

Clark “Zackery” Jones was born in Oklahoma in the 1950’s as the tenth of eleven children, most of them from different fathers. They were raised by a single mother and never lived in one home for more than a couple of years. Early childhood for Clark, as he was known during that time, was a series of unhappy years when he was verbally and physically abused, not unlike many boys who end up coming to TBH. For reasons unknown, he had become the target of his mother’s rage and frustration, more so than his siblings, who often seemed to find pleasure in setting him up to receive punishment that was often undeserved.

Clark was a large child, big for his age, like his brothers, often mistaken for someone quite a bit older. Not only was he singled out at home, but at school he was often the brunt of jokes or fights instigated by his peers and his cousin Jackie, who sat in the back of the same classroom as Clark. Jackie would throw spitballs and when their classmates turned around, she pointed at Clark, who was then reported to the teacher. She would whip him with the fan belt of her car. Instead of standing up for himself Clark put his head down under his arms, trying to hide and shut everyone out. But then the teachers would punish him for “sleeping in class”. When his mother found out, she would whip him even harder. One cold winter day, he was in science class and, thinking he was asleep, the teacher had another boy pour water on Clark’s head. Very much unlike him, he reacted rather instinctively by hitting the boy. Everyone was surprised because they had never seen him like that. The teacher had him come up to her desk to give him licks but he spoke up and told her, “No, I’m not taking licks, I did not start this”. He was sent to the principal’s office, where once again, he stood up for himself, refusing to take further abuse. The principal told him to walk home to get his mother and bring her to school to discuss the matter. She was already upset and became even more so when the principal gave her an exaggerated version of the event. Clark was given an ultimatum: either licks or suspension. He decided licks were better than suspension. Stone faced, he surrendered to physical punishment from the principal.

A week later, a small accident occurred at home for which his mother beat him badly. He barely managed to crawl on the floor away from her to reach the door knob. Looking back he told her that was the last time she would ever lay a hand on him. He opened the door and left. With nowhere to go, he slept under the house and ate dog food. His self esteem had taken a nose dive, he barely spoke to people.

The Department of Human Services became involved and referred him to Children's Medical Center (CMC) in Tulsa, Ok. He was eleven years old. After six months of testing and therapy, his family was told he could not live there any longer, but Clark refused to go home. The staff at CMC recommended placement at the Tulsa Boys' Home (TBH).

He was the first African American resident admitted to TBH in 1965, at the height of the civil rights movement. Milton "Pop" Singleton, the agency's Superintendent, was not sure how a boy from a different ethnic origin would manage to get along at TBH. "Pop" sat him down and told him that he would stick up for Clark, if he agreed to do his part, warning him that it would be a difficult task. Mr. Singleton's words always stayed with him and Clark realized that it was up to him to make it or not. He always appreciated "Pop", saying that anytime he had a real problem, he would go to him. "Pop" never gave him an answer, but helped Clark to reason things out and to find the answer for himself, true to the TBH motto: "To help boys help themselves". Empowering people to find solutions is something Clark learned at TBH and he used that powerful tool when he became a coach later in life.

Realizing that anything was better than going home, Clark set out to do his best. In his recollection it was more difficult for others at the agency to get along with him than for him to get along with them. Some residents and staff were outright hostile at first, others took a wait and see approach, a few immediately took a liking to the new kid. For them the difference in color did not seem to matter. This group of guys were the ones who stood up for him and defended his character. The nucleus of that group, about seven boys, eventually finished high school together.

Clark discovered quickly that life in an institution presented its own challenges, such as peer pressure to do things that might not be in his best interest. When some disgruntled boys tried to convince Clark to runaway with them, he would talk some sense into them, by saying: "If you leave tonight, where are you going to eat tomorrow?" He was very much aware that running away would be much more dangerous if he was with them, for the police would punish them more severely if they were in the company of a black guy. Even at a young age, Clark was very conscious of how rebellion as a young black man could change, or even

end, his life growing up in a southern state in the 1960's. He would tell his friends "There are some things you can do that I just can't".

Clark began to play basketball while he was at TBH, encouraged by several staff members who were good players. They motivated him to do his best, recognizing his potential. All Clark knew about the sport was what one of his brothers had taught him. Little did he know at the time that he was developing skills he needed for a sport that ultimately became his career.

As Clark grew bigger and taller, he still played basketball but also spent summers riding horses and doing rodeo tricks. At one point in his teenage years, he appeared to have lost some of his reflexes, his shootings were inconsistent, and he was somewhat unsure of himself. He had a basketball player's built, but not the skills.

When he was in the ninth grade at Horace Mann Junior High School in Tulsa, Ok., Clark attended an end-of-the year banquet where he met Eddie Sutton, who was the head coach of the Central High School basketball team. Sutton saw Clark's potential and encouraged him to join his team, which meant transferring to a different high school. In his sophomore year, while he played on the junior varsity team at Central, they won the state championship. In his senior year Clark made the A team that won the state championship. He was named Most Valuable Player (MVP) of the tournament and an All-American that year. At the time, it meant he was one of the top 100 players in the United States. Someone referred to him as "Superman".

While at TBH, Clark not only developed close relationships with some of his peers but also with several adult staff members and volunteers. Jerry Dillon, the new Executive Director at TBH starting in 1967, took Zack under his wings. Nancy McDonald was a TBH volunteer with a passion for helping kids. She later became President of the TBH Junior Women's Association. Nancy became the most influential person in Clark's life; she helped him to express himself more, she became his mentor, his tutor and encouraged him to do well. She was the first one to detect that Zack was an auditory learner. In Clark's own words: "I didn't talk a lot until I met her, then I didn't stop talking". Clark began to spend time with Nancy and her family on weekends, on holidays, and for long periods in the summers. While continuing to do well at TBH, Clark

gradually became a member of the McDonalds' Caucasian family where he quickly turned into a "big brother" to Nancy's four young children.

When Clark turned 18 in 1971, he aged out of TBH, and it was the McDonald family who suggested that he come to live with them, while he pursued higher education at the University of Tulsa. Clark said, "Nancy is probably the best human being I've ever met". Nancy showed him compassion, love, trust – all the things he never received from his mother. The relationship with the McDonald family grew into a lifelong relationship that to date still exists and even includes Clark's children who call Nancy and her husband: "Granny" and "Grandpa." The story of Zack's "adoption" into a white family parallels the story of Michael Oher in the movie "The Blind Side".

Clark went to the University of Tulsa (TU) on a basketball scholarship, where he developed a close relationship with coach Ken Hayes, who recognized Jones' potential as a player and a leader. At TU the players could not be on the varsity team as Freshmen, and though Jones played the maximum twelve games during his first year, he followed Ken's advise and transferred to Crowder Junior College in Neosho, MO. where he could play more. Coaches from TU watched him play at Crowder during his sophomore year and asked him to come back. Jones played for TU during his Junior and Senior year for the first time as "Zackery" Jones. From then on, he went by that first name. The McDonalds supported his name change.

After some disappointing experiences, Zack sold insurance for a couple of years while he continued to play basketball at night and on the weekends. He wanted to get back into professional basketball and attended the "Athletes for Action" try-outs in Boulder, Colorado. While he was there, a basketball coach gave him the phone number of an agent who hired American ball players to play on professional basketball teams in France. As a result, Zack was asked to be an alternate for a French professional team in Avignon, France. He accepted and went to France thinking this would be short-term while he was filling in for other team players. But life presented him with a different plan. The team manager and coaches in France noticed how effective Zack was in working with younger players on the team and decided to hire him for the whole year. One year led to another. Zack remained in France for the rest of his life. This guy who once struggled with language, became fluent in French and also studied Italian.

Zack earned his French basketball coaching degree and worked as a sports counselor for several city hall sports programs in French public schools. He played basketball until he was 51 years old, forced to stop after he broke a tendon in his shoulder, but continued to work as a sports coach until he retired in 2016.

For his many contributions to professional basketball in France, Zack was inducted into the Southwest France Academy of Basketball in 2016 (to be equated to the United States' Hall of Fame). He also received bronze and silver medals from the French Confederation.

Zack's personal life blossomed. He married a native French woman named Chantal. They have two grown children together. Zack also has a daughter from a previous relationship. Zack is very proud of his children and five grand children. His son followed his father's footsteps and played for the University of Connecticut. Zack also coached his daughter's team in France for a while.

Zack contributes his turn-around and the successes in his life to Tulsa Boys' Home, where he learned life skills that helped him to become a successful person, basketball player and coach. Zack's story is an example of how an abused and neglected child can turn his life around when given a second chance. From a young child with many bruises and lack of confidence, Zack's life changed forever, thanks to Nancy and the many other people affiliated with TBH. For anyone who wants to learn to overcome hardship, Zackery Jones is your coach!

(interviewed by Cheyenne Green in 2017)