

Trevon Jenifer: From the Ground Up

Alan Goldenbach

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Unfortunately, a lot of kids like the author grow up in unfavorable circumstances: born to a single mother in an impoverished home, living in a dangerous neighborhood, he started life with strikes against him. On top of everything else, Jenifer had the burden of being born without legs. When he was a teenager, school zoning laws dictated that he transfer out of the relative security of his high school and circle of friends as a sophomore and into a new situation as one of the few African-Americans in a new school.

What might be a devastating set of conditions to some was a mere annoyance to this personable young man.

Jenifer was raised in an environment in which he was encouraged not to let his condition hold him back. His can-do attitude made him a popular figure to everyone he encountered: fellow students, teachers, and coaches. Although he was fitted with prosthetic legs, he preferred his “natural” state, using his arms and hands as his legs and feet. He participated in wheelchair sports, excelling in basketball, and was manager of the school’s wrestling squad. His stepfather suggested that he not settle for sitting on the sidelines, but try out for a spot on the team.

Through hard work, he rose through the ranks of his weight class, ultimately becoming a champion athlete against “full-bodied” opponents by learning how to use his “handicap” as an advantage. To anyone who questions whether he has an unfair advantage, he suggests that they try cutting off their own legs.

Similarly, Jenifer believes he should not be defined by his situation. Reporters “liked to ask me a lot of hypothetical questions,” he writes. “The one that bothered me the most was, ‘What if you had legs?’ ... Asking me to consider life with legs was like asking ‘What if the sun rose in the West?’ Both were pointless questions. I was the person I was because I didn’t have legs. If I had legs, then maybe I would have become a basketball player, or maybe a world-class chess player, or maybe the brightest scientist the world had ever known. Or maybe I wouldn’t have found success like I had in my life, because I wouldn’t have embraced challenges.”

What’s especially surprising—and gratifying—about this story is how Jenifer was accepted by all those around him. Teens can be less than welcoming, especially when it comes to those perceived as “different,” and Jenifer was as different as they come.

He wrote this book with Alan Goldenbach, a reporter with the *Washington Post*, who first profiled Jenifer in an article in 2005; the two manage to infuse a sense of humor, honesty, and humility into what could have been a treacherous story.

RON KAPLAN (December 8, 2006)

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