**Why I Stayed**

By Lisa Fenn

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*"Why did you stay?"*

He asked me, unprompted, as we waited quietly for the light to turn green. My heart revved. I always thought he knew.



*Leroy Sutton, Dartanyon Crockett and Lisa Fenn grew close during the reporting of her 2009 story, "Carry On."* Brownie Harris for ESPN

"I love you," I answered.

"That's what I thought you'd say," he replied. "But … why … why did you stick around and do everything you did?"

The answer to Dartanyon Crockett's second question was not as tidy as the first. Because life can be a knotted mess and, sometimes, love is not enough.

Dartanyon and Leroy Sutton grubbed their way into my heart four years ago. As an ESPN television features producer at the time, I was always on the hunt for unique athlete pieces. For 10 years, I traveled the country, chronicling human-interest stories against the backdrop of sports. I covered Derek Jeter and Michael Jordan all the way down to disabled amateurs and terminally ill little leaguers who imprinted a special brand of heroics onto this world. What a privilege to be invited into their private pains and sacred celebrations.

But what I found on the wrestling mats at Cleveland's Lincoln-West High School in 2009 caused my spirit to sink and soar, all in the same moment.

Dartanyon was Lincoln's best and strongest talent. He was 5-foot-7 with muscles bunched like buckeyes and a winner in multiple weight classes. He was also homeless, subsisting on the soggy mozzarella sticks and badly bruised apples served in cafeteria lunches. His mama died of an aneurysm when he was 8 years young, at which point family collected him and took him to live in an East Cleveland crack house. Where exactly it was Dartanyon could not say because Dartanyon is legally blind. Born with Leber's disease, a condition that causes acute vision loss, he can barely make out the facial features of a person sitting a few feet away.

Perched atop Dartanyon's back -- yes, riding on his back -- was teammate Leroy Sutton. He traveled around up there because he had no legs, and the school had no elevator. And because when he was 11 years young, he was hit by a train. Yes, a freight train. Though the paramedics saved his life, they could not save his entire body. His left leg was amputated below the knee, his right leg below the hip. His mother, ravaged by guilt, soon slipped into drug use and disappeared for stretches of time, leaving Leroy alone to care for his younger sister. His father spent nearly all of Leroy's youth in jail. The "why" questions haunted Leroy, but he learned to mask their torment with a quick smile.

The one with no legs, being carried by the one who could not see. At first, I stayed because I simply could not look away.

In addition to being intense practice partners, Dartanyon and Leroy shared a handful of classes, always sitting side by side. Dartanyon would get up to sharpen Leroy's pencils; Leroy ensured Dartanyon could read small print. Yet each time I allowed myself to revel in their tenderness, they reverted to teenage humor with a twist that only they could share.

"Did you guys do the homework?" the teacher asked.

"Dartanyon tried," Leroy said, "but he couldn't see it."

"So Leroy ran over," Dartanyon said, "and read it to me."

 *Leroy, left, lost his legs in a train accident when he was 11. Dartanyon, right, was born with Leber's Disease, which led to blindness.* Brownie Harris for ESPN

Afterward, they barreled down the halls together, their echoing laughter the brightest light in that dreary place. Dartanyon kept a hand on Leroy's wheelchair, in part as a guide for himself but also as a protector, a brother, for Leroy. Their teachers remarked to me that they were "some of the good ones."

Their cheerfulness stood out in a school marked by irreverent students and sunken teachers. Seas of black and Latino teens poured through the metal detectors each morning, many stopped for pat-downs. One boy wearing no coat on a blistery March morning was turned away, the security guard informing him that he had been expelled the week prior. There was an arrest in the hallway after 10th period. Books were handed out and locked back up after each class. Less than 40 percent would ever graduate; untold numbers were left pregnant. Yet Dartanyon and Leroy moved throughout the chaos with grace, with a refusal to have their hope tainted. "Destined for Greatness," Dartanyon scribbled on his pages throughout the day. They seemed oblivious to the damning limitations on their lives.

Producing the 2009 story, "Carry On," challenged me in ways I previously had not experienced. Instead of telling the story of an individual accomplishment or remarkable moment, this conveyed a friendship. And in order for the nuances of a friendship to unfold naturally on camera, I needed to become a part of it. Calling out, "Be funny on the count of three" or "Now convey warmth on this take" is artificial. This story required me to be in on the jokes and move fluidly with the characters.

I found this difficult at first, because I grew up on the other side of Cleveland. The white side. Though I was raised just eight miles west of Lincoln, my parents scrounged up the money for private school to protect me from the public schools and "those people." Through all of their summer yard sales and side jobs, I silently wondered what was so bad about the people "over there" to prompt their determination. Now I realized their internal discomfort was probably akin to the visible uneasiness I wore standing in Lincoln's halls. Small, shy, blonde and studious, I would not have survived a week.

But Dartanyon and Leroy eased me in graciously. As we filmed over the course of five months, I tagged along to their classes, to their practices and on team bus rides. They taught me their lingo and poked fun when I tried to use it. They opened up about their struggles -- Dartanyon with great eagerness, as I think he had waited his entire life for someone to want to know him, to truly see him. Leroy's revelations emerged more reluctantly. He had been emotionally abandoned too many times before. But sharing his past began a type of therapy for him. Both began to believe that, perhaps, I genuinely cared.

I stayed because I would not be next on the list of people who walked out and over their trust.

After the wrestling season, Dartanyon and Leroy competed in power lifting. Leroy held the Ohio state record in bench press, Dartanyon in dead lift. Immediately following his conference power-lifting-championship win in April 2009, Dartanyon discovered that all of his belongings had been taken from the bleachers. Stolen along with them was his right to celebrate. Every victory in his life was ripped from him before he could even taste it.

That week, I drove Dartanyon around town to replace his lost items. A new bus pass. Another cell phone. A trip to the social security office for a state ID, which required a birth certificate, which had been confiscated during his dad's last eviction. His was a cruel world, even for a sighted person. How he endured it in shadows baffled me. I paid for all of his items, arguably crossing a journalistic line. But this was quickly becoming less about a story and all about soothing the suffering. Dartanyon later told me it was during that week of errands that he grew convinced God placed me into his life for reasons beyond television, that no one else would have taken the time and money to help him in those ways.

Soon thereafter, I traveled to Akron to film Leroy's childhood neighborhood. This required a police escort. "Welcome to Laird Street," the officer said smugly. "We call it 'Laird Country,' because once they're born onto Laird, they never leave. They just move from house to house, up and down, following those drugs." Shadowy men loomed on the dilapidated porches of each home, while the streets were filled with children who should have been in school. "Your guy must have been real lucky to get out," the officer remarked.

 *Leroy and Dartanyon, inseparable in high school, have made their own successful*

*ways since their days together at Cleveland's Lincoln-West High School.*

Brownie Harris for ESPN

I stayed because my heart was too heavy for my legs to walk away. Dark clouds hung over every turn of Dartanyon's and Leroy's lives, and I found myself pleading with the heavens to end this madness.

That summer, I feverishly edited "Carry On," praying that just one viewer would be moved to help these boys in meaningful ways. But instead, following its August airings, hundreds emerged! Emails from Africa to England, from Idaho to Ipswich flooded my inbox, every viewer offering money and sharing personal accounts of how this extraordinary friendship shook their souls awake. Dartanyon and Leroy were no longer invisible. Their plights mattered to a world inspired. I curled up on my kitchen floor and wept.

In the month that followed, I personally responded to nearly 1,000 emails, not wanting to miss out on a blessing. Round the clock I harnessed donations, vetted speaking invitations, deciphered financial aid forms, coordinated college visits and ensured Dartanyon and Leroy were finally fed on a daily basis. Each time I shared exciting new developments with them, Dartanyon gushed with thank-yous and hugs, broad grins and relieved exhales. But Leroy's stoic posture never budged. "Leroy, if at any point you don't want this, you need to speak up," I said. "The last thing I want is to inflict my desires on you."

"No, it's all good," he said.

"But usually, when it's 'all good,' people smile or say something," I said. "Each time I call you with good news, you are so quiet. I'm not even sure you're on the line."

 *The U.S. Olympic Committee invited Dartanyon to live at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs and learn judo for the Paralympics.*

Courtesy Thomas Lovelock

"No one's ever called me with good news before," he said. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

He once told me that Christmas was his least favorite holiday because his mom wrapped up Bazooka bubble gum and toys from around the house, hoping he wouldn't notice. Having never known pleasure, he had not developed the language to respond to it. "But I am happy inside," he added. "My dreams might come true."

I stayed because I vowed right then to fill Leroy's life with a thousand good things until he simply burst with joy.

In November 2009, thanks to the generosity of ESPN viewers, Leroy moved to Arizona to study video game design at Collins College. I had my doubts that he could manage on his own, but time and again, he disarms his skeptics. He was the first in his family to graduate from high school, and, this August, he will be the first to receive a college diploma. Dartanyon and I will be in the front row, listening as the sound of this cycle of poverty shatters.

Dartanyon received his life-changing offer from the United States Olympic Committee in March 2010. Recognizing his natural athletic abilities, coaches invited him to live at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs to learn the Paralympic sport of judo. This was akin to a winning lottery ticket -- shelter, sport, mentors, school, medical care and, as he proudly showed me on a visit to Colorado, his first bed.

"Top judo athletes begin training at a very young age," his coach confided. "We don't know that Dartanyon can make up the years by the 2016 Games." But a little doubt was all Dartanyon needed to work his fingers into calluses and his heart into that of a champion. In a blur, he swiped a spot on the 2012 Paralympic team to London. Leroy and I crossed the pond and celebrated in the front row as the bronze medal was draped around Dartanyon's neck. Once forgotten by the world, Dartanyon stood on top of it.

"Things like this don't happen to kids like us," he cried on that unimaginable night, his face beaming bronze, his tears soaking into my shoulder.

 *Lisa and Leroy helped Dartanyon celebrate his bronze medal in judo at the 2012 London Paralympics.*

Courtesy Lisa Fenn

And he is right. Blind and legless kids from the ghettos don't get college educations and shiny accolades, but they should. And that is why I stayed. Because hope and love and rejoicing and redemption can happen to kids like them. And people like me, people from the "other side," who can soften life's blows for them, ought to help.

Those who know the story behind this story heap a lot of credit onto me for dedicating my past four years to improving Dartanyon's and Leroy's lives. Indeed, I have spent thousands of hours removing obstacles from the paths of their dreams, providing for their needs, reprogramming poorly learned habits, exposing new horizons and piling on the encouragement they need to rise above. I drove Dartanyon to the dentist to drill the first of 15 cavities. I taught Leroy how to pay a bill. I sat with Dartanyon at the social security office to apply for disability benefits, something he could have received all his life had anyone submitted the forms for him. I soothed the burn of Leroy's broken heart and phantom limbs. And through it all, we grew into an eclectic family of our own. We carried on.

When he made a visit to the eye doctor in 2009, I asked Dartanyon to include me on the consent form so I could access his records if need be. Later that day, I received a call from the office administrator. "I just thought you should know what Dartanyon wrote on his consent form today," she said, somewhat undone. "Next to your name, on the release, is a space that says 'Relationship to Patient.' Dartanyon wrote 'Guardian Angel.'"

I stayed because we get only one life, and we don't truly live it until we give it away.

I stayed because we can change the world only when we enter into another's world.

I stayed because I love you.

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