

Perseverance pays off as Hixon accepts his Master's Degree at graduation

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COOKEVILLE, Tenn. -- *There was a gentle knock on my office door last week, and I looked up to see a woman peeking her head around the frame.*

"Is Drew here?" she asked. "No, he's not in right now, can we help you with anything?" I replied.

"Oh no, I have something for Drew, but I want to leave it when he's here. Do you have his phone number? I promise I won't harass him, I just have something for him."

"Sure thing," said my co-worker from the next desk over, handing her the digits. The woman left happily, and my colleague and I looked over at Drew's empty desk – a whole five feet away from the two of us, packed into the corner of our minuscule office. In a space so small, it's hard to not notice the significant absence of one-third of the personnel...

Thirty-seven catches, 512 yards, five touchdowns, a critical injury... a Master's degree. One of these things is not like the other, yet all of these things transpired at Tennessee Tech for Drew Hixon. On Saturday, May 8, 2010, all eyes were on Kenneth Andrew "Drew" Hixon as he walked alone across the floor of the Hooper Eblen Center for a second time, this time to accept his Master's degree in Instructional Leadership.

The last time Hixon walked across that floor alone, he was three months removed from a medically induced coma. More significantly still, he was essentially three months out of infancy. When Hixon was transported by ambulance to a Tampa hospital on September 11, 2004 in critical condition after a career-ending, life-altering football hit, his parents had no idea that they were about to get a "painstaking lesson in patience."

"Everything he does I'm encouraged by," said mother Rebecca Hixon. Little did she know that Hixon's comatose actions brought a more significant meaning to the term "baby steps" than anyone could possibly imagine.

A yawn. A twitch. A squeeze of the hand. Any response at all was enough to reassure his family that their convictions of his recovery were legitimate.

But when Hixon finally came out of his coma, the overwhelming ecstasy that embraced his family was quickly overshadowed by the numbing reality of Drew's present condition.

"It's a long process," Hixon said of coming out of a coma. "It's not just waking up."

Coming out of a coma is eerily close to being born again. Hixon's muscles were too weak to give structure to his internal organs, let alone to hold him up. He couldn't sit, stand or swallow. His motor skills were non-existent and his memory sporadic, as it is to this day.

"I don't really remember anything from July [2004] until maybe November," admitted Hixon. While he remembers bits and pieces of "waking up," his memory didn't return immediately.

"I remember Hawaii in July [2004] with my family because, you know – it was a big deal, our vacation. But I don't remember training camp, or my roommate, or Tampa at all," he said.

On January 29, 2005, when he walked through the Eblen Center for Drew Hixon Night, the former wide receiver for Tech had no idea just how many people his injury had touched over the past three months.

Less than two weeks after Hixon sustained his injury, more than 1000 people from Cookeville gathered at Tucker Stadium to form the shape of his number seven, and were photographed from above as a tribute to Hixon. His teammates practiced in #7 t-shirts with “In Our Prayers” across the front. Trust funds were set up in his name to help cover the cost of his medical bills. Vast numbers of people from all over the country reached out to support his cause and prayed for his recovery:

“(To: sportsinfo@tntech.edu, Thursday, September 16, 2004) Hi. I am a student at the University of South Florida. I couldn’t find a place to send my prayers to Drew Hixon and his family, so I’m sending it here. I want to send my deepest condolences to Drew. Even though I wasn’t at the game, and don’t know Drew, he has been in my mind a lot since Saturday. Again, I just wanted to send my deepest deepest sympathies and prayers to Drew and his family, from me and my family. You are in our prayers, and will be until you fully recover. Ryan Benson”

Dr. Richard Stevenson of the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville characterized Hixon’s injury as “the most severe head injury I’ve ever seen from football.”

“The impact was essentially high, [and] went through his entire brain,” Stevenson said.

However, by the time Thanksgiving rolled around a mere month later, Drew was “ahead of schedule when he compares to past injuries [Stevenson’s] treated in 15 years as a doctor.”

And Hixon would continue on in his new life ahead of schedule – more so than he himself comprehends today. It never once occurred to him to wallow in self-pity or approach his future with the mindset of one who was disabled. In fact, less than one year following his injury, Hixon wanted nothing more than to finish his undergraduate work at Tennessee Tech University.

“I wanted to graduate because I didn’t know anything else. When I was growing up, I didn’t know people *didn’t* go to college,” Hixon admitted. “[My parents] wanted me to wait another year. I just wanted to get back.”

According to the Brain Injury Association of America, patients sustaining a severe brain injury rarely return to a functional state that can be classified as good or normal. Death is common, and those who were in a coma naturally have a bleaker outlook due to the severity of the injury.

In essence, Hixon’s prognosis following the hit was uncertain at best. But his core personality, values and upbringing – those that placed college at the top of his priority list – remained the same even after the injury.

The year between his accident and returning to Tech was filled with the hardest experiences of Hixon’s life.

“I remember thinking, ‘I’d rather go through two-a-days for the rest of my life than go through what I’m going through now,’” Hixon laughed. Yet despite the year of uncertainty and obstacles, he returned to school in the fall of 2005.

Unfortunately, but almost expectedly, his return wasn’t what he expected.

“It was hard – real hard. My old friends were just that – old friends. My teammates [and] coaches– I wasn’t part of the team anymore. I didn’t have a girlfriend. It was lonely. Very lonely. I don’t have very good memories of coming back to Tech. Everything was different,” Hixon recalled.

Drew's father, Stan Hixon, has been involved in collegiate and professional football as either a coach or administrator since 1980. He currently acts as the wide receiver coach for the Buffalo Bills under Chan Gailey. Drew Hixon had been a wide receiver since the age of 13 and surrounded by football for his entire life, but found himself to be shockingly unfamiliar with the sport he had always had a passion for.

"I went out to one practice. The first ball they ever threw to me – I ducked. I ducked away from it. And then they started tossing it underhand," remembered Hixon painfully.

Hixon admitted that he was probably about 60 percent recovered when he finished his classes and graduated with his degree in finance, which would explain his difficulties in returning to Tech. What's so outstanding though, is the fact that he remained undaunted by the chain of hardships that he faced in such a short period of time.

After graduation, Hixon pursued his career in finance, passing some of the hardest exams of his life to work at Citibank in Leesburg, Virginia. However, his deep-seeded love for athletics prevailed.

Having already gone above and beyond many patients in his condition, and enduring adversities that most can't even fathom, he decided to go back to Tennessee Tech to earn his Master's degree.

"[It was] an opportunity to come back to the south and further my education, to open more doors and become more marketable." said Hixon confidently.

Hixon took a graduate assistant position in the athletic department at Tech, working under Grant Swallows, Assistant Athletic Director for Development. He spent two years as a GA, assisting in day-to-day activities across campus and working special events for the athletic department.

He hosted home basketball games, managed Tech tailgate parties at home football games, promoted baseball and softball games and assisted Swallows with his monthly reports. Hixon also attended alumni events with Mark Wilson, Tech's Director of Athletics.

Additionally, he took classes such as Educational Research, Problems in Instructional Leadership and Production of Instructional Materials to earn his Master's degree in Instructional Leadership. He believes that his degree will serve to guide him as he pursues his dream of becoming an athletic administrator. School was different for him this time around. "I had grown mentally," he explained. "I was, I would say, about 87 percent back to normal when I started [my Master's]."

Eighty-seven percent is still a good stretch from 100 though, and Hixon naturally experienced some difficulties as a student. Reading and writing long papers posed a challenge for Hixon; while he doesn't have a problem reading, he has a hard time remembering what he's read.

Hixon worked with a primary tutor for each of the two years that he took graduate courses. Three times a week he would meet with his tutor for a total of about 15 hours a week. His tutors helped him with formatting and outlining papers, reading and note-taking, and organizational skills.

In the spring semester of 2010, Hixon earned a 4.0, bringing his cumulative GPA for graduate school to a 3.73.

His academic accomplishments are lofty, but so are his personal accomplishments. The injury has changed him in ways he never would have imagined. While Hixon was never angry about what happened to him, certain aspects of his personality were vastly different post-injury.

"There's no feelings of animosity, I'm not mad at the guys who hit me," said Hixon after the incident. "I recognize [the good things] that have come out of my accident. I most likely wouldn't have been here [getting my Master's]."

“Now, I’m more friendly and outgoing. I say ‘hey’ to everybody, or I try to, anyways. I have a different outlook on life.”

Southern hospitality has always been a part of Hixon’s life, and a trait that remained with him after his accident. He is a genuine “yes ma’am, no sir,” person, and regularly flashes his contagious smile to everyone he meets.

More amazing though is his willingness to extend himself as a friend to others, while remaining incredibly humble about his past experiences. While his accomplishments are remarkably staggering to those who know his story, he remains modest about his past, and expects no pity from those around him. He’ll speak easily about his accident and experiences since then, but the information is rarely volunteered initially.

“Everyone tells me it’s a big deal,” he said thoughtfully, “but I just see it as it is. It happened for a reason. God has a plan.”

Another piece of God’s plan was realized last week as Hixon accomplished the seemingly impossible. He persevered through a tragedy with amazing endurance and continued on to make choices that would benefit himself personally. He has achieved a level of education that many only dream of and has touched the lives and hearts of more people than he knows.

.. Another knock on the office door, and the three of us looked around to see the endearing woman at our door again. Her face broke into a smile when she saw Drew though, and he stood up immediately to give her a hug.

“Hi Miss Elkins,” Drew said, smiling.

As it turns out, Miss Elkins’ son, Mark, had been Hixon’s Phys. Ed. teacher at Harrison High School in Kennesaw, Georgia. Coach Elkins had also received two degrees from Tennessee Tech University and naturally heard about Hixon’s injury on the football field. He told his mother and father, who still reside in Cookeville, about the accident and followed the story closely. When Hixon returned to Tech to work on his Master’s degree, Earline Elkins approached him to introduce herself and welcome Hixon back to Cookeville, and into her family.

The Elkins had the opportunity to befriend Hixon during his graduate time at Tech and were some of his biggest fans as he pursued his degree.

“Drew, I’m glad you’re here, I have cookies for you!” Miss Elkins said excitedly. As she handed him a container full of cookies that looked mouth-watering even through the Gladware, I understood why she was unwilling to leave them for us to give to Drew. She also passed over a card:

“We are so glad we have been able to get to know you and see what an amazing young man you are. You have had a long journey getting ready for your career but you’re almost there. We wish you the very best life has to offer.”

Miss Elkins held on to Drew for a moment and beamed proudly up at him. She congratulated him on his Master’s degree and promised to have cookies ready for him anytime he was in Cookeville. They shared another embrace, and she was gone. Drew looked after her for a moment, sat down and opened his card. He read it over carefully, and passed it on to me without a word. He opened the cookies and announced “the good ones,” with a satisfied nod.

Moments like that are those that only some of Hixon’s closest friends have the privilege of witnessing. Moments like that are true testaments to Hixon as a person and as a friend. Moments like that, seen from the outside, provide a true realization of what he has experienced. And moments like that are those that everyone who has ever met Drew Hixon should experience.