

Auntie Rose's Narrative:

That nurse at Northeast Regional Hospital who called me earlier this week sure gave my old heart a scare. But I've got reason to be thankful. Usually when folks get that kind of call it's to tell them a loved one has died. I've been through that before with my nephew, Theodore, when he and his wife were killed in a head on collision sixteen years ago. That's when my nephews, JT and Ashton, came to live with me.

But hallelujah, that nurse who called wasn't making a death notification. My oldest nephew, JT, who's a senior at Truman State University, had been seriously hurt in an auto accident, but thankfully, he's alive and kickin'.

Even so, I'm worried about JT. Worried about his future. And Ashton's. JT's little brother has cerebral palsy. He was six months old when his parents died and the boys came to live with me. I was living in St. Louis then. But we moved to Milan not long after so I could take a job at Smithfield Foods—I still work there as a shift manager.

And things only got harder—at six months Ashton wasn't able to roll over but I thought maybe he was just a little slower at it than some other babies I've been around. But when by a year old he hadn't even started to crawl yet, I knew something was wrong. When I took him to the doctor they did some tests and within a few months, the doctor diagnosed him with cerebral palsy. And on top of that, JT got diagnosed with hearing loss in grade school and had to start wearing hearing aids.

JT has been just the best oldest brother. JT did everything he could to help me and his brother as they were growing up. He helped me take care of Ashton despite all his school work and athletics. JT took two years of Spanish in high school and began helping other students with it too. Plus he loved to play basketball. And did I mention that boy is six feet eight? And I'm only five feet two. When we have our pictures taken together I have to make him sit down on a chair—or I need to stand on one—so we can both be in the shot. (laughs) Keepin' that boy in groceries was not easy!

And he's smart as a whip. Jocks have a reputation for not doing well in their studies but don't you believe it. JT loves to learn. He read every book in the house growing up and my friends would bring over new books for him to read. But when he graduated high school he told me he was going to forego college and go to work for Smithfield too so he could help me with Ashton. But I was having none of that. He already had a scholarship lined up to help with college tuition and I wasn't letting him miss out on his chance.

And now here we are, him with a concussion, a jaw injury and something wrong with his shoulder. I pray whatever's wrong with his shoulder won't affect his basketball career. JT already has an agent and some contracts lined up. I don't want JT to lose out on that. He's been through a lot in his young life. He deserves this shot. And I know he'll feel guilty about not being able to take care of Ashton and me if his pro career is canned.

We'll just find a way to make it, that's all. I was hoping to retire when I turned 67 this year, but with Ashton's care, that just wasn't possible. But this ole body of mine won't last forever. So I just want JT to have his career in the NBA and finish his degree so he can teach. I want Ashton to have someone to look out for him.

JT's worked hard all his life. I want him to have his dreams.