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Bashir Mason survived Jersey City's streets, now using lessons as head coach and student at Wagner

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Photo by JOHN MUNSON

The man has his face pressed against the cold sidewalk of Bergen Avenue. He is lying on his stomach, being patted down by two plainclothes Jersey City police officers. His hands are cuffed behind him, while one of the officers searches the pockets of his jacket, finding a tiny bag and waving it in his face as traffic casually weaves around this mid-afternoon scene.

"They just put somebody in the car?" a woman on the corner, clutching her son with her left hand, asks a neighbor.

"Mmm-hmm," the neighbor says back.

"Drugs."

Little has changed since Bashir Mason used to dribble his basketball from 34 Lexington Avenue down the decline onto Bergen Avenue on his way to wait for the bus to school. This is still one of the most notoriously drug-riddled areas of Jersey City, just like it was when Mason lived around the corner from where the man was arrested Wednesday.

"It's worse now, though," said his mother, Kathy Mason. "It's worse."

Twelve years have passed since Mason moved most of her family from Lexington Avenue. She lives in Bayonne now. Bashir is in Staten Island where — at 29 years old — he is in his first season as the head men's basketball coach at Wagner. His younger sister has stayed behind on Lexington Avenue, but is currently looking to move. They know how fortunate they have been to escape when so many others did not. Bashir is especially aware.

His mother is still amazed that all it took was a \$10 bill to pay for him to play after-school basketball at the Boys & Girls Club on Grand Street when he was in third grade. She always worried that he would be gobbled up by the streets, by the drugs, by the violence. Even when he was in junior high and later a standout at St. Benedict's Prep and Drexel after that, the hustlers and the dealers in his neighborhood knew Mason. They knew he wasn't in the game, so when they saw him walking home on a summer night or working on his handle after school, they looked out for him.

"There's only about 30-40 houses on that one street, but between the drugs and violence, it's a war zone from corner to corner," Bashir said. "Several nights after playing basketball, guys would walk up to me and be like, 'Yo, you got about five minutes to get in the house.' And I knew what that meant.

“As soon as you’d get in the house and close the door, shots went off.”

He has survived all of that. But even now, as the youngest head coach in Division I basketball, Mason isn’t settling.

MOTIVATED BY TWO GOALS

“What do you do when you’re angry, Bash?”

It’s the second hour of ED 615 — Parent, Family and Community Involvement: Cooperation and Collaboration — on the third floor of the Health Services Building [Campus Hall] on the back end of Wagner’s campus. Ann Gazzard, the class’ professor, has posed the question to Mason as a way of continuing the discussion on abuse and behavior in children. As the other seven students in this informal classroom in a hallway lounge look on, Mason thinks about his answer.

“Just get over it,” he says.

The rest of the class shares a collective laugh. Here, he is not the school’s head men’s basketball coach. This is one of the two two-hour reprieves he has during the season. Because in addition to trying to reach the NCAA Tournament this spring, Mason is also in the final semester of getting his master’s degree in education.

Two night classes a week and he’ll graduate in May.

“He’s a wonderful student,” Gazzard said. “Although I had to make him tell the rest of the class who he really was this semester.”

Being the only person in his family to graduate from college, Mason wasn’t satisfied with having just his Drexel diploma on the wall of his office. So when he joined Wagner’s staff in 2010, he enrolled in the college’s master’s program. Over the past two years, he’s been taking classes and trying to blend in as a student. When it was his turn during ice-breaking sessions, he would tell professors and classmates that his name was Bashir and that he worked in the athletic department. He wanted no special treatment.

“For me, this is about that next generation of family,” he said. “I’ve got four nieces now that are growing up in the same environment in Jersey City that I grew up in. So now they have somebody to look up at. That this is all possible. This is doable. You’re supposed to go to school.”

Mason saw how hard his mother had to work to put her three children through school. Kathy Mason has been a home health aide for 24 years, but she worked two extra jobs to put them through private elementary and high schools. She took overnight shifts at the post office and weekends at St. Mary’s Elementary, where the school would discount her children’s tuition in exchange for her services.

So for Kathy to watch her only son reach the pinnacle of his profession so early in his career and then decide to stick with his continued education, made those long nights and weekends all worth it.

“I thought he’d just be bouncing a ball for the rest of his life,” she said. “It really is amazing to see that he’s become a coach and is working, but is still going to school and keeping it up.”

A COMPASSIONATE ‘GENERAL’

Bashir Mason is trying to hide the tears.

His team has just survived an overtime win over Sacred Heart on the final day of January. It was a game that the Seahawks — currently 15-10 and 9-5 in the Northeast Conference standings after an 89-75 victory yesterday against first-place Bryant — needed to keep pace in the standings. The team and his assistant coaches are excited to have pulled it out. They sprint off the floor, passing their coach, who is crouched at the top of the stairs.

Eyes bloodshot, voice hoarse, he is the last to enter the locker room after the game.

“I’m extremely proud of you guys for battling,” he tells his team. “It’s about going 2-0 every week. There’s nine games to go. These are the last games for the seniors. You lay it on the line for those guys.”

How do you get players to buy in to what you are saying? How do you get them to respect your presence and command their attention when some are only a few years younger than you? These are the thoughts that Mason struggles with every day. By the measure of the standings, he has had a successful first season taking over for his former boss and high school coach at St. Benedict’s Prep — Dan Hurley. But he is a relentless perfectionist with an ultra-competitive motor.

Before his team enters for pregame warm-ups, Mason’s nerves are frayed. He breathes heavily while pacing. Most of the time is spent in a small corridor just outside of the locker room where he gathers his thoughts surrounded by motivational posters with quotes from Muhammad Ali and John Wooden.

“I did, because of the way he played,” Hurley, now the coach at Rhode Island, said when asked if he thought Bashir could be a head coach. “At St. Ben’s his nickname was ‘The General,’ because he kept everybody in line. But for all of that, I don’t know if anyone is really ready to be a head coach until you start doing it.”

Mason tries to keep an open and relaxed atmosphere as possible. He treats his staff as equals. Administrative staff freely pop into his office, even if he is reviewing game tape. He encourages players to come to him with problems or concerns.

“His confidence in us is great,” says sophomore guard Kenneth Ortiz, a Newark native. “It just makes you comfortable on the court.”

He still works to find an answer he knows he cannot: How to be perfect. Before the Sacred Heart game, he spent nearly 10 minutes meticulously writing keys and goals to winning on the dry-erase board at the front of the room. Then, after detailing all of the information to his team and staff, he stayed behind while they went back to the court for final warm-ups. He stared back at the game plan and began to doubt himself.

“This is the worst part,” he said. “To find out if what you’ve done is worth anything. And if it’s not? Only a couple of thousand people get to see.”

BLENDING AND BEFRIENDING

On a cold and snowy Monday two weeks ago, Wagner held one of the first Open House dates for perspective students. Nearly a half-dozen tours zig-zagged throughout the scenic campus atop Grymes Hill. Tour guides pointed out fitness centers and libraries and the dining center. Dressed in sweats and a backpack, Mason blends right in.

“No one recognizes me when I look like this,” he said, holding the door open to the Hawks Nest dining room for an entering tour.

He’s not entirely anonymous. In his short time at Wagner and as the head coach, he has befriended many on campus. From one of the cooks in the cafeteria, Curtis, who knows Mason’s preferred meal by heart — “turkey burger, rare, two leaves of lettuce and french fries” — to the very top of the school’s hierarchy.

He calls Dave Martin, Wagner’s vice president of administration, the Seahawks’ “general manager.” His boss, athletic director Walt Hamline, said last spring during the introductory news conference that he thought Mason would “be real good.” When he popped into Wagner president, Dr. Richard Guarasci’s office after lunch, he asked Mason how the master’s degree was coming along.

“Right on schedule,” Mason said.

“So does that mean I get to give you a diploma in May?” Guarasci asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“When the process for hiring a new coach began, we said ‘We’ll give him a shot and if he gets it, he gets it,’ ” Guarasci said of Mason’s hiring. “And he got it. And given everything else that he does off of the basketball court, he is a certain kind of special role model.”

No one knows the fortune of their good position better than Mason.

During the first session of his other night class this semester — ED 605: Dynamics of Human Relations — one of the readings was about a child study from the early 1990s of kids in poor urban neighborhoods. The material had determined the findings in a story-like manner. It said that of every 10 kids in an elementary classroom, half would fall asleep — an indicator that they

would drop out before high school. Of the five that remained, three wouldn't make it through high school.

That left two children, and only one — due to overwhelmingly poor social climates, the study found — would make it out of a downtrodden city situation to go on to become successful in life.

“I sat there listening to the class discuss this reading and it occurred to me,” Mason said. “That’s me. I’m the one.”