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Chucky Mullins 20 years later: What is his legacy?

Name etched in UM lore; money aids students

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Roy Lee "Chucky" Mullins' neatly kept grave resides in the shade of tall oak trees on the edge of hilly Luketown Cemetery in this remote northwest Alabama town.

The epitaph on the marble monument is as telling as it is succinct:

Chucky

Man of Courage

He was that. It has been nearly 20 years since Mullins, a lightly recruited University of Mississippi defensive back, both warmed and captured the hearts of Mississippians with his smile and his grit in the face of a football injury that left him a quadriplegic and eventually took his life.

"After he got hurt, all Chucky could move were his lips and his eyes, but they were always smiling," Billy Brewer, Mullins' Ole Miss coach, says. "He never asked, 'Why me?' He was a positive influence on everyone he encountered. He kept fighting. He wanted to live."

It was Oct. 28, 1989, homecoming at Ole Miss. Sturdy Vanderbilt fullback Brad Gaines was trying to catch a pass in the middle of the field when Mullins, 50 pounds lighter, slammed into him, knocking the ball loose. Gaines got up. Mullins never did. The collision shattered four vertebrae and paralyzed Mullins instantly. He was airlifted to Memphis, where doctors saved his life.

The outpouring of support for Mullins crossed all boundaries, both racial and in school loyalties. More than \$1 million was raised. Mullins returned to Ole Miss the following June, determined to complete his degree. But less than a year later, he was stricken by a pulmonary embolism and died on May 6, 1991, at the age of 21.

His legacy lives on, in Oxford and Russellville.

Precious few Ole Miss football heroes are recognized on a first-name basis: Bruiser, Jake, Archie, Eli ... and Chucky. Currently, 32 special-needs students receive scholarship money from the Chucky Mullins Endowment Fund that exceeds \$1.1 million. Before home games, Rebel players touch a bronze bust of Mullins before taking the field. Mullins' jersey number "38" is one of two retired at Ole Miss. The other is Archie Manning's "18."

In Russellville, the Chucky Mullins Multi-Purpose Center provides children with after-school care, computers and a gymnasium.

"I know Chucky would be proud of how he is remembered both here and in Mississippi," says Carver Phillips, Mullins' guardian, who works as a supervisor at a Russellville poultry plant. "People still care about him. He still inspires people. Chucky would like that."

Would be 40

Mullins would have turned 40 this past July. Gaines, the Vanderbilt fullback, is 40. A Nashville businessman, Gaines visits Mullins' grave three times a year, on Christmas, on the anniversary of the game in which Mullins was injured and on the anniversary of Mullins' death. Gaines says it took him years to get over a deep sense of guilt. He says he knows it makes no sense. After all, Mullins, not Gaines, delivered the blow.

"But the mind is a powerful thing; I don't know if you'd call it guilt by association or what," Gaines says.

Gaines occasionally watches a replay of the play.

"It kind of reminds me of the accident that killed Dale Earnhardt," Gaines says. "It doesn't look that bad. It looks like a good hit, a good defensive play. You see the same kind of play every Saturday. It's not helmet to helmet. It doesn't look that bad. But ..."

Gaines says Willie Morris, the late Mississippi author who lived in Oxford at the time, would often call Gaines and try to lift his spirits.

"Willie told me once that he thought Chucky's injury and the response that followed had done more for race relations in Mississippi than anything," Gaines said. "I guess all things happen for a reason. In a way, that made me feel some better about it."

Recruiting Chucky

Brewer, who lives in Oxford, loves to tell of recruiting Mullins - or rather of Mullins recruiting Ole Miss.

"I told him we just didn't have room for him," says Brewer, who was fired by Ole Miss in 1993 but sued the school for breach of contract and in 1999 was awarded more than \$200,000. "But Chucky looked me right in the eye and kept telling me that if we gave him a scholarship, he would earn it, and that we wouldn't be sorry.

"I told him that if another recruit backed out of his commitment, I'd call him. Sure enough, somebody did. And Chucky was right. We never regretted it."

Trea Southerland was one of Mullins' teammates and one of his closest friends. Mullins was an orphan, adopted by Carver and Karen Phillips, and had never had much. If not for football, he would never have been able to afford college. Southerland, from Columbus, came from a well-to-do family and from a private school background. He is white; Mullins is black. They were suite mates at Kinard Hall, then the Ole Miss athletic dorm.

"We came from totally different backgrounds, but we clicked; we were close," says Southerland, 40, a Memphis lawyer. "He was one of those guys who made you feel good just to be around him."

Southerland took his 6- and 9-year-old sons to visit Mullins' grave and he uses his story as a lesson:

"I think Chucky's story teaches so many lessons about relationships, about how fragile life is and, of course, about courage."

Senior defensive end Marcus Tillman is the 20th Ole Miss player to win the Chucky Mullins Courage Award, chosen each season by Rebel coaches.

The first 16 winners, including Southerland, wore Mullins' jersey No. 38. In 2006, the jersey was retired and All-American Patrick Willis became the first to wear a "38" patch on his jersey. Tillman, who was 2 when Mullins was hurt, says Ole Miss coaches make certain everybody knows the significance of "38" in Ole Miss lore.

"It's a symbol not only of how you are supposed to play, but about how you're supposed to act," Tillman says. "It's about character. It's about never giving up. It's a great honor for me to wear it."

What's his legacy?

Ole Miss and Vanderbilt play Saturday in Nashville. Now, 20 years later, seems as good a time as any to ask the question: What is Chucky Mullins' legacy?

- "Courage," Brewer says simply. "Chucky epitomized courage against all odds."
 - "It's remarkable to me how relevant Chucky's courage and inspiration continues to be," former Ole Miss Chancellor Robert Khayat says. "Usually, it seems to me when some tragedy like Chucky's occurs, there's an immediate reaction and then it sort of dissipates. That hasn't happened and won't happen where Chucky Mullins is concerned."
 - "We were from totally different backgrounds. We were brought together by a terrible tragedy, and we got to be close friends," Gaines says. "Not a day goes by I don't think of him, several times a day. I still miss him."
 - "Chucky's legacy?" Southerland asks, rhetorically. "Have you got three hours? Chucky taught me that it's not about where you come from or what you have in your back pocket. It's about what you have in your heart."
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