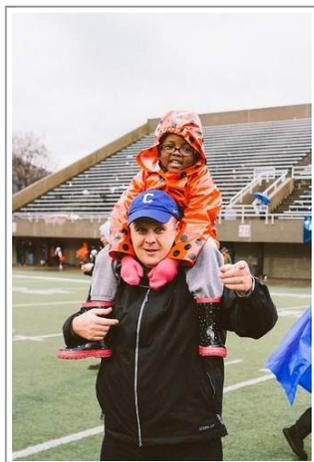


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Chuck McGill: Capital football coach, wife, discover true meaning of family through adoption



Capital football coach Jon Carpenter holds his daughter, Destiny, on his shoulders after the Cougars won the Class AAA state championship on Dec. 6. COURTESY PHOTO

CHARLESTON, W. Va. — Coaches in any sport are known for their victories and their defeats.

Jon Carpenter, a state championship football coach at Capital High School, can tell you about true loss.

“Next time you have a bad day you call me and I’ll tell you about the day you find out you can’t have kids,” Jon said. “It was my problem, so it was my torture.”

But in life, just like football, sometimes it takes a Hail Mary when a situation looks the most bleak. It took time for Jon and his wife, Leslie, to realize their Destiny.

“I wouldn’t change anything for our journey now,” Jon said.

Jon, an East Bank product, and Leslie, a DuPont graduate, met as students at West Virginia State. They married in 2000 and started their respective careers. They enjoyed each other’s company, traveled and strengthened their relationship.

Eventually, they tried to expand their family, but problems arose. They couldn’t get pregnant, so they saw doctors and underwent tests to determine the source of the issue.

It was Jon.

They were inconsolable, heartbroken and on the brink of hopelessness. Jon couldn’t promise his wife a family.

“I went and took the Army test, I was going to run off,” Jon said. “Seriously, who’d want to be married to me after that? It’s awful. You feel like you’ve been cursed. I thought it was selfish of me to make her live her life without those things, so I wanted to disappear so she would have a chance.”

The coach’s wife stuck by her husband, win or lose.

“That’s when I realized — she’s not a fair-weather fan,” Jon said.

This is how their daughter, Destiny, found her way into their arms.

After the Carpenters mourned infertility, they considered adoption. Leslie was ready, while Jon was content to mentor the student-athletes in his football program.

“I figured I had 60 football players to look after every year,” Jon said. “It didn’t hit me until I heard myself say that. I was being selfish. She doesn’t have 60, I have 60.”

They explored their options, and started the process and filed the paperwork in 2009. On Jan. 12, 2011, they received a call about Destiny, a 10-month-old girl living in Kingstown, the capital of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. That’s a small island more than 2,100 miles away in the Caribbean.

The Carpenters first met their daughter on March 6, 2011, and returned to the island on May 27 of that year to bring Destiny home. That is her “Gotcha Day.”

They spent their first days as parents at the Beachcombers Hotel in Kingstown. Destiny’s foster mother warned Jon and Leslie that their new baby girl might cry for two or three days.

The tears came almost instantly, and Jon fumbled around in his pocket to find his phone and inadvertently hit a button that started playing Frank Sinatra’s “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.” Five minutes into official parenthood and the cries ceased. Destiny, on her new momma’s lap, fell asleep. She never cried again.

“They bonded instantly,” Jon said. “I was excited for her probably the same way she was excited for me two Saturdays ago,” Jon said of the Cougars’ state championship.

The Carpenters are what is called a “conspicuous family” in adoption circles. Jon and Leslie are white, Destiny is black. This didn’t matter to them. After all, Jon builds a football family every season made up of all kinds of different races.

Family is not about blood, it’s about love.

Destiny is now 4 years old. She is her daddy’s biggest fan, and she was front and center as Capital finished undefeated and won the Class AAA championship this season. After the title game in Wheeling, Jon hoisted Destiny onto his shoulders and carried her around the field.

Jon insisted on adopting a girl, and they’re waiting for the call to add another little girl to their family. A sibling for Destiny, who said she wants to feed her baby sister and teach her how to do flips and cartwheels.

It means more ladies at home for Jon.

“I didn’t want a boy,” he said. “I’ve got 60 of those I’ve got to look after all the time, so we got her. I get to have a relationship with all those kids and we have our family and now it’s intertwined. It makes everything better.”

Destiny’s family isn’t limited to her mom and dad. She has a church family and marching band family and dance family. Kashuan Haley, Tyrhee Pratt, Silas Nazario and Jordan Kinney are star athletes, sure, but they have important roles as Destiny’s big brothers.

“She’s always going to be protected,” Jon said.

And she always gives Jon and Leslie a reason to smile, something that once seemed so hard to do. There are no bad days. Adversity is easy to overcome.

They have the typical parental challenges, but the perspective is different.

“Everything we have, we’ve had to fight and struggle to get,” Jon said. “I think that’s what makes everything better, you know? We’ve had to struggle for everything we’ve got.

“We fought so long and so hard for this, let’s smile and enjoy all of it, the good and the bad.”

The day the Carpenters learned they couldn’t get pregnant seems long ago, but it is not forgotten. It was the turning point that led them to the family they never thought they could have.

“If we hadn’t had years of infertility struggles, we wouldn’t have met her,” Leslie said. “Obviously, it’s meant to be. Somebody asked me one time if I wanted to be a mom or if I wanted to be pregnant, and the answer was obvious.

“I just wanted a baby. I wanted to adopt. We got her.”

Destiny loves drama, so now Leslie has someone who wants to go to musical theater with her. Daddy-daughter dates involve movies and popcorn, or maybe a night at home playing with dolls.

The day after Capital won the state football title, Carpenter lost to his daughter in Princess Dominoes.

It was the perfect bookend to the weekend for the 38-year-old head coach.

“With her and football, everything, I prayed and prayed and prayed for all these things,” Carpenter said. “Now I’ve got everything I’ve ever asked for.”