

# The Gentle Giant

The measure of a life is more than years.

It's a mother and three children, crowded around a table, laughing about bologna and syrup sandwiches and crying about the empty car sitting in the backyard.

It's a phone call to a grandmother who gave him the nickname Famous. It's the coaches and players who call him the Gentle Giant. It's the untouched room at the end of the hall, and the way his little brother's smile brings tears to his mother's eyes.

And it's the people left behind, who will never forget the impact that life had.

Senior Damian Coats died June 19 and was remembered today during the Senior Sunrise.

"He was a gentle giant," Damian's grandmother, Tanna Coats, said. "He was gentle to the point that no matter where he was, if he saw somebody from a distance that needed his help, he'd drop what he was doing to help. His voice never got rowdy with anybody. Even when he was wrestling with his sisters, his voice never got loud."

Sitting at a wooden dining table, Shyvokeia Coats, Damian's mother, alongside his three younger siblings, relays stories of the Gentle Giant, like the time he stole their Halloween candy and sold it at school. Between laughs, they agree he was the "crazy one" in the family.

"He always told the corniest jokes," Shyvokeia Coats said. "He was always nice, except when he was messing with his siblings."

Davidriah, Damian's 12-year-old sister, was the typical target of his pranks. They exchanged pranks in the way siblings do:

he would stand in her doorway and scare her and she would retaliate by running in his room and flicking the lights on and off.

“She was the one he did the most to,” Shyvokeia Coats said. “She could be asleep and he’d come pour a cold cup of water on her. They always picked on each other.”

According to Damian’s siblings, Davidriah, Dasia and Dakota, Damian was a great cook, and even though his signature dish was bologna and syrup sandwiches, they ate them without complaint. From the gleam in their eyes, it is evident that Damian was admired as more than just a brother.

“That was my man of the house,” Shyvokeia Coats said. “When I had to go to work, Damian was there to watch his brothers and sisters. When I wasn’t able to cook, Damian cooked. Damian cleaned. You would think Damian was my husband.”

A mother’s memory recalls childhood evidence of Damian’s kindness, and it becomes clear that this sense of selflessness began at an early age.

“I remember when he was little, I was working and we didn’t have any food stamps so we had to buy our own food,” Shyvokeia Coats said. “We had sandwich meat, but only enough left for one sandwich. So I fixed Damian a sandwich. He would not eat that sandwich unless I ate some of it with him.”

Just then, the oven timer goes off, interrupting their stories and announcing that the batch of chocolate chip cookies are done. Dakota, the youngest of the bunch, flashes a million dollar smile. His mother grins back and comments that he looks just like Damian. Suddenly the mood shifts, and laughter fades to silence.

“[The hardest part of all of this] is him being gone,” Shyvokeia Coats said. “Since he’s been gone, I don’t even like going home. It’s not the same. It’s not the same without him

waking me up in the morning and calling me, seven o'clock every morning, ready for practice. I still wake up in the morning just waiting for that phone call, and I know I'm not going to get it. I still walk through my door at my house, and I just know he's not there, so I don't want to be there."

The quiet in the room is deafening. Shyvokeia Coats tears up, and one of the sisters has to leave the room.

"It's the worst feeling ever. It's the worst feeling because he was someone who had been in my life for 17 years, almost 18," Shyvokeia Coats said. "I mean it's hard, I wasn't able to see my baby's 18th birthday or him walking across the stage. He was my child."

His clothes sit in his bedroom, untouched, with the rest of his belongings. His mother says she's not washing them, and not letting go of them, no matter what.

"Damian being in my life changed it for the good," Shyvokeia Coats said. "Every day that he was here was for the good. My baby was my guardian angel."

The life changing impact of the Gentle Giant was felt by many. His grandmother gushes and brags about him the way proud grandmothers do, remembering everything about Damian and not being afraid to say it.

"He will be remembered for all the love he showed to everybody, no matter what," Tanna Coats said. "He loved people. He loved friends. No matter what he had at the house, he was always trying to make the most of it. He will be remembered for his love and kindness and loving everyone that came in his sight. He always fell in love with them."

She calls him Famous, a name earned when he was born. Damian contracted meningitis when he was just a few weeks old, and despite the odds, he made it, and became a family celebrity. His grandmother says he kept surprising him ever since.

“When he was little, he had a little cousin, and he would always share his toys, even at just a few months old,” Tanna Coats said. “My Famous, nobody ever knew that he was the type of person you never had to ask to do anything for you. He always volunteered. He was always willing to give, and never expected anybody to give him anything.”

Football was one of those things that Damian gave everything to. His coaches say that even at a towering 6’4” and 330 pounds, his heart was even bigger.

“The thing that stood out to me the most was his unselfishness. He would do anything to help the team win. He would help the younger players, who were struggling with practices. We often referred to him as the Gentle Giant,” position coach Jeremy Harrell said. “My favorite memory of Damian is seeing him make it on the first team at offensive guard position. He worked his tail off in the weight room, classroom, and on the field to accomplish his goal.”

The weight of the loss of a team player, a mentor, and a friend is deeply felt by the team.

“He was looking forward to the upcoming football season so much. It breaks my heart as his position [coach] to not have him with us anymore,” Harrell said. “Our team will miss him more than words can describe. Soft spoken jokes, funny stories about his family and being with him during film, weights and meetings will be what I miss most about Damian. My heart goes out to his family.”

Damian’s football career goes on, however, through his 5-year-old brother Dakota, the one with Damian’s smile. Ever since he was little, he shared Damian’s love for football and copied anything his big brother did in hopes that one day he can be on the team himself.

“[Dakota] didn’t drink water,” Shyvokeia Coats said. “In order for Damian to get [Dakota] to drink water, he told him he had

to drink plenty of water if he wanted to be strong enough to be on the football team. Dakota says he likes water now.”

The big brother. The famous grandson. The team player. The Gentle Giant. These moments and memories measure a life rich in friendship and kindness, a life lived with other people’s needs put first. The memory of Damian Coats will be the memory of a boy who gave everything and expected nothing.

“Don’t ever forget my baby,” Tanna Coats said. “I thank the [people who knew him] for taking him and mentoring him and teaching him and loving him just as much as I did. Don’t ever forget my baby. He was Famous.”