truly believe that it speaks to the heart of Kevin's character.

I believe those of you who know Kevin well would enjoy reading this message he left on my answering machine after we'd returned home from Kansas City, so here goes. Also please understand that I have always felt Kevin is twice the Godly man I am, so when reading the message you might understand why I have saved this message on cassette and listen to it often as inspiration. Here is the message:

*Donnie B, KJ, Man 1:40 on.....oh whatever day it is, Wednesday, you guys are National Champions man. I just wanted to call to congratulate you and say what an encouragement that you are to me man, you just go and show all the coaching world that you can be a Godly man and fear the lord and win Championships. Change guys life for Christ. Man, that is so awesome and I am just so happy for you man. You deserve that. You and Coach Sheehy. I think even more importantly man is what an encouragement you are to me. Just to know your faith and to know how God has blessed you with that. Just want to say congratulations man. Thanks for being an example to me. Just to fear the Lord and also be in coaching. UM.... Just do what you do man. Great Job. SEE YA.*