



A “Marvelous” Family Legacy

By NAJJA PARKER

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CNN NEWS ANCHOR FREDRICKA WHITFIELD, THE DAUGHTER OF LEGENDARY ATHLETE MALVIN “MARVELOUS MAL” WHITFIELD, REFLECTS ON HER FATHER’S GREATEST LESSONS AND KEEPING HIS MEMORY ALIVE

A VOICEMAIL FREDRICKA WHITFIELD RECEIVED IN 2008 CONFUSED HER.

“The man in the recording said, ‘We’re looking for your dad,’” she recalls. “We want him to collect his Tuskegee Airman Congressional Gold Medal.”

She knew Malvin Whitfield the loving, doting father, but she had no clue about Malvin Whitfield the Tuskegee Airman.

Fredricka, who anchors the weekend edition of *CNN Newsroom*, thought she’d been educated on all there was to learn about her pop’s biggest accomplishments. After all, “Marvelous Mal” was a legend in the sports sphere. He was a member of the the U.S. track and field team at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, bringing home two gold medals and a bronze for the men’s 4x400-meter relay, 800-meter and 400-meter events, respectively. He was victorious again at the 1952 Games in Helsinki, where he won another gold medal, this time for the 800-meter dash, and a silver for the 4x400-meter relay.

He made history as the first active-duty member of the U.S. military to win an Olympic medal, and in 1954, he became the first Black athlete to win the Sullivan Award, an honor bestowed on the nation’s top amateur athlete.

His jock days didn’t end there. In 1955, he was appointed as a good-will sports ambassador by the U.S. State Department, and in 1963, he joined the U.S. Foreign Service. For over 30 years, he traveled to more than 130 countries, including Kenya, Uganda and Egypt, to help coach and groom players across the world.

“He’s done some fantastic things, but my siblings and I didn’t know the intricacies of his greatness. We would at least look him up in encyclopedias as a fun family activity, but it stopped there,” his daughter concedes.

So why did he keep some feats to himself? For Malvin, those were the hardest times of his life. He’d achieved many of his goals during some of America’s ugliest eras, including the Great Depression, Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement.

As a Tuskegee Airman, Malvin won another battle. The notion that Black Americans weren’t capable of becoming pilots during World War II rang loudly. Though that falsity was quickly dispelled during trainings, he and his comrades continued to face discrimination. Not only were they banned from the military base, they were also forced to work with substandard equipment.

“That explained in a giant nutshell why he hadn’t shared all this with his kids, because he thought that it might promote a thinking among us that there were limitations,” Fredricka assesses. “He was a doer, and he showed us by exceeding expectations. That’s an incredible lesson.”

Making it to the Olympics was no easy task, either. Malvin had known he’d wanted to compete ever since he’d snuck into the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in 1932 to get a glimpse of the athletes. But once he joined the Army in 1943, serving in World War II in the 1940s and the Korean War in the 1950s, he had to find creative ways to train. To prepare for his second go-round in the Olympics, he kept his body in tip-top condition by sprinting on the tarmac at night between flight missions.

What’s most impressive for the news anchor isn’t her daddy’s gazillion trophies and awards; it’s the stories she’s heard about him from others.

A woman once approached Fredricka to tell her that her dad, whom she did not know, had carried her across a huge puddle during a rainstorm.

Another time, a man called to reminisce about a moment in high school when her father, then a student at a different school, had offered his running shoes because the young man had forgotten his own. Without a pair of proper kicks, the runner would have been disqualified from the race.

“I love hearing little stories like that from complete strangers who talk about his generosity or kindness. So while I didn’t know all these big things about him as a kid growing up, I’ve always known about his character,” she says.

The journalist has never been afraid to share him with the rest of the world. In 2008, she surprised him with a trip to the Olympics in Beijing and also documented their experience for a news segment. Fredricka stunned him again four years later when the Olympics returned to London, and that visit was even more special.

“I knew that was going to be his last one. I thought it was so important to go full circle because his first Olympic Games were in London,” she says. “Again, he was just awesome. Though he couldn’t get out of his wheelchair, he had an amazing recollection of things. It was so beautiful because I kind of knew that this was the long goodbye.”

When her father died in November 2015 at age 91, Fredricka honored him with a six-minute on-air tribute titled “My Dad, Marvelous Mal.”

“I felt like I owed it to him and everybody else just to say this has been an amazing journey that you’ve all been on with me, and I appreciate you caring about him the way [my family and I] do,” she explains tearfully. “I just have to let you know that this is how he rode off into the sunset. I had to. That was total duty to my dad.”

Even after his death, her father continues to influence her work and personal ventures in remarkable and unexpected ways. While covering the 2016 Ohio primaries, she discovered he was featured in the Ohio State Men’s Varsity “O” Hall of Fame and, more surprisingly, in a mural at his alma mater.

And as a mother of three, Fredricka is constantly reminded of his teachings.

“I’m always hoping they look at me as I did my parents. Mine are both just really my heroes,” she reveals. “They demonstrated how to look at life. You may not get there when you want, but that doesn’t mean you can’t get there.”

Undoubtedly, her family legacy is rich and full of firsts. But Fredricka’s definition of the term isn’t just about making it to the history books.

“I think that legacy is making a decision about your ability, taking it even further and not stopping until you get there. My dad would always say, ‘Go beyond the finish line,’” she remembers. “I’m thankful to him for exemplifying what it is to be an extraordinary human being. To me, that is legacy.”