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Friends find peace inside prison Helping those in need frees football pair from painful grip of depression

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By CARLTON THOMPSON / Copyright 2004 Houston Chronicle

Philip Burguieres never dreamed of being in the NFL, but that's where he finds himself today as vice chairman of the Texans and the most prominent member of Bob McNair's ownership group.

John Sage almost made it as a late-round draft choice of the Philadelphia Eagles after a standout career as a defensive tackle at LSU before deciding to take his life in another direction.

Now the two longtime friends, whose bond was strengthened by their mutual battle with depression, are teammates in a cause totally separate from their sporting ties. Burguieres spent much of his life running some of the largest companies in the world before going through what he described as a mental health crisis.

Seeds of Anguish

As Burguieres was sinking into depression, Sage was coming out of depression after the greatest tragedy of his life. In June 1993, Sage saw his world turned upside down after his sister, Marilyn, was brutally murdered by two 19-year-old strangers, a man and a woman.

Through the first 21 years of his life, Sage spent more time with Marilyn than any other person in his life. They were the fourth and fifth of eight children, separated by just 19 months. They went to the same grade school, associated high schools, the same college and had the same friends. Marilyn even introduced Sage to his wife. Suddenly, at the hands of two murderers, his sister was gone.

"Their motivation was to steal her car," Sage said. "They got her car and \$13. They brutally killed her, stabbed her with a number of knives. They put a bag over her head and planted a butcher knife in her throat. It was a horrible grotesque murder. She was begging for her life. They testified what her last words were, 'Please don't kill me. I've got two kids.' So the guy said: 'I just put a butcher knife in her throat.'

"That horrible tragedy put me in a real bad valley of anger, rage, revenge, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress. I was to the point where I really couldn't function well about six months after the murder. I couldn't really work full time for a while, and I lost about 25 or 30 pounds in about 60 days. It was a tough time. It was gut-wrenching for me."

As Sage searched for ways to climb out of the valley that had become his depression, someone suggested he visit a prison in Richmond, where a project was under way to link victims and family members of victims to inmates who were like offenders to the ones who had impacted their lives.

Finding meaning again

The experience had such an effect on Sage's life that he eventually learned to forgive the people who murdered his sister, and in 1998, he founded Bridges To Life, a faith-based nonprofit that brings groups of crime victims into prisons across Texas to meet with inmates.

This year alone, Bridges To Life will have more than 300 volunteers contributing in excess of 25,000 hours. Last week, Sage was in New York as the 2004 recipient of the Social Entrepreneurship Award, given by the Manhattan Institute.

"Having gone through health problems, John and I became friends really fast," said Burguières, who is chairman of the board for Bridges To Life. "We both started looking around for what we'd do with the rest of our lives. John started working in prisons, I got interested in what he was doing and developed a lot of resources to help raise money. In a very real sense, it brings more joy to me than anything I've ever done."

Satisfying work

Sage, who grew up in Houston and attended St. Thomas High School, spends about 100 days a year inside prisons. He's seen murderers admit their crimes for the first time during his projects, he's seen victims move past their pain and regain their trust in others and he's seen ex-convicts rehabilitated, leading productive lives.

Although people still talk about Sage in Baton Rouge, his outreach with Bridges To Life doesn't come with much fanfare. That's OK, he says — he gets much satisfaction from his work.

"This has a much deeper, longer-lasting meaning," he said. "It's a pump-up to play football and I'm glad I did. We had good teams. We were in the top 10 in the nation two of the three years I played at LSU, and I started 33 straight games. That was great, the memories were great, but it doesn't have the depth of affecting human lives. That was more for yourself and your own ego.

"This has been more giving and what you can do for someone else. The paradox is that in giving, you receive so much. Next to my family and being a parent, the football experience and this experience would be in the top experiences of my life."
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