December 2009

Virtue In Action

Love, Perseverance Forge an NFL Player

VIRTUE IN ACTION | FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

REUTERS

By most accounts, Michael Oher was quiet, and moved about the hallways of Briarcrest Christian School somewhat like a ghost. But despite his silence and seeming unwillingness to be noticed, he stuck out.

> Some noticed his size—he was about six feet-five inches tall and 300-plus pounds.
>
> Some noticed his skin color—he was black in a school that was predominantly white.
>
> Some noticed his poverty—he wore the same clothing every day among classmates who were upper middle class or wealthy.

But one family didn't just notice Oher's poverty; they decided to do something about it. Sean and Leigh Anne Tuohy, a wealthy couple who lived on the opposite side of town from where Oher was born in Memphis, decided to invite Oher to live with their family and to accept him as one of their own. The Tuohys did not just open their wallets for Oher, they opened their hearts.

This wasn't an easy invitation for the Tuohy family to extend as Oher came from a markedly different background. Michael's mother was addicted to crack cocaine during much of his childhood, and he was so neglected that the state of Tennessee forcibly removed him from his mother's care. Oher moved in and out of multiple foster homes and over a 9 year period attended 11 different schools. By the time Oher entered high school, his grade point average was less than 1.0. It was evident that Oher's previous schools simply kept passing him along, even though he wasn't meeting the required standards

Amazingly, Oher succeeded at Briarcrest Christian high school, and then was admitted to the University of Mississippi, where he became a good student and a star athlete. Oher is now a Baltimore Ravens offensive lineman and poised for financial and emotional success.

The Tuohy family's unorthodox love, generosity and support for Oher demonstrate many important virtues, including **empathy**, **compassion** and **solidarity**. At the same time, Oher's efforts and commitment show us how **humility**, **perseverance** and **resiliency** are keys to success. Oher's story—which inspired a best-selling book and, subsequently, the current hit movie, *The Blind Side*, starring Sandra Bullock—proves an inspirational one as we head toward the holiday season.

A school takes a chance

Before meeting the Tuohys, Oher lived a nomadic life relying on the kindness of acquaintances and the availability of a floor or air mattress to sleep on. His most recent stay had been at that of a friend's father, Tony Hunter, who took Oher in and brought him along to the upscale Christian school, Briarcrest, to see if they would admit Oher along with his son.

Oher struggled during his first meeting with school officials, and his lack of consistent schooling made it nearly impossible for them to admit him, according to a *New York Times* article written by *The Blind Side* author Michael Lewis. "He didn't know how to do it," Hunter reportedly said of Oher's initial admissions meeting. "I had to show him how to shake hands." A failed stint at home-schooling in order to qualify for Briarcrest made it clear Oher needed more help than Hunter could offer. School officials at Briarcrest eventually changed their minds and admitted Oher, but with the condition that he wouldn't be allowed to play sports unless his grades improved.

Sean Tuohy: "God sent him to us"

Oher almost literally stumbled into the Tuohy

family's lives at the age of 16. The young man was walking near a bus stop close to Briarcrest dressed only in a T-shirt and shorts even though it was snowing. The Tuohys drove by and were puzzled at the sight. "Sean, then a volunteer assistant basketball coach at the school who had met Oher at the gym, says Leigh Anne grabbed the wheel," Bell wrote in *USA Today*. "Next came a U-Turn" that changed all of their lives.

Despite Leigh Anne's upbringing with a racist father who opposed the integration of schools, she didn't see color when she saw Oher standing in the cold, alone. Leigh Anne simply saw a human being who needed help and felt immediate **empathy** for Oher's plight. Leigh Anne took Oher out to buy him clothes and offered him temporary shelter. Within a few weeks, in an amazing act of **solidarity**, the Tuohy family offered Oher a permanent home alongside their own young son, Sean Jr., and daughter, Collins who also attended Briarcrest.

"When I first saw him, I was like, 'Who the heck is this big black guy?'" says Sean Jr., then 8, according to the *New York Times*. "But Dad just said this was a kid we were trying to help out, and so I just said all right."

Leigh Anne seems to see her **compassion** toward Oher as a natural reaction, and not one deserving of any particular praise. "God gives us money to see how we're going to handle it," Leigh Anne told the *New York Times* of her **generosity**. The Tuohys paid for Oher's tuition and private tutoring, the latter of which he desperately needed. But most importantly, the Tuohy's outreach to Oher shows us how to establish unity and **solidarity** with others in need, by not just giving money but by also giving of our time, talents and **love**.

"They've got big hearts," Oher told *USA Today* of the Tuohys. "To take somebody from my neighborhood into your house? Nobody does that. I don't think I'd even do that … I owe a lot to them."

"They've got big hearts. To take somebody from my neighborhood into your house? Nobody does that. I don't think I'd even do that ... I owe a lot to them."

Moving forward, not looking back

Oher also owes a lot to himself. He demonstrated great **resiliency** in bouncing back, and in catching up on the education and family ties he lacked as a young child. "I don't dwell on anything," Oher told *USA Today*. "I'm not going to feel sorry for myself because I didn't have a place to stay a lot of time. It is what it is. We've got to go through some things in life. Take it and run with it."

He's not even angry about his past situation, his family told the media. "He's not mad at anybody," Sean said of his adoptive son. "He should be. He has a lot of fire but no anger. God has blessed him with way more than physical ability."

Oher's grades slowly improved at Briarcrest to the point where they allowed him to begin playing basketball and then football. Oher's football coaches could see that he had great potential; however, given his low ACT score, the NCAA rules stated that he could not accept an offer to play for a college team unless he attained a minimum GPA of 2.65. Given that Oher ended his sophomore year with a grade point average of .9, it would take a monumental effort to raise his average to 2.65.

Oher demonstrated remarkable commitment and **perseverance** in working many additional hours with a tutor, and in taking online high school classes to improve academically. Oher eventually raised his GPA to the level required by the NCAA and was accepted into the University of Mississippi.

Sean, Leigh Anne and their children also often express **gratitude** for what Oher has brought into their lives. Collins says Oher's character and **perseverance** has served as a model for her. "He mentors me; I mentor him," Collins says of Oher, with whom she attends Ole Miss and who has taken her to the hospital when she was feeling ill and is there even if she needs a tire changed. "It just depends on the day."

Oher also exhibits **generosity** and **empathy** to strangers, a parallel of the kindness the Tuohy showed him. "Oher can never forget what he's endured," *USA Today*'s Bell wrote of the young man. "He says he can't pass a homeless person on the street without digging into his pocket and offering money. 'I know how hard it is,' he says."

Helping others: What can we do?

Although the Tuohy family had exceptional resources to help Oher in many financial ways, we don't need money to imitate their sense of **empathy**, **compassion** and **solidarity** in assisting others with our time, talents and emotional support.

Take for example, Bilaal Rajan, who at only 12 years old, has served as an official spokesperson for **UNICEF** Canada. Rajan got his start early and very simply. As a child he sold Clementine oranges to his neighbors in Toronto to raise money for earthquake victims in India. He continues to find creative ways to show his **solidarity** and **empathy** with those less fortunate.

This spring, he started the Barefoot Challenge where he shows solidarity with those in impoverished countries by going without shoes for a week and has encouraged young people in 25 other countries to do the same. We may not be able to replicate the inspiring story behind *The Blind Side*, but we can certainly open our eyes to make sure we are not blind to those whom we can and should help.

Vocabulary

Stature: height

Nomadic: having no fixed home and wandering about seeking food and shelter

Generosity: giving freely of our own possessions, time and or talent to someone else

Empathy: entering into the feeling or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation

Compassion: feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

Solidarity: a shared common interest; active loyalty within a group

Humility: modest opinion of one's own position; an honest self appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses; a lack of false pride

Resiliency: the ability to recover from adversity

Gratitude: being thankful

Perseverance: trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

www.virtueinaction.com

Copyright December 2009 Current Links in Education

1126 Dartmouth Rd. Flossmoor, IL 60422
Phone: 708.922.1075

Copyright Current Links In Education, December 2009

December 2009

Virtue In Action

Love, Perseverance Forge an NFL Player

VIRTUE IN ACTION

FOSTERING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CHARACTER EDUCATION

Lesson goals

- Help students to realize the importance of empathy in discerning the needs of others
- Model for students how others are being generous with their time, talent and resources in addressing others' needs
- Present a realistic portrayal of how reaching out to personally assist another person often presents challenges, yet through perseverance there is opportunity for tremendous reward and transformation both for the recipient and the giver
- Model for students how individuals can endure tremendous hardship in life, yet through a commitment to focus more on the future than the past, perseverance, humility and goal setting, a person can not only endure but thrive
- Stimulate classroom discussion and personal evaluation on the needs of others within our local, national and global communities
- Challenge students to engage in their own charitable endeavors

Highlighted Virtues

Empathy: entering into the feeling or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation

Compassion: feeling of sympathy for the distress of others, with the desire to help

Generosity: giving freely of our own possessions, time and or talent to someone else

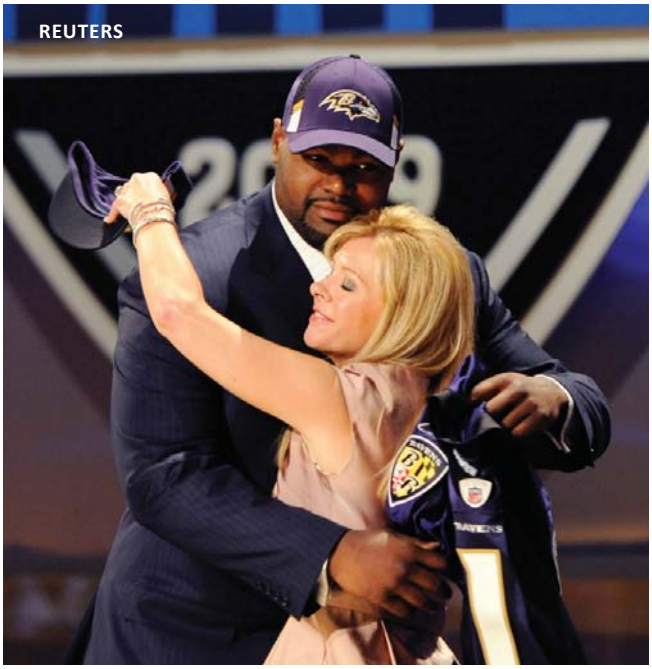
Gratitude: being thankful

Humility: modest opinion of one's own position; an honest self appraisal of one's strengths and weaknesses; a lack of false pride

Perseverance: Trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

Virtue In Action

Connecting Virtues to Our World
www.virtueinaction.com


REUTERS

Resiliency: the ability to recover from adversity

Solidarity: a shared common interest; active loyalty within a group

Discussion Question Options

1. What was Michael Oher's background before he met the Tuohys? What adversities and challenges did he face?

2. How did Michael Oher meet the Tuohys? How did Leigh Anne react to Oher's plight? What virtues did she live out in their initial encounter?
Journal Writing Options:

3. Why might Leigh Anne's ability to ask Oher to move in with her family be surprising? Explain her background in dealing with people of other cultures.

4. How would you define the virtue of solidarity? In what ways did the Tuohy family establish solidarity with Oher? What differences existed between the lives of Oher and the Tuohy that they had to mutually overcome to become a united family?

5. What can we learn from the Oher and Tuohy family experience in working to address social and economic divides? Are there social or economic divides within our local community that need to be addressed so individual needs can be met more effectively?

6. Why was Oher so far behind in school? How did the Tuohys assist him with this problem? What virtues did Oher live out that enabled him to improve academically?

7. Oher was far below the regular admittance standards for Briarcrest Christian School, yet they let him in anyways. What does Oher's experience at Briarcrest teach us about sometimes taking chances for a noble cause? If Oher hadn't succeeded at Briarcrest, would admitting him still have been the right thing to do?

8. How does Oher exemplify the virtue of resiliency?

9. Where is Oher now? What has he accomplished?

10. Describe the relationship between Oher and Collins Tuohy. What is special about it, according to Collins, especially when they were both at Ole Miss?

11. Name the movie and book Oher's story inspired. Do you think this story is significant enough to be the inspiration for a book and film? Explain.

12. Who is Bilaal Rajan, and why is his story significant for us as a model of giving?

Writing Options

1. Describe a charitable act that you initiated or were part of. Who did you help, what did you do to help and what were the results? Discuss whether you would do it again and why. Throughout your writing, incorporate at least three of the virtues covered in this lesson that you lived out in your charitable outreach.

2. Leigh Anne Tuohy told UPI reporters at a recent *The Blind Side* premiere: You don't have to go out and bring a child into your home, but you can do something. Everybody is capable of doing something, so whatever your something is, do it well. Make a difference." Write about what this statement means to you personally, and specifically whether the Tuohy Oher story inspires you to engage in a charitable project.

Extended Learning Activities

1. Encourage students to becoming involved in an existing charitable venture or organize a new venture. For ideas, students can visit www.halftheskymovement.org and click on the "Get involved section" for a list of charities, many focusing on youth issues around the world, such as the penniesforpeace.org program. Encourage students to consider local and national charities through a class discussion on local and national needs. The CNN Heroes Web site also is a good resource for generating ideas: cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/index.html.

2. Organize students into groups. Ask each group to give a class presentation on a youth oriented charitable venture, which was either founded by a youth leader such as Bilaal Rajan, Laura E D'Asaro, or Efren Peñaflorida CNN's 2009 Hero of the year. Each presentation should include the story of how the founder was inspired to launch the charity, the need the charity addresses, how the charity is working to address its targeted needs, and the virtues their work reflects. The CNN Heroes web site is also a good resource for generating ideas: cnn.com/SPECIALS/cnn.heroes/index.html

Internet Resources

"From Homeless to the NFL," Jarrett Bell, *USA Today*: usatoday.com/sports/football/nfl/2009-04-23-michael-oher-cover_N.htm

"The Ballad of Big Mike," Michael Lewis, *New York Times*: nytimes.com/2006/09/24/magazine/24football.html

"'Side' Mom Hopes Film Inspires People," UPI.com: upi.com/Entertainment_News/Movies/2009/11/24/Side-mom-hopes-film-inspires-people/UPI-78701259109758/

Copyright Current Links In Education, December 2009