

STREETS TO SCHOLARSHIP

A homeless high-school dropout with a felony charge and a son, Damian Relierford now has a football scholarship and wants to help kids like him.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

The tattoo on his forehead reads “Damebo.” It’s his nickname. He got it when he was high.

“I do regret it but I don’t.”

It’s a reminder of his missteps, but also of how far he’s come.

“I was a thug, a street guy, basically. . . . Selling weed, doing weed, doing cocaine.”

Damian Relierford dropped out of high school, had a child by the time he was 19 and twice went to jail—the first time for fraud, the second for throwing an empty beer can at his son’s mother. All along, one thing never wavered: his passion for football.

Relierford had shown talent for the sport early in life. And it was no surprise. His uncle is Fresno State wide receiver Josh Harper, whom the Tallahassee Quarterback Club Foundation named to the 2014 Biletnikoff Award preseason watch list in mid-July. Another uncle, Matt Harper, is assistant special-teams coach for the Philadelphia Eagles. And his grandfather is Willie Harper, outside linebacker for the San Francisco 49ers from 1973 to 1983 and a 1972 All-American at the University of Nebraska.

When Relierford found himself in jail for the second time—at 20—he started having some realizations. Looking back on his short life of transgressions, he began thinking about what could have been.

“I felt like I wasted a lot of time,” he said.

In the moment, he thought, “I did all that to myself. If I want to give my son a better opportunity than I had, I need to get myself together.”

And he did.

Today, the 23-year-old is enrolled at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, after earning a football scholarship to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics school. He left Aug. 12—his first time on an airplane, his first time outside California.

His goal: The NFL. But “No. 1 is get my degree.” He promised grandma. He’s focused on majoring in social work and minoring in special education or physical education.

“I wanna work with kids like myself, try to help them and guide them in a different direction, give them the help that I didn’t have,” Relierford said.

Most importantly, he added, he wants to “make it” for his mother, Nikki, a single parent who raised him and his two siblings by working multiple jobs.

“To give her the life she never had.”

STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS

Relierford’s politeness and discipline hide the fact he used to be a self-described thug. His sentences often include “yes, ma’am” and “yes, sir.” And at 5:30 each morning during the summer, he walked about an hour from his grandparents’ house where he lived to the bus stop. The bus took him roughly 23 miles north from Tracy, California, to Stockton, where he took summer-school classes at San Joaquin Delta College. That’s also where he played football.

As a wide receiver at the community college he’s recorded 26 receptions and one touchdown, and he averaged 19.1 yards per game and 7.3 yards per catch, according to California Community College Athletics. The folks at Benedictine see potential.

“He will block and take the right path in traffic,” said George Papageorgiou, the school’s assistant football coach.

It’s through football that Relierford learned about CrossFit 209 Sport and met one of the box’s coaches, Vince Carter.

Carter, 36, had been through some rough patches himself. He, too, grew





A self-described former "thug," Relierford has now dedicated himself to turning things around in college.

up with a father who didn't want to be involved. His mom had two jobs to provide for six kids. Carter was a talented runner but had a lot of anger growing up because of his father's absence. He had a son at 17. And the summer after his senior year in high school, he ended up in jail for a week-and-a-half following a street fight. To raise money for a lawyer, his mother—with the help of four friends—made and sold 2,000 tamales. After that, Carter moved to Southern California to run for Mt. San Antonio College outside Los Angeles; three years in, he left the school to pursue custody of his son, who is now 19.

Relierford started showing up at Carter's Elevate Your Game class at CrossFit 209 Sport in the summer of 2013. But he didn't stick around.

"I knew that I couldn't afford how much it cost so ... I just quit," he explained.

Still, the program made an impression.

"I could definitely tell that the stuff they were doing was different from anything that I've done."

At the time, Relierford was homeless.

He had been living with some of his teammates since his grandparents kicked him out of their home in July 2012 because "we had a disagreement on some things." But in April 2013, he and his teammates were evicted after noise complaints from neighbors. He used his financial aid to stay in hotels when he could. Sometimes he would couch surf at friends' places. Other times he would sleep in what he called an "alleyway" at Delta College; there was a vending machine and, likewise, an electrical outlet to charge his cell phone overnight.

Moving in with his mother, a head preschool teacher, in San Jose—nearly 78 miles south—wasn't an option if he wanted to stay enrolled at Delta and pursue his football dreams. Besides, he didn't want to burden to her.



Vince Carter, a coach at CrossFit 209 Sport, worked through troubles of his own as a youth and now helps others stay on the right path.

"I was sleeping at Delta, walking all night, walking around Stockton. I was stressed out," he said. "There was a couple of people who knew I was homeless, but there was nothing much I could do."

"I refused to go back to my old ways.

I wanted to do it the right way."

—Damian Relierford

Relierford added: "I kept it to myself and just did what I had to do. Some of the coaches knew my situation; they would offer me food. Other coaches would offer me jobs—painting, helping someone move. I just made that work like that."

In July, he moved in with another group of teammates. But that only lasted until January, when they all decided to move back home.

For the next four months, he was homeless. Again.

In April, he returned to CrossFit 209 Sport, making the nearly 3-mile trek from Delta College to the box by foot. Eventually, he opened up to Carter about his struggles.

Carter was "just blown away" by the 23-year-old going to school, playing football—all while he had no place to call home.

Finally, in the spring, Relierford broke down.

"I couldn't take it no more. I started crying. I refused to go back to my old ways. I wanted to do it the right way," he said.

So he called his grandparents with an apology.

"That's where I've been ever since," he said in mid-July. "I've been doing a whole lot better."

And he managed to pass his spring semester.

“Me basically sleeping outside and walking around all night paid off.”

A Coach’s Purpose

To watch Carter interact with kids in his 5-year-old Elevate Your Game program is to watch something special.

As the hands on the clock struck noon, Carter walked into the small adjoining room inside CrossFit 209 Sport and greeted the 18 kids who had shown up on this particular Monday in mid-July. There were fist bumps, bro handshakes, hugs.

He started the group on a warm-up and then broke it into smaller groups to rotate through a sled drag, bench presses and max-effort kettlebell swings.

As each group rotated through the stations, he walked around, occasionally stopping, checking in on each athlete.

“Slow down, fast up. All the way up,” he loudly said as one athlete bench-pressed.

“Come on, come on, come on. Finish,” he yelled as another pulled the sled the final few meters beneath the scorching sun.

When Relierford took to the 70-lb. kettlebell, Carter counted each rep.

“This is where we eat,” he shouted at him while he swung. “They don’t know what’s comin’!”

Relierford finished with 62 swings.

The day’s workout was one Carter had concocted while on vacation.

“I don’t like you on vacation, Vince. You think of some weird shit. That felt real,” 18-year-old Blake Smallie said after the sled drag.

Carter smiled.

It’s typical to see him at his athletes’ games and meets, cheering from the sidelines as if they were his own children.

“I want to be that kind of coach that makes a difference,” Carter said. He added, “You gotta change someone from within first.”

Both Carter and CrossFit 209 Sport owner Gabe Subry believe in CrossFit as “a life-changing tool.” Subry, a member of CrossFit’s Level 1 Seminar Staff, opened the affiliate with Carter in 2009.

Relierford, Subry said, is an example of someone who “went straight to the bottom and came back up.”

He added: “That’s the kind of stuff that gets you fired up.”

And Carter, Subry continued, goes “above and beyond,” giving these kids rides home and checking in on them to be sure they’re doing their homework.

“You can tell when he’s training, it’s not just training,” Subry explained. “He loves it.”

For Relierford, Carter is the one who lit a fire in him, told him he was just as good at football as his uncle Josh, told him to stay off drugs and keep his nose in the books.

“I want to be that kind of coach that makes a difference.” —Vince Carter

“Not only does he train me but he cares about my well-being,” Relierford said. “I really appreciate that dude.”

He later added: “I’m going to work with Vince as long as I can—till the day I die.”

Carter laughed.

“I’m definitely gonna look for a CrossFit” in Kansas, Relierford said.

CrossFit, he went on, did more than just increase his back squat from 185 lb. to 255 lb.

“CrossFit’s not only made me better regarding being fast and strong but an all-around good dude,” Relierford explained. “People just love comin’ there. It’s a family thing. We got love for the trainers, and we know the trainers got love for us.”

Roxane Harper, Relierford’s grandmother, credits Carter with motivating her grandson.

“Something happened,” she said. “I have to give Vince all the credit. What he did is what we tried to do all these years. . . . He just helped Dame get that confidence that he needed.”

Carter sees the changes, too.

“You can tell the difference because he’ll call me and tell me ‘thank you,’” he said. “Besides fitness, we’re building character.”



Sometimes a change in attitude is all it takes to turn a life around.



While playing football at Benedictine College in Kansas, Relierford plans to seek out a CrossFit gym to continue his training.

He added: “It just shows what fitness could do and what it is doing. And I think (some) coaches don’t understand that. What’s your purpose?”

Turning It Around

After Relierford’s grandparents kicked him out of their house, his grandfather, Willie Harper, made a habit of calling Delta College football coaches. He checked to see how he was doing, if he still was going to practice, still attending classes. And he kept doing it even after Relierford moved back in.

“I still check,” said the stoic Harper in mid-July, sitting near a dining table inside his home in Tracy. “I still check.”

Roxane, surprised, burst out laughing.

Willie calls Relierford D-bo. Both he and his wife are pastors, explaining they found Jesus after a stint with drugs themselves and coinciding marital problems.

D-bo used to be irresponsible and quick to anger, but now he’s calmer and focused, Willie explained. He’s taken his grandmother’s words to heart: “If you want to get even, get better.”

“I tell him, ‘You have to forgive. You can’t act out. If you lose your cool, you’ll only make yourself feel worse.’ I can take about 90 percent of his ‘OKs’ and (take) them to the bank,” Willie said.

He continued: “He’s been very much accountable. . . . That’s forgiveness: ‘I can’t change it, so I’m not gonna make myself angry.’”

It’s accountability that eventually convinced officials at Benedictine College to admit him as a non-traditional transfer student after weeks of evaluation.

“It was a hard sell,” Papageorgiou said. “Damian’s fairly rare.”

With enrollment close to 2,000 students, every individual is “that much more identified and highlighted.”

“The end product is graduating,” Papageorgiou explained, “not just bringing in a ton of bodies.”

Papageorgiou, known as “Coach Pops”, first started talking to Relierford in the spring.

“I’m goin’ out there to take care of business.”

—Damian Relierford

“Damian and I talked about our school, and then I let him known in no uncertain terms that I didn’t want to spend a lot of time talking to him until he showed he could turn things around academically.”

The next time the two men spoke was May.

“Lo and behold he had just done a bang-up job with his spring grades, and that turnaround is why our admissions people thought he was fit for our school,” Papageorgiou said.

That and some reassurances from grandma.

“Mrs. Harper was instrumental in talking with those in admission and housing so they understood he has a support system,” Papageorgiou added.

What impressed him most about Relierford’s football film was how he’s translated his work ethic on the field to his academics. He’s willing to be a behind-the-scenes player, Papageorgiou noted.

“(He’s) not puffing his chest and letting everybody know he’s out there. . . . He just wants to help everybody, and I think that’s the right track that he’s taking.”

Papageorgiou continued: “In the pyramid of talent in every endeavor, it gets smaller at the top. If you’re going to compete and stand out at the top, you’re going to work very hard . . . and so far Damian has done that.”

Still, Relierford will be on a short leash while at Benedictine because of his felony fraud charge. And he gets it.

“I know I’m a big black dude goin’ to Kansas with a tattoo on my forehead. I know,” he said, sounding understanding. “I’m not goin’ out there to cause trouble. I’m goin’ out there to take care of business.”

While he didn’t have it the best, Relierford noted, he didn’t have it the worst.

“I had a few obstacles,” he said, “but I did it.” ■

About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.