

The Athletic

The Jets' D.J. Reed, a dad gone too soon and a family story of fortitude

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Linda Reed got the phone call around 5 a.m. Sunday.

Nothing prepares you for that moment, finding out a loved one has passed. Time stops. The heart races, breathing turns heavy and words are hard to come by. Living in that moment is hard enough — and the idea of moving on to the next one feels staggering, like climbing a mountain in the middle of winter.

“You’re in a daze,” she said, “and then all of a sudden it starts becoming clear.”

Dennis Reed, 54, died Sunday after a long battle with multiple sclerosis. Linda didn’t have time to sit in that moment, to process what she was feeling. She had to call friends and family, to inform them that her ex-husband had passed overnight. D.J. Reed, one of her three children with Dennis, was getting ready for the Jets’ season-opener against the Ravens that afternoon, his first game with a new team at the start of his fifth NFL season. She didn’t want him to find out until after the game, because she didn’t want his mind to wander while he was playing. So she called Bri, Reed’s girlfriend, and let her know. Her message: Please, just be there for D.J. after the game.

Then, she sent a group text message to family members: D.J., Tyson and Florence lost their father today. He was called to heaven and we just want to pray for our family to get through this. Keep us in your prayers.

She forgot to ask them to not tell D.J.

Before kickoff, she prayed from her home in Bakersfield, Calif.: Please, God, help him control his emotions once he comes off the field and finds out.

In the fourth quarter, she watched as Reed, a cornerback, dove and intercepted a Lamar Jackson pass, a remarkable play against a former league MVP. Reed ran to midfield, dropped to his knees, looked to the sky and raised up both of his arms. Then, he touched his heart.

That’s when his mother knew: Someone told D.J.

Hours earlier in the locker room, Reed, fully uniformed, pulled his phone from his locker and saw text messages from his cousins, offering condolences. From his uncle: Your dad passed away. Rest in peace. Reed read those words, but he couldn’t feel them. He put his phone back in his locker, and then promptly ran out of the tunnel at MetLife Stadium for player introductions, in front of more than 75,000 roaring fans. He told only two people — a teammate and a coach — what he had just found out. During the national anthem, the whole crowd sang along, in remembrance of 9/11. Reed looked

up to the sky, and cried.

“It was emotional, man,” Reed said.

Then, he had the game of his life. Jackson threw six passes in Reed’s direction — all incomplete. Reed had the interception, as well as a forced fumble. Pro Football Focus graded him as the NFL’s best cornerback in Week 1.

Reed went through a lot to get here, to the Jets, who signed him to a \$33 million deal in free agency, hoping to solidify a cornerback position that has been a problem area for awhile. Reed, 25, can handle that pressure. He’s battled serious family health issues — his mother survived breast cancer, and his father had MS for 18 years. He’s battled divorce, his parents splitting up when he was in middle school. And he’s battled doubt — rejected by colleges for his height, cut by an NFL team due to his injuries.

Back home in Bakersfield, no one is surprised by what Reed did on Sunday.

He was built for this.

“My emotions were everywhere,” Reed said. “I believe in God, and I thought for him to pass away right before the game — there’s a reason for that. He could’ve passed during that whole week, but he passed right before the game started.

“I just said, ‘OK, I know he’s watching, so I’m going to put on a show for him.’”

Dennis Reed grew up in Waterloo, Iowa, a long way from the West Coast. He moved to California when he got a full scholarship to wrestle at Cal State University Bakersfield, located in Linda’s hometown. Dennis became friendly with her cousin David, and started showing up at their family gatherings — which were frequent.

One day at church, Linda was serving as an usher, and Dennis worked up the courage to walk up to her. He asked if she would go to Sunday brunch with him after church.

“I was like: ‘OK, that’s fine — if you’re paying,’” she said.

So they went, ate and “that was it,” she said. They dated, got engaged, married and had kids. D.J. was born in November 1996, joining older sister Florence. Their brother, Tyson, was born a year later.

“That was such a joy,” Linda said. “We had a very loving, kind, peaceful home.”

The house was always full of visitors, including cousins and uncles. And Dennis, a teacher and coach, often brought home kids who needed a place to stay, many of them from a wrestling club he ran in Bakersfield.

“They were always coming,” Linda said. “If anyone needed something, Dennis brought them home.”

He pushed D.J. to play sports, and not just football. Wrestling, of course. Plus soccer and tennis. He went to most of D.J.’s practices, all of his games.

“When he was healthy, he was active,” Reed said. “A great father.”

In 2004, when Reed was 8, his father was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. It's a disease that "impacts the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves, which make up the central nervous system and controls everything we do," according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

Linda, Dennis and the family didn't know anything about MS. Slowly, Dennis' mind and body began to deteriorate. By the third year, he couldn't be as active anymore. Movement was hard. Talking, too. Then, he started getting angry, a common progression after the loss of motor function, when simple day-to-day tasks become difficult. Weather is a factor, too — it's "not friendly to hot weather," Linda said. The temperature in Bakersfield rose to 115 degrees earlier this month, a record high.

"He kept a positive attitude," Linda said. "He went through a transition period where your emotions get the best of you. He became very angry. But at the end of the day, he worked through that. It takes a while to accept what's going on. Especially when it changed his entire life."

It eventually became too much for Linda to handle on her own, raising their children while working as a program coordinator for Kern County in California, a car saleswoman and mentoring young students. Linda and Dennis divorced and he moved back to Waterloo, where his family could take care of him. They stayed close — wife and kids — and talked constantly.

Things didn't get any easier for the Reed family.

In 2007, Linda found out she had a congenital heart disease. Six months later, she was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer.

"Linda is an amazing person," said Allen Thigpen, a father figure and mentor in Reed's life. "She did whatever it took to make sure her kids lived a good, normal life."

Linda didn't know what to think when the doctor said she had cancer. She'd never dealt with cancer in her family before. And she was a single mother now, too, with three kids to raise.

"They told me, 'You're not going to make it,'" she said.

Linda's response: Nah.

"I said: You can't put life and death on me because you didn't create me," she said. "So I'm going to make it. I just had to make up my mind on what I needed to do. So that's what I did."

The day she found out, she just laid on her bed, and prayed. When she told D.J, Tyson and Florence, they cried. She insisted (and persisted): "We're going to be fine."

As she battled through chemotherapy, each morning before school, each child would stop into her room. D.J. would pray with her. Tyson brought her cranberry juice and water, and said that she better finish it by the time he got home.

While they were gone, she was struggling. Too weak to leave her bed, to do anything. But she didn't want them to know that.

"I had to fight," she said. "I had to really fight. ... I would be so sick. They didn't know it because I never showed anything to them because I wanted to protect them from that pain."

In the afternoon, she'd set an alarm for around the time they'd be getting out of school. Using all the strength she could muster, she'd get dressed and then sit on the couch by the front door, so when

they'd walk in, they'd have no idea how much she'd been struggling.

Mom, how you doing?

"I'm good."

You look tired. You need to lay down.

"I'd say: 'You're right, I do.' So I'd go lay down," she said, laughing.

"But we got through it," she said, 15 years later, cancer-free. "We've been through a lot, but we got through everything by God's grace and mercy, together as a family."

D.J. Reed always played bigger than his size, still does. And he always played above his weight class. Sean McKeown, his coach at Independence High School in Bakersfield, didn't mind it when Reed would demand to cover the other team's best wide receiver, because he knew he could handle it.

Reed played wide receiver, too. McKeown remembers that toward the end of a quarterfinals playoff game against the No. 1 seed, during Reed's senior year, Independence's quarterback heaved a ball to the end zone. McKeown figured it would be intercepted, but there was Reed, soaring above multiple defenders, hauling it in for a touchdown. Independence won that game.

Maybe McKeown shouldn't have doubted that play — Reed often did the same thing as a junior, too. That's when McKeown discovered Reed was special, on and off the field. As Reed was struggling with issues at home — his mom's cancer, his father's MS — he never let it show when he got to school.

"When there was a job to do, for him, it was time to work," McKeown said. "His parents did a great job of instilling a work ethic in him. It's one thing to be a leader on a football team, but he was a leader on our high school campus. That's a great testament to his parents. ... He cares about himself but he cares about what happens to other people. He wants to lift people up, not put people down. He's always lifted people up."

Once a week, McKeown would bring the entire team into a classroom for "life lessons." They would discuss character development, how to handle success, self-image. They often cited John Wooden, and his famous quote: "Be true to yourself. Make each day your masterpiece."

"He thrived in that situation," McKeown said. "I've never doubted he was going to be successful. ... And he had the best smile. This is my 23rd year of coaching high school football, and to remember someone had the best smile is a rare thing."

At home, Linda was struggling. Dennis, in Waterloo, was still coaching Reed up from afar, constantly talking on the phone, helping the family financially when he could. Linda did her best to be there for Reed, to take him to practice, games, or anything else he needed. But once Reed was a junior and it became clear that he had a future in football, she reached out to Thigpen for help. Thigpen and his wife, Joyce, run "We Are G.A.M.E", a nonprofit that helps mentor athletes "in need of support, advice, and most of all, life guidance."

"He determined he wanted to play in the NFL back in those days," Thigpen said, "even though it seemed like a far-fetched dream."

They helped Reed get on track with his classwork, but he was a late academic qualifier — and small. He's listed at 5-feet-9 now with the Jets, and he was even shorter as a 16-year-old senior. So he worked with Joyce, a retired college counselor, and applied to schools where he could walk on and eventually earn a scholarship. He got into Fresno State, and Joyce drove him to orientation. After he made the team, and redshirted as a freshman, Fresno made it clear it wouldn't be giving him a scholarship.

"For whatever reason they didn't see the value in him," said Tom Caines, his coach in junior college.

So Reed — thinking about his mother, and how much of a financial strain paying for college would put on her — decided to "humble" himself and "show people I can play," Thigpen said, by spending a year at Cerritos College in Norwalk, Calif., where Caines promised he'd get him back to Division I, on a scholarship, in a year. At Cerritos, the living wasn't easy, either. Housing wasn't provided, so Reed shared an apartment with eight other players, sometimes sleeping on the floor, Thigpen said.

"It makes you really wonder if you want to do this," Thigpen said, "but he never wavered."

And Reed never let his struggles show on his face.

"He's just one of those kids that maybe didn't talk the most, but he always had a smile," Caines said. "His smile is infectious. Some people have that, some don't. He's a dynamic personality. It didn't take long to recognize him as special."

Caines sent Reed's junior college film to five schools. Within 48 hours, Kansas State hosted him for a visit. He had another visit scheduled, but committed on the spot. It felt like home.

A couple weeks later, a Kansas State coach texted Caines, thanking him.

"This kid is like nobody we've ever seen," the message said, "and we've got plans for him."

Reed became a starter right away at KSU.



D.J. Reed celebrates a fumble recovery for Kansas State in 2017. (Peter G. Aiken / Getty Images)

In October 2016, a couple weeks before Reed's 20th birthday, the Wildcats were scheduled to play Iowa State on the road. Dennis hadn't traveled in a while, so he hadn't been in the stands for any of Reed's games for a long time. Iowa State, in Ames, was only an hour and a half away from Waterloo. Finally, Dennis was going to see his son play. Dennis was "so excited the night before," Linda remembers.

Dennis' caregiver, Bonnie, got him dressed up in Kansas State gear, and Reed's friends drove Dennis to Ames that Saturday. It was an emotional afternoon for both of them. Reed was stellar — he finished with 14 tackles and a pass deflection in a 31-26 win. After the game, father and son spent time together, something they hadn't been able to do much since Dennis moved away. But Dennis was always on his son's mind, every Saturday when he suited up at Kansas State, and every Sunday in the NFL.

Reed was eventually drafted in the fifth round by the 49ers in 2018, when Robert Saleh was San Francisco's defensive coordinator. The 49ers made it to the Super Bowl his rookie year, and his family made the trip. From Iowa, his father called to wish him good luck — and to make him laugh.

San Francisco cut Reed during training camp in 2019 after he suffered a pectoral injury, and the Seahawks swooped him up. After two years thriving as a starter for the Seahawks, the Jets signed him as a free agent in March.

His dad was thrilled, he said.

“The thing I love about my dad, talking on the phone with him and stuff, he always had a sense of humor,” Reed said. He “always was smiling, chuckling, joking, cracking jokes, trying to make light of things. I learned a lot from his personality, doing that during tough times.”

Linda still refers to Dennis as her “friend.” She never stopped loving him. They spoke on the phone “all the time,” she said.

“He always said: ‘I don’t want to be resuscitated, I want to go peacefully,’” she said.

About three weeks ago, Reed said he and his father had a conversation on the phone for the last time. On Wednesday, Sept. 7, Dennis was rushed to a hospital and put on a ventilator.

“He was on life support, breathing through a tube,” Reed said. “They said, ‘He’s tired of fighting.’”

His mother said that Dennis couldn’t talk anymore, but he could still listen. So Reed called for their last words. He told him: “I love you. You fought a good fight. Thank you for everything.”

Reed cried that night, and prayed. On Thursday too, when the tube was removed, per his father’s request. That’s when Reed started grieving.

Then, Dennis breathed on his own for two more days. All of a sudden, there was hope. Doctors moved him out of the ICU and into a regular hospital room. “I was like: Oh my God, thank you, Jesus!” Linda said. She texted DJ: Your dad is improving! God is so good!

Then, at 5 a.m. on Sunday, Bonnie called and shared the news, that Dennis had passed.

“I couldn’t believe it because he was getting better, you know?” Linda said. “The roller coaster was going up and then all of a sudden it was going down again. ... It was a surprise but I know that God does not make any mistakes.”

Reed often turns his phone off a couple days before a game, something he started while at Kansas State. “He’d say: I’m getting zoned in, Mr. Allen. Sorry,” Thigpen recalled. But Reed had his phone on this time, awaiting updates about his father.

Before the national anthem, Reed told two people about his father: Jets defensive back Justin Hardee and cornerbacks coach Tony Oden.

“He came up to me and was like: ‘My Pops passed,’” Hardee said. “I was at a loss for words.”

So, Hardee hugged Reed, and told him he was there if he needed anything, to help him get through this. None of Reed’s other teammates knew what he was dealing with. Defensive tackle Sheldon Rankins didn’t hear until the next day. Cornerback Brandin Echols said he didn’t find out until Tuesday, when he saw Reed post on social media about it.

“Man, it just gave me a whole other level of respect for him,” Echols said.

Rankins lost his grandmother a few years ago and “that just truly broke me,” Rankins said.

“I couldn’t fathom what he was feeling, I can’t fathom being able to go out there and focus on alignment, assignment, keys, playing physical, being part of the team. My mind would just be elsewhere. For him to be out there and not only do that for himself, for his family, for his father, but to put it all on the line for his teammates — that’s a special dude.

“Man, that was something special.”

Hardee also knows that broken feeling that comes from losing a loved one.

“It’s rough. You gotta be mentally strong, man,” Hardee said. “It ain’t like it was a friend or someone he knew for a minute. That’s his father. That’s a person that made you. They have the same name. That’s crazy.”

Hardee paused, and took a deep breath.

“It’s tough, man. Just from experience, I know how hard it is. I guess the best part about it: Now you have an angel, watching you every step of the way.”

D.J. Reed doesn’t plan on flying to Iowa for his father’s funeral this weekend.

“Me and my dad, we already chopped it up. It was nothing but love,” Reed said. “I don’t know if a funeral is going to be the best situation for me. For me, the best thing is to keep busy, and that’s what I’ve been doing. Being around my teammates. That’s what helps me. I don’t want to just sit and dwell and think about that stuff.”

Reed has always been able to compartmentalize, to internalize. He did that when he found out about his father’s MS, his mother’s cancer, his parents’ divorce. When his father moved away. When Fresno State turned him down. When the 49ers cut him before his third NFL season. First, he prays on it. He thinks it over. Then he moves forward, always smiling, even in his darkest moments.

When Reed intercepted Jackson on Sunday, he forgot the score, that the Jets were losing by 21 points in the fourth quarter. Not that he didn’t care — “I care about winning, but it was just deeper than football. ... I wanted to pay tribute to my dad.

“This season is for my dad.”

He’s been preparing his whole life for this moment.

“I always told him: You have to make things happen. No matter what we go through, we have to get up,” Linda said. “We may get knocked down, but we have to get back up. We have to get back in the ring. We have to get things done. And as a family, we have to stay strong. That doesn’t mean you don’t cry, that doesn’t mean you don’t hurt, that doesn’t mean there isn’t emotions all over the place. But what it does mean is: You don’t stay there. You keep moving forward. Because the storm will pass if you keep moving forward. ...

“Another thing I always tell him: No weapons formed against us shall prosper,” she said, quoting the Bible. “Yes, we may have to fight and go through the storm more than once. But one thing: We will be victorious.

“That’s just how we roll.”