

## The FOJ Experience Series, Story No. 2 (6/23/2015)

Headline: The boy who touched a baseball team's heart, in just a few months

By Michael J. Lewis



The [plaque](#) will be there every day, from now on, reminding everyone in the Rhodes College baseball family about the special kid who once roamed the grounds.

It will sit inside the gleaming new hitting facility at the school, where Lynx players will trek all throughout the season to work on their opposite-field swing or some other aspect of the game. It's a simple plaque, inscribed with the name of a boy who never threw a strikeout or smacked a two-run double, but put an indelible mark on all those he touched.

“In memory of Derek Thomas Vincent,” the inscription reads. “An honorary member of the 2014 Rhodes baseball team, Derek touched the hearts of all who met him. He continues to cheer on his team, his seats are outside our vision just this side of the Field of Dreams. Our Forever 6 Angel, 2008-2014.”

Derek Vincent was a 6 year old boy living in Memphis, Tenn. in January, 2014 when he was diagnosed with diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma, a tumor located on the brain stem.

Soon after, the Friends of Jaclyn Foundation contacted Rhodes College and head coach Jeff Cleanthes, asking if the might adopt Derek and let him be around the team.

Coincidentally, Derek’s grandmother, Tina Nesmith, worked at Rhodes.

“I got together with the team and told them about it, and what Derek was going through, and they couldn’t have been more excited about doing this,” Cleanthes said. “I asked who wanted to be leaders of Derek’s adoption, and really spend a lot of time with him, and every one of them wanted to do it.”

One of the things we’re going to do with these “FOJ Experience” stories is talk to families about what FOJ means to their sick child.

But we’re also going to show the other side: just how much the children affect the teams they’re adopted by.

And in the case of Derek Vincent, who only got to spend eight months with his baseball pals, that affect was huge.

In just one season of hanging around the Rhodes team, Derek became a permanent part of the club’s legacy.

When asked to tell stories about Derek, Cleanthes goes on and on, unspooling one happy memory after the other. Stories of Derek hanging in the dugout, or the team visiting their little buddy in the hospital.

Cleanthes’ favorite tale is pretty funny: Derek and pitcher Max Halasz formed an immediate bond last season, laughing together and being fairly inseparable around the field.

One day, Cleanthes recalled, the Make-A-Wish-Foundation came to Derek and told him he had an amazing opportunity: He could spend a day with any athlete in the world, so who would he want to spend it with?

“Max Halasz,” Derek replied.

“We told him, ‘you can hang out with Max anytime, wouldn’t you rather hang out with someone else,’” Cleanthes said, chuckling at the memory. “Finally Derek settled on LeBron James. But really, he wanted to spend time with Max.”

Tragically, Derek’s health declined rapidly during the 2014 season. Cleanthes said he frequently talked to his team about keeping a brave face on when Derek was around, and always staying positive. For many of these 19 and 20-year-old athletes, this was a very new experience.

“I would say things like enjoy every moment you have with him, and don’t take anything in your life for granted,” Cleanthes said. “Always appreciate every moment.”

Derek passed away on August 18, 2014. The whole Rhodes team, away on summer break, came back to Tennessee for the funeral.

In addition to holding fundraisers to help Derek’s family, Rhodes dedicated the baseball facility to Derek this past April 18.

“I get to go in there every day and see his name, and think about him and what a great kid he is,” Cleanthes said. “He’ll always be our angel, and I’m forever grateful for that.”