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A father's choice: Family over Final Four dreams



By [Dan Wetzel](#), Yahoo! Sports *Mar 29, 12:07 am EDT*



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BROOKLYN, N.Y. – At the age of 15, Thabiti “Bruce” Boone watched Magic Johnson and Larry Bird star in the 1979 NCAA Final Four, and a dream was born. One day, he told himself, he’d play in that tournament, captivate the country like those guys, lead one of those magical teams of March.

“The Final Four,” Boone said, “was the thing to do.”

This was no pipe dream. Thabiti Boone may have been a product of a chaotic childhood in his blighted Brooklyn neighborhood. He was already a playground legend, though, a brilliant point guard coming into his own at Erasmus Hall High School. Within a couple years, he’d garner major scholarship offers, head off to the University of [Florida](#) and be certain his March Madness moment was at hand.

Now 47, Boone watched the NCAA tournament this month as he always does, cheering on the kids of today, reveling in the dreams they are achieving and no longer feeling a single pang of regret. He never did reach that Final Four like he expected, never did have his one shining moment.

“I have something better,” he said with a smile last week. “Way better.”

Twelve years old and this was the only slice of normalcy Boone knew: a sunny, spring afternoon on

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the playground, a basketball in his hands. There were dice games on one side, drugs deals on the other, but in the middle of all the chaos and calamity it somehow made sense. Every afternoon, Boone would get home from school, sprint out of his apartment in the Grace Towers and onto the city asphalt in the East New York section of Brooklyn. Basketball gave him purpose, neighborhood fame and protection. Even the thugs respected his talent.

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One afternoon, mid-dribble, a voice shocked him back to reality.

“Hey, Brucey,” screamed a kid through a fence, his knuckles white gripping the chain links, “your mom is on the top of the roof, the top of your building.”

Boone dropped the ball and sprinted out of the park, across Pennsylvania Avenue and eventually to the back of Grace Towers. Just then he saw his mother falling downward until she landed, feet first on a small patch of grass just steps from where he stood. The sound is still haunting, the sight even worse: his mother winding up in a crumpled pile, dressed, inexplicably, in her trendiest outfit.



Elizabeth Boone was 26 that day, mother of three, and had broken nearly every part of her 4-foot-8 body. Her legs were a snarled mess, bent behind her shoulders. Her back was off-kilter, her arms snapped in half. She gurgled blood. But she was conscious. Alive. A 6½-story free fall from a housing project was not enough to kill her.

Thabiti stood over her, realized she was going to make it and did the first thing that came to mind: He yelled at his mother.

“Once I figured out she was alive, the anger in me came out,” he said. “It was like, ‘Damn, what more can a little kid take?’ And so I asked her, ‘Why did you do this? How could you do this?’”

“I already knew what I was going to have to deal with. Not just the body casts and mental hospitals for my mother, the social workers and the uncertainty for my sister, brother and me. I knew I’d have to deal with the laughter and the ridicule. You know kids. Here would come the jokes, ‘I heard your Mom thought she was Superman and tried to fly; your mom is crazy.’”

By the time he heard the ambulance sirens, he had said, and seen, enough. So he took off, running from the crowd down the block and off into his own thoughts, a 12-year-old almost no one thought would survive.

“The day my mother jumped looked like another spin of the cycle, another chapter in the ghetto story,” he said. “For far too many lives in the ’hood, this is the

pattern. Generation after generation. Like father, like son. Like mother, like son. Like the 'hood, like I will be. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Elizabeth Boone got pregnant with Thabiti at age 13, the victim of date rape. The perpetrator was a 22-year-old who lived upstairs in her multi-family home in the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn.

It was the 1960s, an unenlightened time for sex crimes. Edward Boone was facing a lengthy prison term for the rape until Elizabeth’s mother, a God-fearing, church-going woman, convinced a judge she – not the legal system – should be the final arbiter.

She delivered an ultimatum to the man: marry Elizabeth or go back in front of the judge. Edward Boone chose marriage. Elizabeth had no choice.

This is the lunacy Thabiti Boone was born into: a union that never could work. A man who couldn’t live right, a girl who had barely started living. Little support, less money. Edward was violent. To this day Thabiti doesn’t celebrate Christmas. When he was 8, as he played with his gift, an air hockey game, he watched his dad dish out a hellacious beating on his mother that still can stir up nightmares.

Things didn’t improve when his father finally left. Drug and alcohol abuse surrounded him. He scrounged pennies to buy food for him and his two younger siblings when his mother would be drunk, drugged or off with another man. When he couldn’t find even that, he’d beg the local grocer for the expired meat and cheese. He attended deficient schools, avoided street gangs and scraped by. And as often as he shakes his head at the insanity now, back then, it seemed normal. He was just another kid in East New York.

“Yes, we were poor,” he said. “Yes, my father was a street hustler. Yes, he violently beat my mother, occasionally within an inch of her life. Yes, my mother sometimes abused drugs and alcohol and, when she finally threw my dad out, welcomed a parade of boyfriends into our little apartment, where we could hear the sex through the paper-thin walls.

“But in the projects, what mom doesn’t get her ass kicked? What dad isn’t out there hustling? What kid ain’t poor?”

He always had a plan, and it involved basketball. He was getting out. There was never a doubt. Since there was no adult to rely on, he became the adult. His height – he’d top out around 5-foot-9 – may not have been enough for the NBA, but major colleges wanted him desperately. He was smooth on the court, a natural point guard, a born leader. He scored 54 points in a single high school game. He engaged in heated battles with future Syracuse guard and lifelong friend Pearl Washington.

It was telling he decided to attend a school so far from Brooklyn – the University of Florida.

Boone looks back now and realizes it was too much of a culture change. He was a mature kid considering his circumstances, which is different than simply being a mature kid. “I was a knucklehead at that time,” he said. The move to Florida was

doomed from the start. He never played for the Gators and didn't last a full year in Gainesville.

He eventually enrolled in Westchester (N.Y.) Community College, which had a powerhouse team that would go 36-2 and reach the junior college Final Four in Boone's one season. He still was going to go to a four-year school, still was going to get to March Madness. It would just be closer to home. Maybe Pitt. Maybe Rhode Island.

He thought it was just a matter of choosing.

The phone call came from a girlfriend, a former cheerleader from Erasmus Hall.

Jacqueline was her name and she was pregnant. Boone was the father. She said she was having the baby. He was rocked. Big mistake, not just having a daughter, but having a daughter with a teenage girl who, just like him, wasn't fit to be a parent at that age. He put his head in hands and cried. Here came the circle of poverty he had worked so hard to avoid.

Everyone told him to go play ball, go off to Division I. His friends. His mother. His father. His sister. His coaches. Mistakes get made. Don't make another and give up on basketball, give up on school, give up on his chance. Save yourself. Be selfish. You can help your daughter later.

But what if he couldn't?

He had little faith in Jacqueline. He feared she would take the baby back to Trinidad, where her family was from. She wasn't mature. She wasn't getting support from her parents. Besides, what kind of father allows his child to live in a bad situation for a single night let alone a couple of years?

He couldn't be the single, full-custody father he wanted to be in D-I, where the coach wants no distractions and total control. Either focus completely on basketball or don't get the scholarship. There wasn't room for both lives. So he had to choose.

"Which means it was a simple decision," Boone said. "Assuming the responsibility of my daughter was something I felt I had to do. I wasn't going to turn my back on her. I wasn't going to make basketball more important than my baby."



So that was it. Kim was born and within a couple of months things didn't work out between he and Jacqueline. Boone got full-custody. The D-I offers vanished. He was 20 and penniless but knew he'd made the right choice. He was going to raise his child.

“If I had chosen basketball,” he said, “then every single girl I looked at from 1984 for the rest of my life would have always been a reflection of that decision. Every girl that I saw in Brooklyn puffing a cigarette, walking around the streets with no purpose, walking around with a man, walking around with her backside out, living with no goals or plans, not appreciating the value of who she is, could have been my daughter.

“I knew my neighborhood; I knew what happened to girls who grew up there, who didn’t have the proper support, the best parenting possible.”

Basketball didn’t completely abandon him. Boone found a school – the academically elite Rochester Institute of Technology – that was eager to add a Division I-caliber point guard to its Division III team. Bob McVean, RIT’s coach, was Boone’s savior.

“I remember we talked [on a recruiting visit],” said McVean, who just completed his 28th season at the school. “He was pretty self-sufficient. He was quite determined and a very intelligent young man. I think as educators, and certainly here at RIT, we’re willing to help people, but then they need to help themselves. He wanted to make it work.”

Once convinced, McVean was willing to let Boone attempt the juggling act work as a single father and a student and an athlete. There was a campus apartment, university day care and a basketball program willing to welcome Thabiti and Kim Boone to campus.

On the day he left for college, Thabiti and 2½ -month-old Kim took the C-Train to the A-Train to Port Authority, all their stuff in tow, which wasn’t much: a few suitcases, some formula and diapers, an old black-and-white television. They boarded a Greyhound and crept through the countryside, for six hours. “I kept thinking,” Boone said, “Where the hell am I going?”

They arrived in Rochester where McVean was waiting to pick them up and take them to a one-bedroom apartment. McVean already had put in an old leather couch and a lamp. That was all the furniture. Kim had no crib, so Thabiti laid a blanket on the floor where they both slept. They found a cardboard box to use as a TV stand. They didn’t have a phone.

“I just sat there and thought, ‘Is this really going to happen?’” Thabiti said. The plan sounded good in theory. In reality, he was equal parts excited and terrified. The silence of campus was more foreign than the chaos of the city. As the night fell, he sat on the floor, watching the flickering images on that little TV and holding his sleeping daughter.

“It was both one of the longest and shortest nights of my life,” he said.

Through the weeks and months and semesters to come, he somehow made it work. He perfected the diaper change. He found ways to study while Kim napped. He realized that even a New York playground legend will have his hand-eye coordination challenged when trying to give a baby a bath. He figured out how to skip meals for milk and diaper money. Success took on a different definition.

“When I could adequately braid her hair – now that was a sign of true fatherhood,” he said. He found other students were instrumental in helping him out, especially his college girlfriend Michelle.

On the court, he was a terrific player and the team captain. Still, it turns out those D-I coaches were correct – it’s total focus or nothing. Boone was majoring in pre-law and wanted to be an attorney, he was spending too much energy chasing a toddler to chase opponents. Basketball was secondary. By the middle of his senior season, he was off the team.

In the end, the RIT experiment was a success though. He earned his degree. From Grace Towers to graduation, the hard way.

He went to work for a law firm in Rochester and made enough for a real place, a real bedroom for Kim, a real life. Money kept law school on the back burner, but over the next couple decades, he made a good living, eventually moving back to a middle-class section of Brooklyn, getting Kim into the best schools he could. He never married and never had another child.

His story began to leak out, the teen dad and star athlete who gave up everything to be a father first. He began making speeches, working with the New York Knicks and then the NBA. He became active in the community. He realized his story is bigger than what he did for himself and his daughter. It’s about a national crisis of broken homes, particularly in the black community. It’s about support and empowerment and showing young men there is another way. He now works on President Obama’s Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative.

“This has to end,” Boone said. “Fathers have to stand up. Not just in doing big things. That’s the pressure society puts on them. They think they have to be Superman. It can be little things. Take your kid to the park. Cook them breakfast. Just spend time. Be there.

“The rewards of being a father will repay you.”

Thabiti’s mother, Elizabeth, now lives in North Carolina. She’s been clean and stable for years and the two remain close. His father is still in Brooklyn and has apologized for taking advantage of his mother. Boone maintains a relationship with his father. He is convinced his dad did the best he could later in life to rectify previous mistakes and had always wanted to be a good father but just didn’t know how to do it. Jacqueline passed away a few years back. His younger sister has a family in Brooklyn and his younger brother followed Thabiti’s footsteps to SUNY-Albany and now works in education and has his own family also.

Kim Boone is 26 now, a nurse at Georgetown University Hospital. She’s married with two sons, 4 and 2. Thabiti visits often and marvels at the entire scene – the sturdy home, the loving marriage, the rock-solid parents working together.

“My father was a real man who stepped up to the plate,” Kim said. “I understand more about it now. You don’t understand when you’re young, but having two sons of my own, I can definitely appreciate it. It’s great watching him with my boys. It’s definitely good for them. And it’s good for him. It keeps him young.”

As a kid, Thabiti Boone lived the worst of American family life and vowed it would end with him. And it did.

“Those two [grandsons], they don’t know anything about poverty and tragedy,” he said. “That’s my legacy.”

Actually, there was a little more, too. As proud as he was of raising Kim, one thing always nagged him. Each March, the NCAA tournament would roll around and he’d watch, and deep down, even if he refused to admit it to anyone, there was a touch of sadness. He never fulfilled his childhood dream. His selflessness got in the way.

“I’d watch and think, it could’ve been, it should’ve been,” he said. “You know you wasted your talent in a way.”

Then in the fall of 2010, Boone got a letter in the mail. His old junior college team that went to that NJCAA Final Four was going to be inducted into the Westchester Community College Sports Hall of Fame. That year had been a blur to Boone – his team kept winning, but his focus was on Jacqueline’s pregnancy and the decision of a multiple lifetimes that was staring at him. Now here was someone remembering him for his game. There was a big banquet. The players got rings and shared laughs and were each given a day of their honor in White Plains, N.Y.

“I got into somebody’s Hall of Fame,” Boone said. “You know what, I’ll take it.”

He smiled at the memory last week. A Sweet 16 game between Connecticut and San Diego State was flashing on the television. He’d just gotten back from D.C., a dual trip to work with the White House on fatherhood and see his daughter and grandsons.

Things were great. Thabiti Boone’s circle was broken. Just one more shining moment in a life full of them.



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