

Brotherly love: Man's loss leads to life-changing work

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It was March 25, 1994, and Dan Marcus was on his way to Highlands Ranch High School, where he coached baseball and taught at the middle school next door. He was half-listening to the radio when a news report riveted his attention. There had been an overnight killing at a convenience store in Denver.

“No name was mentioned, but for some reason I just knew,” he recalls.

He was shaking by the time he got to school and made the fateful call. His younger brother Scott had been working the graveyard shift for another employee when a man entered the store and shot him dead during a robbery that netted \$32.

And so began a journey that led the Lewis-Palmer School District 38 teacher from despair to action — and to recently being named the state’s Big Brother Sports Buddy of the Year.

“The Big Brother award doesn’t surprise me at all,” says Terry Miller, Lewis-Palmer Middle School principal. “Dan says he can’t save all the wayward kids. But he never gives up on anyone.”

Marcus, who lives in Castle Rock, has taught math and computers to fourth- through 12th-graders in various districts for 30 years. He retired five years ago, but still teaches geometry part-time at Lewis-Palmer Middle School and is a professor of classroom technology education at Adams State College.

But on that day 16 years ago, all he could do was slam a baseball bat against the lockers until his colleagues restrained him.

Scott had been his best friend. Marcus and his three brothers grew up in Kansas City, Mo., where his father worked long hours for an electronics company and his mother

traveled the country showing German shepherds. That left Marcus often caring for two younger brothers, a chore that he did not chafe against.

In fact, Scott was his first student. He used to sit his brother in front of their toy blackboard for lessons he created. He taught Scott the names of all the presidents and once made him recite them for second-grade show-and-tell instead of taking a new toy car to show off.

Scott's death shattered him. For almost a year he was in and out of the hospital with anxiety and post-traumatic stress. Police made no arrests. They believed the killing had been a gang initiation.

Marcus says he began to see the killer in every kid with baggy jeans and tattoos he saw on the street.

But then one sleepless night a couple of years after his brother's death, he found himself thinking that if someone had reached out to the killer when he was a kid, maybe, just maybe, Scott would be alive.

"At that moment, I decided I could be angry for the rest of my life or I could try to help those kids."

He was 41 and had been teaching for 18 years. Every summer he had looked back on the school year and repeated that universal teacher litany: "I hope I made a difference." But that mantra changed, he says. "After Scott, it was: 'I must make a difference.'"

In the classroom, he paid special attention to at-risk kids. He tutored them, and got them involved in school activities such as computer club and basketball, which he coached. Sometimes it helped to talk to the parents to enlist support. Sometimes it didn't.

At first he naively found himself trying to keep score, "like it was some kind of batting average," he says, shaking his head. In schools, administrators saw his successes and put kids they couldn't reach in his classes. Sometimes he succeeded.

"The measure I used was if they started having confidence in themselves and setting goals," he said. "When they started talking optimistically about a future, I knew I was getting through to them."

Take, for example, John Cackowski, a baseball coach at Highlands Ranch High School who said Marcus "helped me believe that I could accomplish my goals and dreams."

He was an eighth-grader, and Marcus taught him in the classroom and on the baseball field. "I didn't have support at home, and he helped during those years that my family was not there for me. He was a huge impact. I try to emulate his example, give that positive reinforcement when kids are failing at what they want to be good at. I got that from Dan."

Eventually, Marcus left the classroom. In 2000, he was promoted to a job training other teachers in technology. In 2005, the position was dissolved because of budget cuts and he retired.

But he missed the classroom, so he returned part-time at Lewis-Palmer in the fall of 2005, teaching geometry to top-flight students.

His wife, Deborah Marcus, founding pastor of Alabaster Vessels, a nonprofit Littleton ministry for abuse victims, has witnessed the changes in the way her husband works with kids.

She notes that when he began his mission, he was so eager that he sometimes enabled the kids. "He wanted to solve everything, get them out of trouble."

Then his work matured. "He challenges. He is quick to tell them when they are going down the wrong path. But it is more, 'you did it, you pay the consequences.' He makes them work hard."

Most of all, she says he succeeds because: "He listens to every single thing they say."

What drives him? "For lack of a better word, I think he has been anointed to do it."

An avid Rockies fan, one day in the spring of 2007 he was drawn to a TV commercial that featured first baseman Todd Helton. He was talking about Big Brothers Big Sisters.

"I liked what I was doing, but I also missed working with at-risk kids, and I thought that would give me an opportunity again."

He signed up for the Big Brothers Sports Buddies program. "It was an intense screening process, right up to the Colorado Bureau of Investigation. I had several interviews and there was training."

Meanwhile, Austin Morrison, who was 12 at the time, had seen a similar television ad. "I never met my dad. So I thought that's what I needed. A guide." He called the Denver Big Brothers office.

His mother, Cece Medina, recalled, "I get this call at work from Big Brothers and couldn't believe Austin had done that on his own." After checking out the organization's screening process, she signed her son up.

"My other kids have relationships with their fathers. Austin felt left out. Dan fills a huge gap in his life."

Marcus and Austin were matched through a database. They had both filled out questionnaires about such things as their favorite movies, foods, hobbies and other information. Volunteers initially commit to three months and then are assigned for another six months and then a year. Marcus and Austin met two years ago at the Big Brothers office.

“What I remember was that he politely held the door open. How many 12-year-olds do that?”

Austin’s impression was a tad guarded. “When I heard he was a teacher, I thought, ‘he wouldn’t be very proud of my grades.’”

For the first year, as per the organization’s rules, Marcus and Austin met only for group activities. Such outings, where tickets to sports event are often provided by the organization, give staff an opportunity to see if the matched pairs are meshing.

During the second year they were allowed to go on outings by themselves.

Austin, 14, says his favorites were meeting Ralphie, the CSU buffalo; a filmmaking camp that Marcus taught; and hiking the Devil’s Head Fire Lookout Trail in Pike National Forest.

Marcus, who oversees the student-led broadcast, film and video production program LPTV at Lewis-Palmer, has taught Austin how to edit video. The two of them put together a film that focused on their experiences; it may be used in Big Brother training.

Marcus also has tutored Austin, who says, “He helped me do better in school and not do drugs and bad stuff. I used to talk back to my mom and now I don’t. He says that back talk doesn’t get you far.”

He had thought of dropping out of school. Now he wants to go to college. “Dan doesn’t think I’m a failure.”

Big Brothers encourages volunteers to mentor their students through at least high school.

“Austin is a work in progress,” Marcus says. “I see our relationship as a long-term commitment. A lifetime commitment. I have students that come back to say hi, and they are now grandparents.”

Marcus is realistic. “Of course. you can’t turn them all around. There are sad stories. It’s not how much I want a kid to change, or how hard I work at it. In the end it comes down to the kid himself, inside, wanting to change. But that doesn’t mean we don’t help them find a sense of themselves, so they won’t be the ones holding a gun in someone’s face at 4 a.m.”

DETAILS

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Colorado

www.biglittlecolorado.org

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