



Photo credit to Jerry Laizure, University of Oklahoma.

BY TIM ELLSWORTH

RAISING ALEXANDER

BARHAMS OPEN HOME AND HEARTS TO A YOUNG MAN WHO NEEDED BOTH

Nothing seemed to work for David Barham as he tried to motivate 14-year-old Rufus Alexander.

As a new student to Westminster Christian Academy in Opelousas, La., where David was the basketball and football coach, Rufus simply wasn't cutting it. He only attended class about half the time. When he was there, he slept.

When the first report cards came out, Rufus was failing almost every class. At first the offenses were minor, but then Rufus started getting into more serious trouble.

This isn't working out, David thought. Westminster is a demanding academic school. It'd be best for Rufus to go back to a school where he has a chance to succeed — because he certainly won't at Westminster.

So one day after a basketball game, shortly before Christmas, David took the boy home. He wanted to talk to Rufus' mother about the situation.

He remembers what it was like walking into Rufus' home in the public housing projects.

It's dark and hot as he enters. Several guys — including Rufus' older brother — are sitting at a table, “obviously doing what they shouldn't be doing,” David said. There's nothing to eat in the house. Rufus' mother isn't home, because she's working one of her two jobs. There's no phone to call her.

“No wonder he isn't passing,” David thought to himself. “There's no kid at Westminster that goes back home to this environment. Study for an English exam? There's no food. No wonder he doesn't make the bus. No wonder he sleeps in class.”

David stepped outside for a minute to gather himself. All of a sudden, it was clear to him.

“It hit me that I wouldn't have made it in this environment, either,” David said.

He told Rufus to go and get his stuff — that he was going to come and stay with the Barhams. David only meant “stay” for a couple of days. The Barhams often kept students for short periods of time, to help them get through difficult situations.

Rufus, however, had something else in mind. He returned from his room carrying a garbage bag with everything he owned. He ended up staying a lot longer than a couple of days.

That was 10 years ago, and Rufus is now a permanent part of the Barham family. David Barham ('88) and his wife Melinda Johns Barham ('90) became surrogate parents for Rufus and took it upon themselves to help him meet his potential.

They taught him how to be responsible and to work hard. They imparted their faith in God.

They showed him what it meant to be a family.

Their efforts paid off handsomely.

Rufus became a football star as a linebacker at the University of Oklahoma, and was named the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year for the 2006 season. On April 29, the Minnesota Vikings selected him in the sixth round of the NFL draft.

Alexander's mother, Siene Champ, is still a part of his life. But in the Oklahoma football media guide, Alexander listed the Barhams as his parents.

"Coach Barham was my father figure when I didn't have one," Alexander said. "Miss Melinda was my mom away from my other mom."

At first, the arrangement was for Rufus to stay with the Barhams during the week, and then go home over the weekends. Since Rufus lived in Breau Bridge, a 30-minute drive from the school, the Barhams thought it would be easier for him to make it to school by living with them.

David planned for Rufus to stay at the Barham house through the end of the semester, so he could more adequately prepare for exams. Rufus' mother was all for it. David, however, had his doubts.

"I never saw it working," David said. "But there was never a kid I brought home that fit more into our family than this one."

A few weeks into the arrangement, the Barhams left town for several days over Christmas vacation. Rufus went back home for the duration. When the Barhams returned, Rufus asked if he could live with them all the time – even over weekends. He had decided he didn't like what he went back to over the holidays.

The Barhams agreed. "He knew he wanted something different," Melinda said. "He was going to do whatever he had to do. I just respect him so much for wanting to be something different and sticking with it."

Almost immediately, the Barhams began to see Rufus change for the better. His grades improved. He finished all his homework.

The Barhams taught Rufus proper manners. David taught him how to look people in the eye. He also made it clear what he expected from Rufus

– and that included no tattoos, and no earrings. Rufus obliged.

"Our relationship grew from coach to dad and role model," David said.

The Barhams' children loved having Rufus as a big brother. Their son Robbie, now 16, and their daughter Ellie, now 11, would fight at breakfast every morning about who would get to sit next to Rufus.

"My mom painted the chairs with our names on them," Robbie said. "He had a chair, I had a chair and Ellie had a chair. And he always had to sit in the middle."

It wasn't long before the Barhams had another addition to their family – daughter, Annie, now 7. Rufus was there when she was born, and Annie dearly loves her "Rufie," as she nicknamed him.

"He doesn't aggravate us like our other brother," Annie said.

Ellie said having Rufus around has other benefits.

"Whenever Bubba (Robbie) messes with us, he beats him up for us," she said with a smile.

The transition wasn't always smooth. David expected Rufus to work hard, and sometimes Rufus chafed at that – like when he had to chop wood.

"I got blisters on my hand and stuff and I was kinda like, 'Nah. I really don't want to do this,'" Rufus said.

So he called his mom and asked her to come and get him.

"She wasn't having it," Rufus said. "She sided with him."

Shortly after Rufus moved in with the Barhams, it was time for spring football practice. David informed Rufus that he'd be playing on the team.

"Coach, I don't play football," Rufus told him.

"If you live here, you are," David replied.

"I'm going to coach it, and you're going to be on it. You may sit on the end of the bench, but you're going to be here every day for practice. You're going to be under my nose."

Rufus didn't like it, but he grudgingly acquiesced. He soon discovered that football wasn't so bad.

"He wasn't afraid to hit people," David said. "Most kids have this little flinch in them right before they collide. He didn't."

After Rufus' sophomore year at Westminster, David left the school for a position at Christian Life School in Baton Rouge. The Barhams gave Rufus the option of staying at Westminster with his friends, but he chose to accompany them.

Rufus excelled in football at Christian Life and was heavily recruited by several major college football programs, including Texas and LSU. Rufus chose Oklahoma, and his games on Saturdays became family affairs. The Barhams would often make the nine-hour drive to Norman, Okla., to watch Rufus play.

"It's really been fun," Melinda said. "I think it's made us a lot stronger as a family. Our kids like being together. They like being with us."

Now Rufus hopes to have a career in the NFL. He knows he can thank David and Melinda for their role in getting him to this point.

"They tried to instill education into me, and that was a hard road," he said. "I learned how to be even more stubborn than I already was from Coach Barham. He's a stubborn dude."

The Barhams are back in Opelousas, where they run Acadiana Preparatory School – a private school for underprivileged children.

"I wanted to help kids," David said. "That's what God put in my heart to do."

Many of their students come from backgrounds similar to Rufus'. It's not an easy task for the Barhams, as money for the school is tight.

But although financial resources are hard to come by, the Barhams have other resources in abundance to help them as they try to change the lives of children. For that, they can thank Rufus in part.

"Rufus has opened my eyes to loving people unconditionally," Melinda said. "He's made me be more sensitive to other kids."

"I can't imagine him not being part of our family. He's not our son, but he's like our son," she continued. "He was just so easy to love." ❖

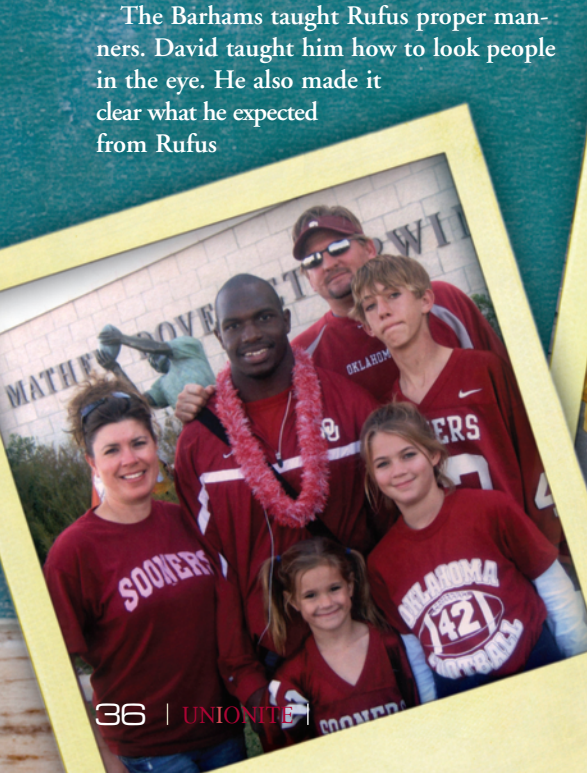


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