

Guest editorial: Coach's love spans horror, time, distance

December 20, 2014

At Christmas time, pleasant memories—like low-hanging fruit—are ripe to be savored. Look around, though, and we see folks toiling daily on life's sharpest edges so one day others can build memories worthy of recall from vineyards that now seem so barren.

☒ Don Newbury This is such an account. Don't expect a happy ending. Currently, a "faith-claiming continuance" may be the best to the hoped.

A man—sentenced to 40 years for first-degree murder—has done 12, just turned 30 and eligible for parole in 2022. The State of Texas sustains him physically. Some two hours away in Alvarado is his high school football coach who—with family and friends—strives to sustain him spiritually, hopeful to keep Anansi Flaherty's hopes alive.

Christians to the core, Jeff and Amanda Dixon have long helped others. They've been on the receiving end, too, crediting kin and friends for propping them up during a life-jolting experience. After several years of marriage, quadruplets birthed at 20 weeks were stillborn. Unwavering in faith and commitment, the then young teachers forged on. (They now have three children—Tyler, 22, Maggie, 20, and Faith, 8.)

They all love Anansi, a second-team running back Jeff coached on Katy High School's 2000 state championship football team. They think it miraculous Anansi survived the streets to reach high school.

☒ Coach Jeff Dixon and Anansi Flaherty in a Katy High School photo. He claimed the Dixons' love—perhaps the first he'd known—at age 16. He

lingered at the fieldhouse, sometimes accepting rides home and such. At other times, though, he flirted with disaster, partnering with alcohol by age 10, with marijuana and worse stuff soon to follow. Little wonder. With no dad around and a mom away most of the time, Anansi lived alone in a tiny apartment near Katy High for more than two of his high school years. He didn't have to look for trouble—it found him. By age 18, he was beyond adrift.

One day, Coach Dixon shuddered upon hearing a TV news bulletin about a young man found in bloodied clothing, stumbling from a knifing scene where his mother lay dead. That was on Dec. 29, 2002, a dozen years ago.

Anansi doesn't remember details of the hideous act that haunts him daily.

The Dixons—piecing together the puzzle of his tattered life—won't let go. Jeff visited him at least weekly during his confinement at the Fort Bend County Jail and later whenever possible at units in Beaumont, Livingston, Huntsville and Iowa Park. Without fanfare, the family provides encouragement monthly by sending money, assorted items and most importantly, Bibles. The Bibles are replaced regularly, since other inmates steal them, using the thin pages to roll marijuana smokes.

'Adopted family'

The Dixons consider themselves to be his "adopted family," praying that one day, they might have family visitation rights. They have exchanged hundreds of letters. For Anansi, they've gone from "Dear Coach" to "Dear Dad," for years signed by "Your Second Son."

"Anansi is a brother in Christ, and I am blessed by every letter and every visit," Jeff said. "We pray someday to visit Anansi as family members, as do blood kin of others incarcerated. My family and I want to hug his neck, hold his hand and pray with him—that's long been our desire."

To date, Anansi never has been visited by blood kin—not even once.

A few months ago, Jeff and I drove to the Iowa Park prison. I was granted a press visit; Jeff, approved only for weekends, remained in the lobby. For Jeff, as well as interviewers, visits are conducted through thick plate glass and way-too-short cords for telephone intercom.

During the hour-long visit, I mostly listened, impressed by Anansi's 100 percent positive attitude and unending smile. His biblical knowledge was stunning; he quoted Scripture like a seasoned theologian, citing biblical figures who never gave up hope.

God has 'changed his heart'

"Our intent has always been to show God's love. We've seen how God has changed his heart and feel strongly we are in God's will to continue support of Anansi," Jeff said.

Perhaps Anansi is most symbolic of the hundreds of youngsters the Dixons have helped during their 30-year educational pilgrimage. They see hurt daily in lives cast asunder by broken homes.

Jeff has a wonderful won-lost record in coaching. But his "life coaching" is most important. It includes caring and comforting. He's at the top of my list.

My wife and I love this family, joining them in prayer that one day soon, the Dixons can be recognized as the family Anansi has never known.

I've procrastinated in writing this piece. It pales alongside [the almost full-page account](#) written by Kevin Sherrington in the *Dallas Morning News* almost eight years ago.

We are thankful for the Dixons, believing "God with us" truths prevail in this and all seasons, particularly for the least of these, our brethren.

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