



HE BROUGHT US TOGETHER

THE
CHRIS
JOHNSON
LEGACY



Photo by Ken Krakow, courtesy of The Medical Center of Central Georgia.

Although he left this earth far too soon, Northside football player Chris Johnson made an astounding impact on the community he called home. Almost one year since his death, family and friends reflect on the legacy of the 17-year-old who changed their lives forever.

5 57,366,400 seconds may sound like a lot of time. 6,451 days does, too. But ask any mother if 17 years, seven months and 30 days is enough time with her child, and she'll undoubtedly tell you it is not. Nevertheless, it was all the time Pat Johnson had with her son — from Oct. 16, 1989 until June 14, 2007 — before he succumbed to leukemia.

Chris Johnson was just four months shy of his 18th birthday when he lost his fight, but his 6,451 days were all he needed to change Houston County for the better, bringing cross-town high school rivals together and creating a sense of unity in his hometown. Through his life, his struggle and his death, the popular Northside High School defensive end brought his community together in a way that would make any parent proud.

That legacy is deeply rooted in Chris's character and personality, which allowed him to make friends easily and often. "Chris loved people. He never met a stranger," says Pat. She recalls trips to the grocery store with a two-year-old Chris who "kept saying hello to everybody he saw." He had a "heartily laugh and a great smile," she describes.

Those were things that the leukemia — a generic term used to describe four different types of blood cancer — couldn't take from the six-foot, 230-pound athlete. Chris' charismatic personality "became even more evident when he was diagnosed with cancer," says his mother.

The diagnosis could not have been more unexpected. Chris was a healthy, promising

high school freshman already seeing playing time on the Eagles' touted varsity squad. Then, during summer practice in 2005, he began feeling tired. "He was coming home more tired — more than normal," recalls Pat. This concerned her since, "Chris was always a go-getter."

A month later his lymph nodes were badly swollen. "That was the first outward

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sign," says Pat. So his parents took Chris to have blood work done. "The next day the results came back, and we were told we needed to go to the hematologist in Macon," she says. "That was July 17, 2005. Chris was admitted to the hospital that same day with the diagnosis of leukemia." He was suffering from acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL), the most common form of leukemia that affects children.

When he was diagnosed, the first question Chris asked was, "Can I play football?" But Chris would never play football again. "He cried when he found out he couldn't keep playing," says Pat. Still, the dream of returning to the Eagles kept Chris going during the tough times. "That hope kept him alive the whole first year," she says.

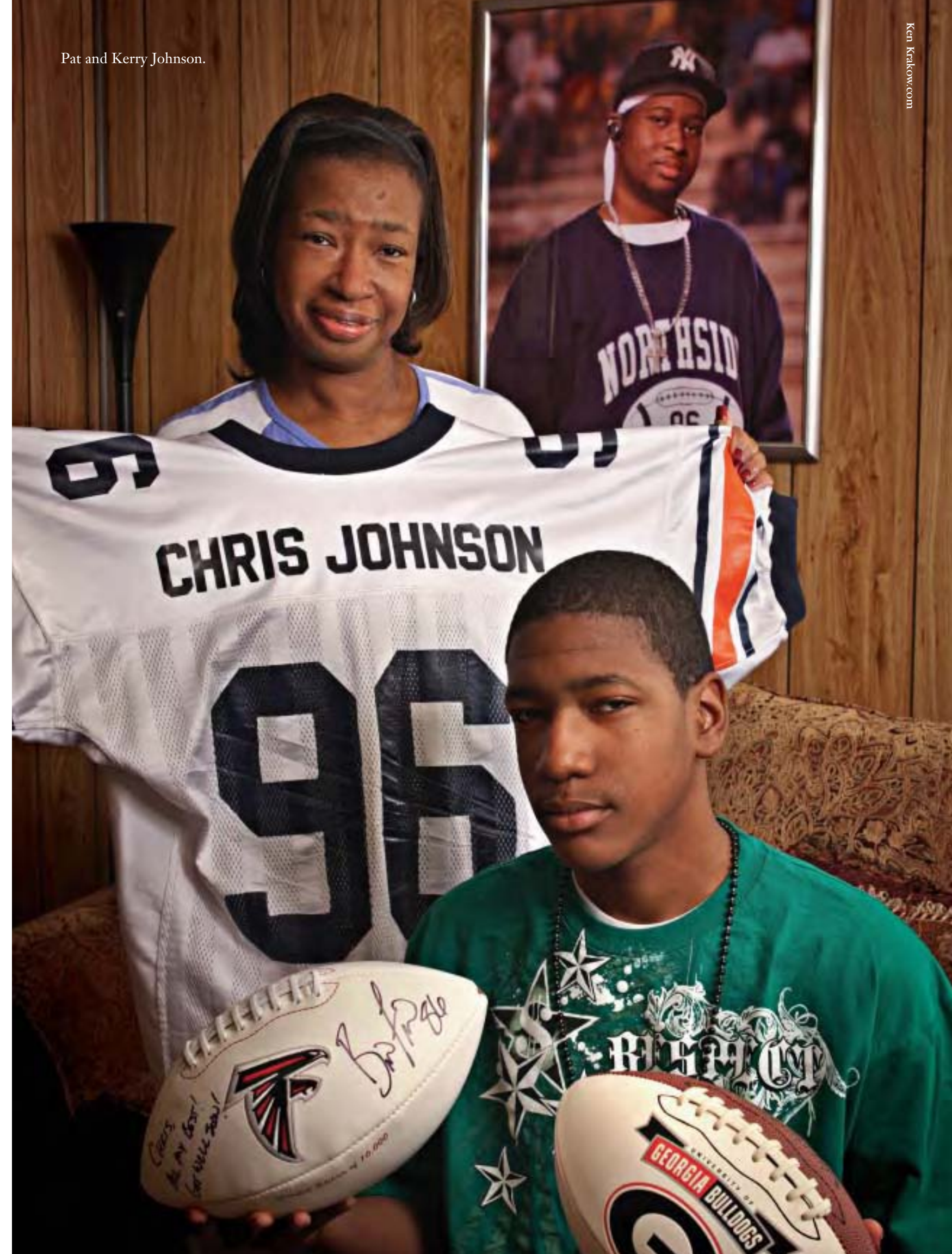
Chris immediately began chemotherapy, and soon the disease went into early remission. It stayed in remission until March 2006; when it came back Chris started a new round of more aggressive chemo. "It started wearing and tearing on his body the second time around," Pat remembers. By May 2006, the leukemia was back in remission. Chris relapsed in June 2007. "That's kind of when we started pulling out all the stops," she says.

Chris needed a bone marrow transplant to stay alive. The search for a matching donor began in March 2006, but time was running out.

"Chris never gave up, even until the end," says Pat. "He was a positive, motivated person. Even when he felt his worst, he never wanted his friends to know. He was always asking how they were doing."

Chris was the middle son of Pat, a counselor at Feagin Mill Middle School, and her husband, Ovie, a custodian at Warner Robins Middle School. His older brother, Bryan, is 24. His younger brother, Kerry, turned 16 this past December. "When he was in the hospital, Chris was always thinking of others," says Pat. "Kerry was in ninth grade last year and having some difficulties. Chris was always trying to motivate his brother from his hospital bed."

Pat and Kerry Johnson.



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—MARQUES IVORY



“I tried to stay positive,” Kerry says. “. . . We’d talk and he’d say, ‘I’m going to get through it. Don’t worry about it.’ I’d go and visit him, and he would always ask me how I was doing and how school was going before I could ask about him. He always made me feel good. He wanted me to do better in school because he didn’t get the chance to go back.”

Chris remained in touch with his friends as much as he was able during his illness, even attending Northside football games when he could barely stand up. “Chris went to just about every game of the 2006 season,” says Pat. “He was on the sidelines, oftentimes in a wheelchair.” Her son would often leave the hospital after chemo treatments to attend pep rallies and then the games. “He was just a determined boy who loved his school, loved his classmates and just loved people,” she adds.

Expecting him to keep fighting, his family was not prepared for the day Chris died. “We signed a DNR [do not resuscitate order] because he was not getting better. . . They had told us he would probably hang on for 24 to 48 hours, but within four hours he was gone. It was like God was waiting on us to sign that permission form to take him home,” Pat recounts.

In a fitting tribute, on the six-month anniversary of Chris’ death, Northside won the 2007 Georgia High School Association Class AAAA football championship 20 to 14 over Ware County. Each of the players had Chris’ number 96 on their helmets. The seniors also wore it on their left chest, appropriately near their hearts. “Heaven was smiling on the Eagles that night,” Pat declares.

“His classmates will probably tell you Chris taught them to fight hard, live hard and get as much out of life as you can. Never give up, even when things look bad. He never gave up. He wasn’t a quitter. I think they learned that from him,” Pat says of the legacy her son left behind.

“His classmates also learned from Chris to appreciate and respect other people and to put other’s needs first – not to be selfish and to think of others and not themselves. That’s something teenagers don’t do much,” says Pat. “It was never about Chris.”

Those friends went beyond the halls of Northside. Although “Chris lived and breathed Northside,” describes Kerry, in a community that can be all too easily polarized

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by high school rivalries, his brother didn't care if you were an Eagle, Demon or Bear. "It was not a rivalry thing in his mind, an allegiance to a school. It was an allegiance to self, an allegiance to community and an allegiance to country," Kerry explains.

"His focus was on being the best, regardless of which school you attended. It was all about the game of life for him. That is truly his legacy. He touched all people. It's not about allegiance to earthly things, but allegiance to God, who created us all as one family. At age 17, Chris recognized and believed that. This is what made him such an awesome and memorable human being," adds his mother.

Kerry now attends Houston County High School. "Most folks at Houston County already knew me through Chris. They knew who I was and would say things like, 'We're sorry about what happened. He did a lot for

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our community. I didn't know him, but he changed my life.' I feel like it is a privilege or honor to even be associated with him," says the younger brother. "He was that good of a person. I looked up to him, and I want to be like him when I'm older. But I can't be like him because Chris was one of a kind."

It's been almost a year since Chris left this world. While the Johnson family presses on, trying their best to return to normal life and drawing strength from their faith, it's the little things often the hardest on any given day. "This would have been his senior year," says

Pat. "That is bittersweet for me as his mama. He is still receiving college applications in the mail. I just trash them. I want to write them and tell them, but I can't."

But she holds on to the memory of his hearty laugh, which keeps her from breaking down on the tough days. "I have an audio tape, so I won't ever forget his voice and laugh," she says.

"Thank God for letting me raise him for 17 years," says the proud mother. "He obviously had a purpose. I didn't have any idea until the end and through his illness that his purpose was fulfilled."

HEART OF CHAMPIONS

**Marques Ivory, 17
Senior, Northside High School**

**Kevyn Cooper, 18
Senior, Northside High School**

"We were friends since the third grade when we met in elementary school," Marques Ivory recalls. They first became teammates in middle school, playing football and basketball together. "He was real uplifting. He always had a positive attitude about everything. He had lots of friends and was real popular. He was so outgoing; he reached out to everybody."

Like many of Chris' numerous friends, Marques did not know what leukemia was when he first found out Chris was sick. "I had to ask his dad," he says. Marques hoped and prayed Chris would recover quickly and return to his former life. He has not forgotten the day he realized just how serious Chris' illness was. "It was when school started in the tenth grade, and I knew that he wasn't going to be able to come back."

Marques says Chris already had a "big impact" on everyone who knew him, but it was through his leukemia that made Chris the ultimate example. "The most impact came from the way he fought against it — how positive he was even though he knew it was possible he could die.

"He had a big heart. When you talked to him, he didn't sound like a 17-year-old kid," he continues. "He sounded like a grown man. He sounded intelligent, enlightened and real mature."

As far as the impact of Chris' legacy, Marques states without hesitation, "I think

he will be someone who will always be remembered. People's kids' kids' kids' are still going to talk about him and just how great he was, how he fought against the disease he had and how he brought the community together."

Even before his illness Marques says Chris had a way of transcending school colors. "We [students] like each other, but there is rivalry between the schools. But rivalries really didn't matter when it came to Chris." For Marques, the most memorable example of this was the giant banner displayed at the first home game of 2007, which happened to be against Houston County. It featured the logos of all three high schools and Chris' name and number along with the words "He brought us together."

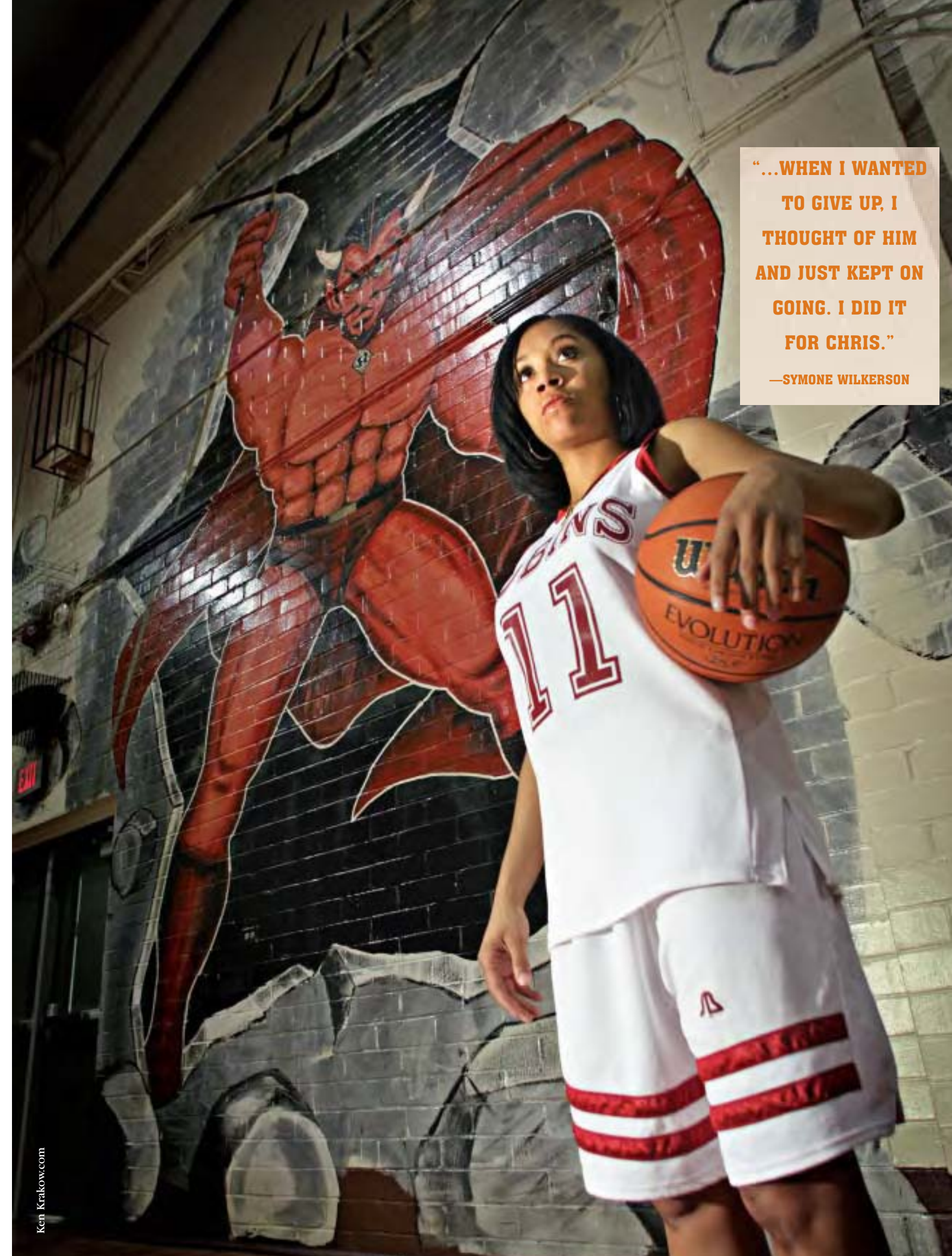
Kevyn Cooper still remembers the moment he came to know Chris. "I met him when I first moved back from Albany in the summer before eighth grade. He was the first person I met when I came to Feagin Mill [Middle School]. I thought he was a coach at first because he was grown," he recalls.

The two became fast friends. "Chris was the coolest dude I ever met," Kevyn continues. "We would talk on the phone, sleep over, go out, play sports." Like Marques, Kevyn also played football and basketball with Chris in middle school.

Kevyn was with his grandmother when he first learned of Chris' illness. "I read it in the paper. They had a picture of Chris with the headline 'Northside's Chris Johnson has Leukemia,'" he remembers. He, too, did not know what the disease was and asked his grandmother. "She said it was real serious. I was kind of shocked. I didn't believe it at first."

The deadly reality of Chris' condition hit home with Kevyn when the two spoke over the phone one day. "I think it was 11th grade, and he told me he had blacked out for a minute and then came back," he says.

But the severity of his plight was never obvious in Chris' voice. "You couldn't tell by talking to him that he was sick," says Kevyn. "He always sounded positive about his leukemia — he was going to beat it and come back to school and play football. But you could tell if you saw him. If you knew him, you could tell something was wrong. He was really skinny."



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“IT HAS NOT CHANGED MY CHARACTER, BUT MY OUTLOOK ON LIFE. I TAKE MORE RISKS NOW”

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Chris’ long hard fight rocked the entire football team. “He was a big influence on a lot of people,” says Kevyn. “It gave you more strength to keep going, even when you thought it was too hard. It was nothing compared to what Chris was going through.”

The two friends remember many community organizations and businesses working together to help Chris. Warner Robins High School’s Fashion Club held a fundraiser fashion show. The school’s Math Club held a benefit car wash. There were also the “Quarters for Chris” change collections at local high school football games.

“Kids from every school would come up and visit him at the hospital,” says Monica Smith, a counselor at Northside. “I would come to see him and not have a clue to who all those kids were.”

The football team was watching a practice video together when they learned Chris had lost his battle. “I got a text message with the news,” says Kevyn.

“I didn’t believe it at first. Then I got the same message,” says Marques.

Marques and Kevyn will remain teammates this fall when they report to Jacksonville State University in Alabama, where each earned football scholarships. Both have a greater appreciation for each day, knowing tomorrow is not guaranteed.

“I know now that not everything is promised to me,” says Marques. “I know you have to get what you want to get done, done. You should have a sense of urgency about what you do and be careful about what you do.”

Kevyn, who shares his birthday with Chris, says he now feels a greater ambition to succeed. “More push or drive, you could say,” he says. In fact, he feels Chris inspired him to earn his ride to Jacksonville State. “The last couple of games of the season were the ones determining if I got a scholarship or not. I played really good, and I think that was because of Chris — he pushed me to succeed.”

FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

Symone Wilkerson, 18

Senior, Warner Robins High School

Symone Wilkerson is an Air Force brat, born in England and raised in Warner Robins. She was little more than a baby when her family moved to Houston County

in the mid-1990s. Her mother was not able to make the move immediately, so Symone and her brother temporarily lived with their grandmother, who knew Chris’ father. Introductions were made and friendship was instant. Soon afterwards, she and Chris started kindergarten together and remained close friends until his death.

It helped that she and her cousins had birthdays about the same time as Chris. “One time all of us had a party together. That was a lot of fun,” she recalls.

An athlete herself, Symone started playing basketball in middle school. “Chris came to all of my games and supported me,” she says. While they would go on to attend rival high schools, it never deterred Chris from cheering on Symone. “He just did it for love of the game,” she says.

Chris also left Symone with an appreciation for tomorrow. “It made me realize to not take every day for granted,” she says. “When you see things happen to other people, don’t think they can’t happen to you.”

She, too, has drawn strength from her memories of the big, genial guy who seemed to have friends everywhere he went. “I keep striving for what I really want to do,” Symone explains. There was a time she wanted to give up basketball. “I was tired and not sure it was what I wanted to do anymore. Chris asked me, ‘Is this what you really want to do? Do you love playing basketball?’ And I realized, yeah, I do. So I stuck with it, and when I wanted to give up, I thought of him and just kept on going. I did it for Chris. I know if I really wanted it, I have to make it work,” she says.

And making it work she is. Through her own perseverance inspired by Chris, Symone has earned a basketball scholarship to Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton. Ultimately, she hopes to transfer to Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville or Presbyterian College in Clinton, SC. She is leaning towards studying sports medicine or sports therapy. No matter where Symone goes from here, she knows Chris would be proud.

EVERYDAY INSPIRATION

Janesa Johnson, 18

Senior, Houston County High School

Janesa Johnson came across Chris at Feagin Mill Middle School. “We met through friends and were close ever since then,” she says. In fact, Chris was her first boyfriend. Though the romance didn’t last past junior high, their friendship never stopped.

Janesa also agrees that Chris taught her to not take time for granted. “He taught me to cherish every day because you don’t know what is going to happen,” she says.

She wears a necklace with 96 charm — a gift from her sister to honor the young man who touched her life forever. “I think about him every day, and it makes me smile,” she says.

In addition to being a high school basketball and track athlete, Janesa is an aspiring fashion designer. She will attend the Savannah College of Art & Design this fall and plans to major in fashion with a dual minor in advertising and contemporary writing. “Art has always been my career path,” she says.

Janesa hopes to one day name her fashion line in honor of Chris, perhaps evening gowns called “96 by 12” (his football and her basketball numbers) or “96 & Johnson.” She’s not yet sure of the name but knows she will find a way to honor Chris and his legacy.

“I cherish everything that happens now,” she says. “My plans haven’t changed much since he’s been gone. It just reminds me every day to be more motivated, to do more. It has not changed my character, but my outlook on life. I take more risks now.”

Janesa knows she is not the only one inspired by her longtime friend. “He touched so many people. You don’t think one person can touch so many, but he brought this whole community together.”

Stephen Jones

Photography by Ken Krakow