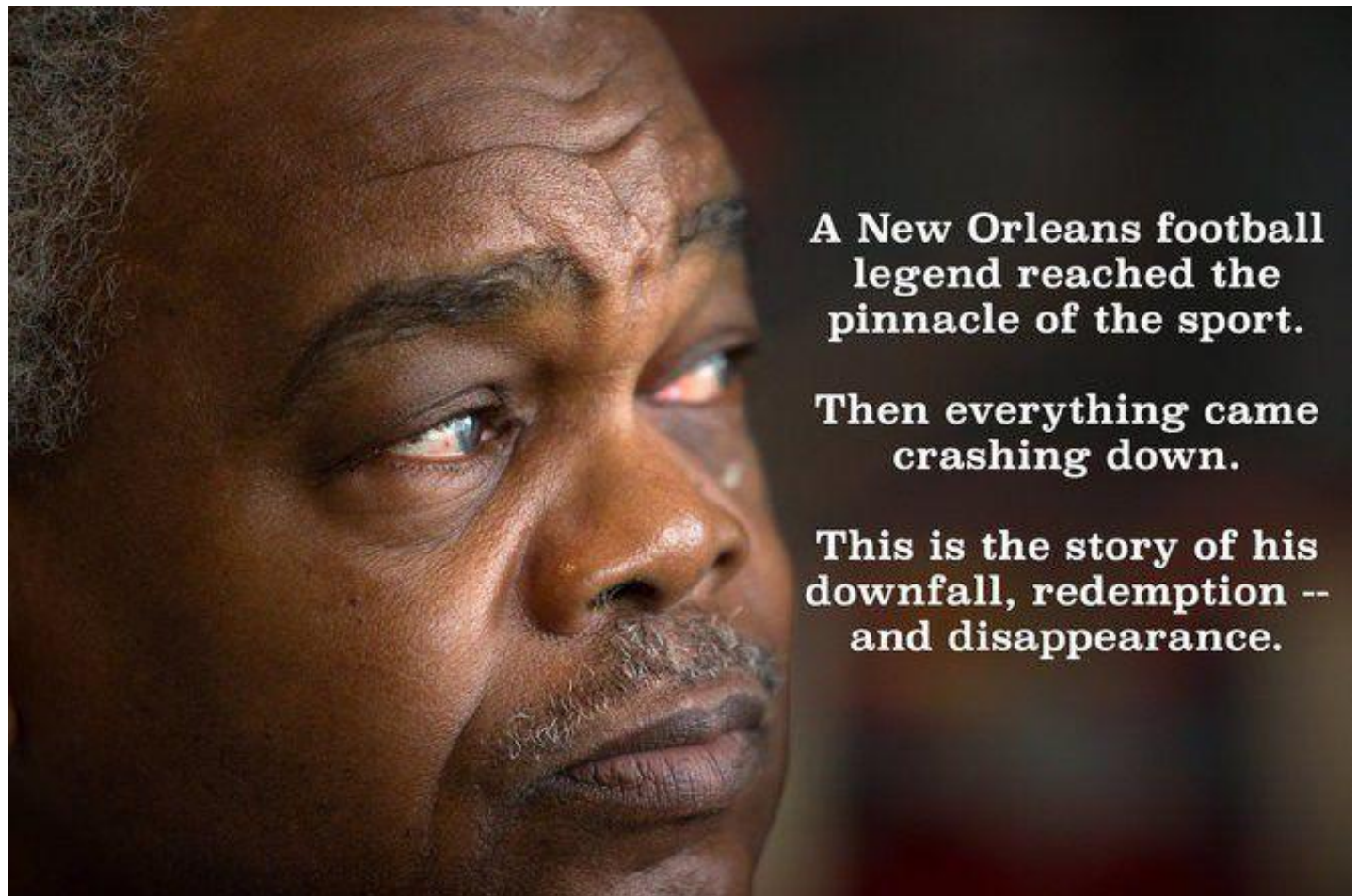


The search for Jackie Wallace

Ted Jackson

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One foot in front of the other, the hulking old man trudged up the ramp to the Pontchartrain Expressway. A cold wind stiffened his face, so he bundled tighter and kept walking. His decision was made. A life full of accolades and praise meant nothing to him now. A man who was once the pride of his New Orleans hometown, his St. Augustine alma mater and his 7th Ward family and friends was undone. He was on his way to die.

The man was tired. In his 63 years, he had run with the gods and slept with the devil. Living low and getting high had become as routine as taking a breath. A hideous disease was eating his insides. He was an alcoholic, and he also craved crack cocaine. He was tired of fighting. He was tired of playing the game.

He crossed the last exit ramp and continued walking the pavement toward the top of the bridge. He dodged cars as they took the ramp. No one seemed to notice the ragged man walking to his suicide. If they did notice, they didn't stop to help.

Only a half-mile more and it would all be over. One hundred and 50 feet below, the powerful currents of the Mississippi River would swallow his soul and his wretched life. He dodged another car. But why did it matter? Getting hit by a car would serve his purposes just as well as jumping.

How did it come to this? This was long after Jackie had turned his life around, or so we both thought.



I've worked as a photojournalist for more than 35 years. During that time, serendipity has been my muse. In my experience, great journalism follows trails and doors left ajar, and the next big thing is

usually just around the corner. My job is to be patient and pay attention.

Case in point: a hot New Orleans afternoon in June 1990. My photo editor at the time, Kurt Mutchler, had recently noticed a homeless camp beneath the Interstate 10 overpass near South Carrollton Avenue. From the interstate ramp heading west, he had caught a glimpse of a living room of sorts, with men resting on ragged couches and old easy chairs circled around a camp stove and rickety tables.

My mind's eye shifted into overdrive. I needed little more to coax me out the door to see this makeshift community of tattered comfort and surrogate family for myself.

I parked along the back streets, then hiked the remaining hundred yards or so. While commerce and civilization raced noisily overhead, another world emerged beneath the bridge. I picked my way through dense weeds and steel supports along a worn path, pointing my way past rusted shells of forgotten cars and smashed debris, much like the broken lives I expected to find beyond.

I practiced how I would approach the men — what I would say and how I would say it. I prepared my mind for honest compassion and understanding. This world is so different from mine, I reminded myself. My cameras were prepared for whatever might happen. I'd experienced this rush of uneasiness many times before. Some of my most meaningful photographs have been made while treading similarly unpredictable terrain.

As I turned the corner, my previsualized episode evaporated. The sofa was overturned. The tables were smashed. It was as if marauders had ravaged it. No worries. There's always the next story, I told myself.

I meandered a bit as I returned to my car, wondering what possibly could have wrecked the scene. I was not prepared for what I saw next: a half-naked man sleeping on a rusty box spring.

I couldn't have been more startled if he had been an alligator. His bed was overlaid with cardboard and tucked into a cleft of piers and brush. He was covered in a sheet of thick, clear plastic. His head rested on a wadded yellow jacket, also wrapped in plastic. Alongside

the bed lay two discarded automotive floor mats, a five-gallon bucket for bathing, a pair of neatly-arranged sneakers, a clean set of clothes, a jug of water and a carefully folded copy of The Times-Picayune. He slept in the fetal position in only his briefs and undershirt.

I climbed the pier with my camera and made a few frames of the scene, then climbed down and woke him. He wasn't startled in the least. I guess when you sleep under bridges, you learn to expect the unexpected.

He sat up slowly and cleared his head. I asked him if he knew anything about the homeless camp — if he knew what happened to the men.

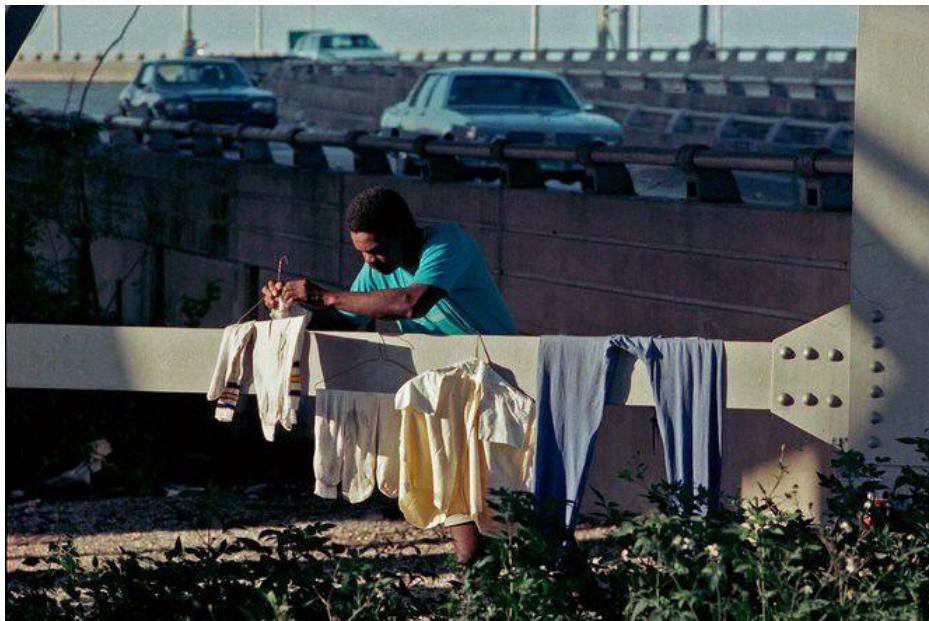
“Yeah,” he said. “Teens driving by started shooting their guns at them, so they decided there had to be a safer place to live. Why do you ask?”

We talked for a minute or two, about my editor's idea and journalism in general. After a brief pause, he said, “You ought to do a story about me.”

I've heard this line many times before, and many more since.

“And why would I want to do that?” I said.

“Because,” he said, “I've played in three Super Bowls.”



I wasn't sure if I'd heard right, but he certainly had my attention.

He reached for his copy of the newspaper. “Do you see this series y’all are doing, ‘The Real Life – Surviving after the NFL?’ You ought to do a story about me,” he said again.

Looking back, as surprised as I was, I was probably even more skeptical. “So what’s your name?”

He carefully unfolded a plastic bag from some hidden spot and produced a ragged ID card. Jackie Wallace, it read.

The name meant nothing to me, but I didn’t tell him that. We talked a little and I shot a few more frames, then thanked him for his time. I headed back to the newspaper office. More specifically, I rushed over to the sports department.

There were probably two dozen sports writers pounding out daily stories when I walked up. “Has anyone ever heard of a guy named Jackie Wallace?” I said.

Every head turned. An editor spoke first. “Of course,” he said. “He was a star at St. Aug, played for University of Arizona, and played for the Vikings, Colts and the Rams.”

And, sure enough, he had played in the Super Bowl – twice, not three times, as Wallace had told me, but that slight exaggeration mattered little to me.

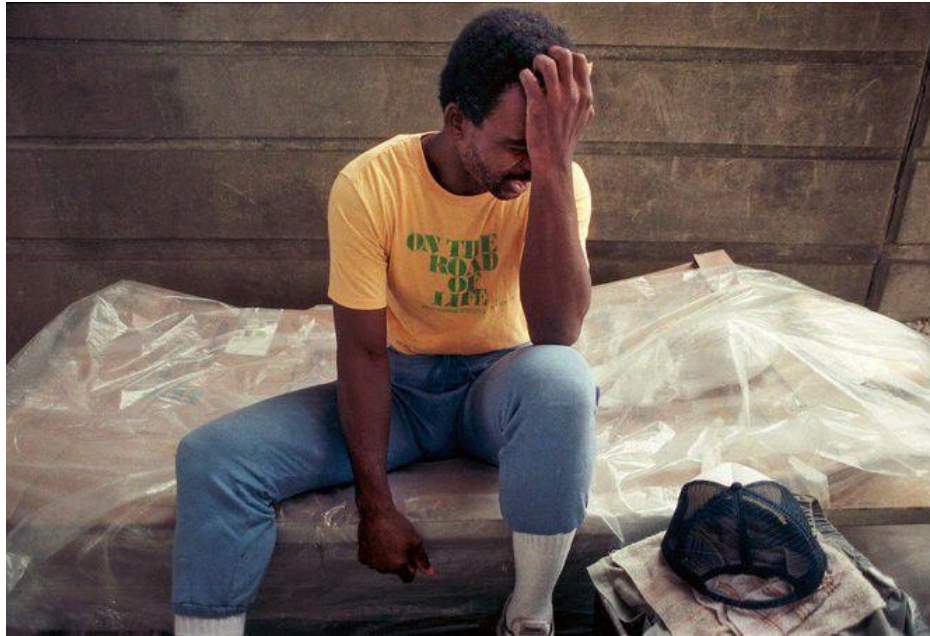
“Once he was released from the Rams,” the sports editor said, “he dropped off the map. Nobody knows where he is now.”

I couldn’t hold my grin. “Well, I think I know.”

Sports reporter Jimmy Smith, the author of the NFL series, hurried back to the bridge with me. Wallace was right where I’d left him.

Jimmy interviewed Wallace, and I became his shadow. I photographed him under the bridge and while he washed his clothes. I watched for an hour as he entertained two Jehovah’s Witnesses in Palmer Park. He led me along Carrollton Avenue as he searched for jobs, which I’m pretty sure was mostly for the camera’s benefit.

His T-shirt read, "On the road of life," and with tiny letters added, "you need training wheels."



Jimmy's story and my photos led the front page of The Times-Picayune on July 6, 1990. The public response was immediate and glorious.

Burton Burns, Jackie's St. Aug teammate and an assistant coach at the time, set out immediately to find him and pulled him from his squalor. That night he slept in a room at the school.

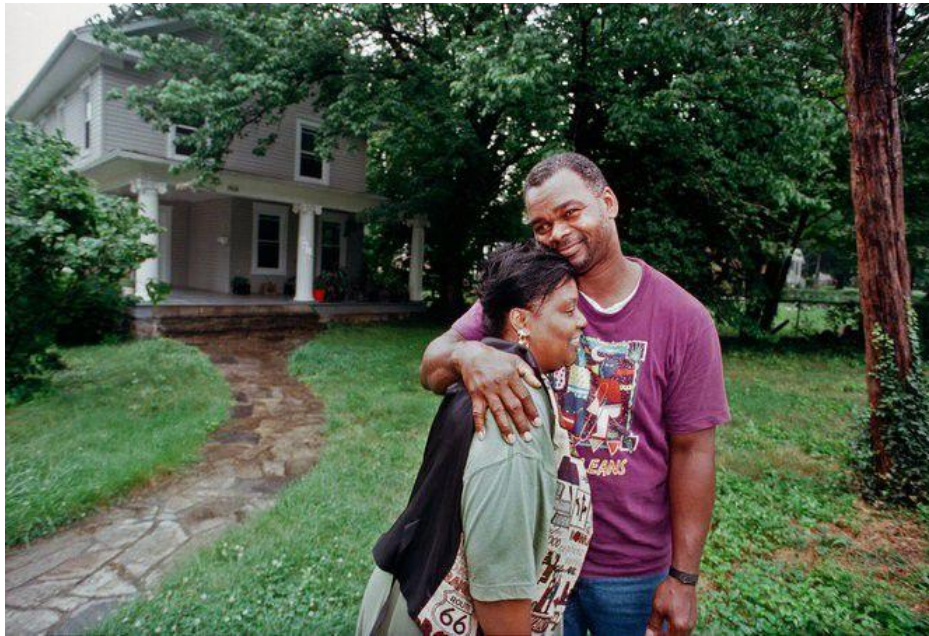
Within days, the school's alumni association had arranged for him to be admitted into rehab at Baltimore's Tuerk House. It was a great ending to a serendipitous moment. I had never been more satisfied with a story's outcome. I patted myself on the back. Jimmy was just as thrilled.

But the best was yet to come. Three years later, I sat working at my desk writing photo captions for some run-of-the-mill story. Above my desk, a large glass wall separated the photo lab from the newsroom. As I worked, I was startled by a sharp rap on the glass. I looked up to see Jackie Wallace's 6-foot, 3-inch frame towering over me, dressed in a three-piece suit with his arms stretched as wide as he was tall.

Beaming with his gap-tooth grin, he exclaimed, “Do you believe in miracles?”

What a sight! He was about to bust with his news. Since I had last seen him under the bridge, he had flourished in the 12-step program. By May of 1991, he had moved into his own apartment and found work as an “operational specialist” on the change-over crew at the Baltimore Arena.

But the real reason he had talked his way into the newsroom was to invite Jimmy and me to his wedding. On Dec. 5, 1992, Jackie Wallace and Deborah Williams, an executive secretary, became husband and wife.



Jimmy and I weren't able to attend the wedding, but we looked forward to a follow-up trip. In the summer of 1995, we flew to Maryland and met the happy couple at their house, a two story, four-bedroom beauty on a half-acre of land in a suburb in northeast Baltimore.

After a tour of the house, we headed to the arena, where Jackie showed us off to his co-workers and gave us a tour, the centerpiece of which was the employee locker room. Inside Locker 47 was a blue folder labeled “Bridge Pictures, July 6, 1990.” Inside were clippings from his turning point, a shocking reminder of his former life.

Jackie told me how important it was for him to see the photos every morning, to touch them and to remember.

“It only takes one slip,” he said, “and I’ll end up right back where you found me. That picture you took, in the fetal position ... I’m being born again.”

It was one of the proudest moments of my journalism career. This is why I got into this business – to unleash the awesome transformational power of photography.

The photos and the story had an even broader effect. A year after the story broke, the NFL addressed the issue of post-career trauma head-on and named John Wooten as their creator/director of player programs to help former athletes with their finances and adjustment to life after football.

But it was the personal connection that felt so gratifying. For years, on Thanksgiving, Jimmy and I would receive a phone call from Jackie Wallace. Just a simple hello and thank you from a humble, sweet soul. It was part of what made the holiday real for me.

For 10 years, Jackie and Deborah lived “happily ever after.” Somewhere along the way, I stopped thinking of him as the subject of a story. He had become my good friend Jackie.

But on Thanksgiving Day 2002, the phone didn’t ring.



I didn't give it much thought at the time. Things change and people move on. But eventually, I began to wonder. I called Jimmy, and we soon learned that Jackie had gone missing. He and Deborah had argued, and he had disappeared.

It was hard for me to comprehend that he could crash so hard, so fast. But it was the lesson he had tried to teach me in the locker room.

Jimmy and I assumed he was back in New Orleans, so I started watching, looking and paying attention on the streets. Jimmy learned he had visited the Ozanam Inn homeless shelter, but that tip led nowhere.

He was never too far from my mind. How far would he drop? Over the passing years, I'd scan the faces in every homeless camp, every man holding a cardboard sign. I'd mention his name to shelter staffers, but no one remembered seeing him.

In 2007, I spent a long night in the dorm at Ozanam for an unrelated story and asked around for clues. No one knew him. Administrator Deacon Biaggio DiGiovanni told me Jackie had come in a few nights over the winter, but the last he'd heard, he was in Orleans Parish Prison. I tried to search records but I couldn't find any proof. To me, he was simply lost.

In my regular speaking engagements at conventions, churches and universities, I would always show my photos of Jackie and relate the triumphant moment in the newsroom. But now the story ended in heartbreak. Jackie's phoenix moment had dissolved back to ash. His life was once again in ruin — or worse — I feared.

In 2014, 12 years beyond Jackie's disappearance, writer Richard Webster and I worked together on a story about the New Orleans Mission. To get a realistic understanding, we went through the humiliating process of checking in, the same as the homeless people would, eating the same food and sleeping in the dormitory bunks.

Once again, I used the opportunity to search for clues and any connections to Jackie, but there were none. It was that night, sleeping in that bed with my camera clutched tightly under my pillow, that I decided it was time for a serious effort.

It was more than just wanting to find Jackie. I needed to find him.

I scoured the usual haunts, walked the streets and knocked on doors. My search for him felt like a maze, every turn a dead end. But even a dead man leaves a trace. Right?



I returned to the Ozanam Inn, where I'd gotten my last trace a decade before. I arrived before dinner, when I knew the courtyard would be full. I talked to a handful of men, who were talkative but had no useful information.

DiGiovanni was helping with clothing requests in the yard when I ambled over. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen Jackie, but he introduced me to Joe Banks, a homeless man sitting on the bench who had been coming to Ozanam long enough to have crossed paths with him.

"I saw him a few weeks ago," he said. "He looked good."

What? This was my first inkling in more than 10 years that Jackie might be alive. But looking good? That didn't seem possible. What did that mean?

"I saw him in the store getting his shrimp loaf," he said, "at the seafood shop at Broad and Banks. He seemed happy, energetic, moving around. He looked like Jackie. I was real glad to see him." He

said he thought he was staying with a relative or a friend in Mid-City.

Joe remembered the day he met Jackie, during a program at the shelter.

“We hit it off and talked, and he’d tell me about his football days, and you know, just trying to encourage me, and tell me to get me to get my life back right,” he said. “He’s a real good dude. He’s real sincere — from the heart. That’s what I like about him.”

I said that’s what I liked about him too.

“It’s a possibility you could run into him at that store,” he said.

At the seafood shop, I passed Jackie’s photo around, but if the cooks and the owner recognized him, they held back. Men loitering on the corner outside said he looked familiar, and promised to call the number on my business card if they saw him.

I wished I was better at this. Movie cops make it look so easy.

With this vague bit of information and a reported sighting, I asked crime reporter Jonathan Bullington for a database search. Jackie’s name returned with an unlikely address in Harvey. His age seemed logical, but the item was four years out of date. I figured Jackie may have used a friend’s mailbox to get mail. It was worth a drive for a possible scrap of new information.

The address led me to a row of identical quadplexes. When I drove up, I found a man sitting alone in a plastic chair, doing nothing in particular.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m looking for a friend. I’m hoping you might know him.”

“Yeah? Who is that?” the man said. His eyes were fixed on something beyond me.

I watched his eyes carefully. If he recognized the name, I expected at least a twitch.

“His name is Jackie Wallace. Do you know him?”

He twitched.

I felt a sudden rush. He looked me in the eye, looked me over, and then to my disbelief, he casually motioned to the door on the right. Almost on cue, the door cracked open and a big man appeared.

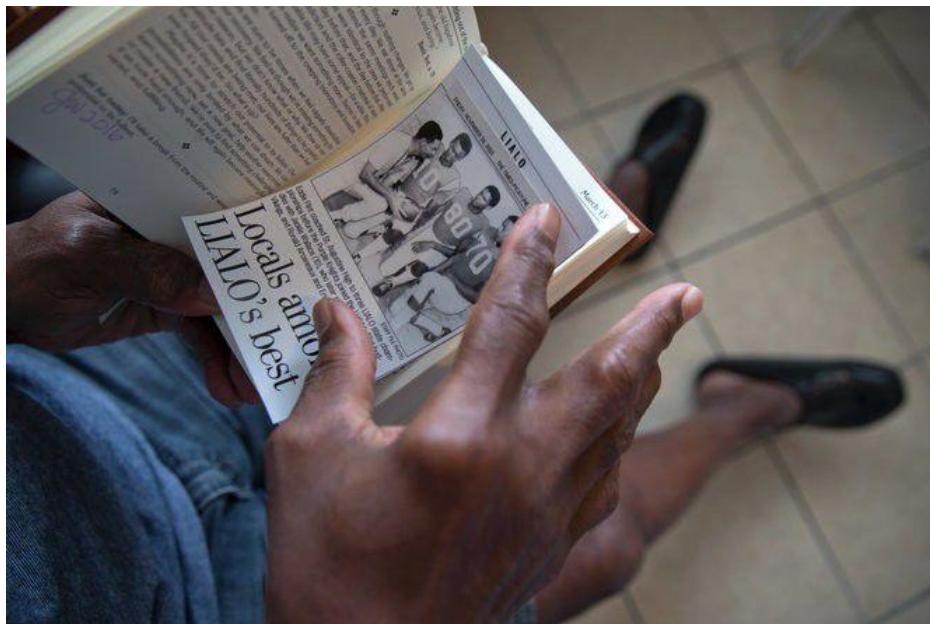
“What are you telling that man about me?” he said.

It was unmistakable. The voice, the face. I couldn’t believe my luck. I was halfway to the door and breaking into a grin. “Are you Jackie Wallace?” I said.

“Who wants to know?” His large frame overwhelmed the space.

“When I tell you, you’re going to smile,” I said, approaching within arm’s length. “I’m Ted Jackson.”

His wrinkled brow immediately broke and his eyes lightened. Jackie shoved the door aside and engulfed me in a massive bear hug.



He was 39 when I found him under the bridge. That would have made him 63 or 64 when I found him again. His black hair was gray, his face a little broader. But his eyes were clear and sharp. His grin was just as gap-toothed as I remembered.

We felt no awkwardness, immediately lost in questions and stories. He showed me around his apartment, proudly explaining it was part of an addiction recovery program. He introduced me to his

housemate. Within 15 minutes Jackie and I had hugged five times. I told him I couldn't stay long but that we really needed to sit and talk for a few minutes. He was eager to sit.

He led me down the hallway to his bedroom with a labored limp, swinging wildly from side to side, touching the wall for stability. It was painful to watch. Seven years in the NFL can do that to a body. He moaned as he lowered himself into a desk chair. Every square foot of wall space was covered in posters and inspirational quotes. This room was his private sanctuary.

A framed team photo of the 1974 Minnesota Vikings seemed out of place on a plywood desktop set across milk crates. The desk was neatly arranged with a Bible, a heavily marked calendar, a set of colored markers and reminder memos. A 1969 newspaper clipping of a young St. Aug senior bookmarked pages in a collection of devotionals.

It was great to see him. But I couldn't stay long. I had another assignment to get to. I promised to return soon. I told him that I needed to know everything.

He said he needed something from me, too. He'd lost his only copy of the photo of him sleeping under the bridge. "How big of a print do you want?" I asked. He smiled. "About like this," he said, his hands spread far apart. A few days later, we had a chance to talk seriously. "So what happened?" I asked.

Jackie took a deep breath and began, but his thoughts rambled. He jumped from one scene to another. Some details and significant dates in his life were hard to remember.

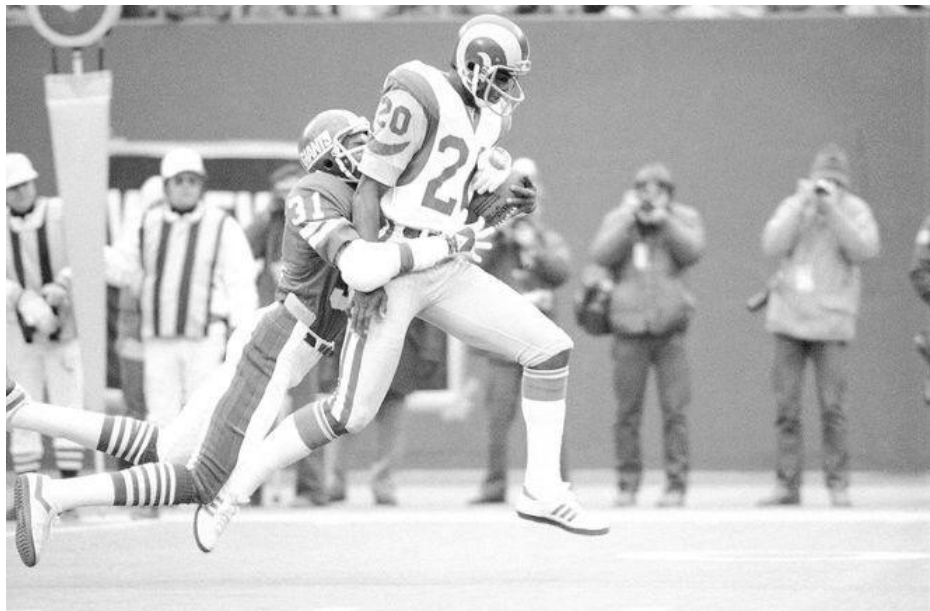
"Let's start with football," I said, and he suddenly became a living, breathing statistics machine.

After a brilliant career at St. Aug High School, Jackie received a scholarship from the University of Arizona, churning out an All-American career as a cornerback and kick-return specialist, setting a conference record with 20 career interceptions, three in one game.

In 1974, he was drafted in the second round by the Minnesota Vikings. He was on the taxi squad for Super Bowl VIII. The next year he returned to New Orleans a hometown hero as a starter in Super Bowl IX. "That was fun," he said. His eyes were now sparkling.

His career took him to the Baltimore Colts, and then to the Los Angeles Rams in 1977. The next season, he led the NFL in punt returns (52) and punt return yardage (618).

In 1980, as the Rams took the field against the Pittsburgh Steelers in Super Bowl XIV, Jackie was supercharged. But the game didn't progress as he had envisioned.



"I had practiced all week with the nickel defense," he said. But when the situations came up, "they didn't put me in." By halftime, the Rams held a slim lead over the Steelers, 13-10. But then Terry Bradshaw threw two long touchdown passes, one to Lynn Swann for 47 yards and another to John Stallworth for 73. The Steelers won the game, 31-19.

No one will ever know if the outcome would have been different had Jackie Wallace been on the field. But Jackie's competitive fire was raging in the postgame locker room. He unloaded on his coach, telling him he "could just kiss his ass," Jackie told me. "I just blurted it out."

During the offseason, a team representative called to say that Jackie's Super Bowl ring would soon arrive in the mail. He told him there was no need for him to attend the team's ring party.

Stunned, Jackie realized he'd been cut. His career was over. "Nobody wanted me after that," he said. "It's a tough moment when you realize you're done."

In the 1970s, an NFL contract didn't create instant millionaires as it does now. In 1974, Wallace played for \$27,500 a year and a \$25,000 signing bonus. In his seven years in the league, he estimated, he made between \$325,000 and \$400,000, including bonuses for playoff appearances and the Super Bowls. That was good money in the '70s, but like so many players of his era, Wallace never saved or invested a share of his earnings.

With no money to fall back on, Jackie struggled to adjust to regular life. For a while, he worked as a Class B gauger on an oil production platform. He said his yearly pay matched that of a year in football, but without the structure and discipline that a team sport imposes, Wallace's attraction to alcohol began to take a toll.



A year after his football career ended, two events changed his life: His mother died. And a cousin introduced him to crack cocaine.

"That's when the 'vortex of darkness' began," he said.

Before long he was sponging off family members, manipulating friends and shuffling from one living arrangement to another. Eight years later, with no possessions left to hock and no friends or relatives left to use, Jackie retreated into himself, cloistered beneath the bridge where he could get loaded and hide from the world.

Finding Jackie under the bridge has always been a landmark moment for me, professionally and personally. As a photographer, I believe in the power of a single frame to change the world. As a man of faith, I believe in the power of grace to transform lives. Living happily in Baltimore, Jackie was my hero of powerful photojournalism and miraculous redemption.

For 10 years, Jackie and Deborah's life together was marked mostly by uneventful days and steady work. Deborah was known for her great cooking. Jackie internalized his lessons from the 12-step program and continued to regularly attend meetings. He made time to counsel homeless men on the streets.

He had learned how important it was to stay on "his medicine," his word for doing the right things to stay sober.

"Everybody that's ever been through treatments knows what the right thing is," he said. "That means, you go to these meetings, you get you a sponsor, get you a home group. You get people who you're going to listen to that's going to tell you the truth, and you do it."

But after 12 years sober, something snapped. "It was one day of me not taking care of myself," Jackie said.

One afternoon he and Deborah got into a heated argument. "I called her a bitch," he said. "She got fearful of me. She had the police come out there and got me out of the house. And once that happened, I gave her everything."

That night, he said, "I went under the bridge in Baltimore."

The next morning, he got a Greyhound bus ticket bound for New Orleans.

"One slip." Two simple words that echoed large from the Baltimore Arena locker room.

“It only takes one slip, and I’ll end up right back where you found me,” Jackie had told me in 1995.

But his crash came faster than I could have imagined.

“A lot of people don’t understand,” he said. “When you have a disease (and you don’t take your medicine), you will revert back to your old ways of doing things. I don’t care how well you’ve been doing.”



Back in New Orleans, Jackie returned to his old cravings. "One thing about drug abuse," he told me, "it will wait on you. It will make you do things and say things that you wouldn't normally do. It knows you will ultimately get back to them."

But he didn’t go back to sleeping under the bridge. He found another form of housing he called “the game.”

“There’s a game the guys under the bridge play,” Jackie said. “You can play that system. You just go from one to one,” meaning from one shelter to another.

Jackie still had money coming in, which he poured into his drug abuse.

“I was still getting the NFL pension checks — about \$650 a month,” he said. “It wasn’t enough to get a place, but it was enough for me to go out and get loaded.”

He called it “the 28-day game.”

“With the checks coming on the first or the third, I’d get loaded,” he explained. “So from the fourth to the 28th or the 29th of that month ... I knew I was going to be poor. But around the 30th or the 31st, I’d start perking up because I knew my money was going to be there. And that’s how the drugs had me living. The only purpose of the disease is to kill you. That’s all it wants you to do, is to overdose. That’s all they want you to do is to get to a point where you either kill yourself or you get killed in the cycle of the dope gang with boys shooting.”

He said the dealers would give him drugs on credit.

“That’s what’s going on,” he said, “because you’ll notice, right before the first of the month, and right after the third or the fifth of the month, you get a lot of killings in New Orleans. That’s because, we call them the ‘dope boys,’ are wanting their money. And when they don’t get their money, they wind up killing people. And trust me, I’ve been in that category.”

It was only because of his status as a former NFL player that Jackie was spared, he said.

“Because they knew that I was a football player, because the guys knew I was going to get the money anyway, the only thing they had to do was be around me,” he said. “That’s why I didn’t get killed.”

Eventually, the pension money wasn’t enough. His addiction became so severe that he was “doing all these crazy things,” Jackie said. “Nothing violent. I thank God I don’t like guns, because if I’d liked guns I’d probably (have) ended up, under the guise of addiction, robbing people, which was all the way out of my character.

“Because I had education,” he said, “because I thought I was so damn smart, I would take checks and cash (them).”

Being “so damn smart” eventually got Jackie arrested. After a 2008 conviction on one count of writing bad checks, a judge sentenced him to treatment at Gateway Recovery in Harvey. The arrest could have been the impetus to turn his life back around, had Jackie come clean

about the extent of his bad check-writing. When the DA's office discovered more checks that he had failed to disclose, deputies came to an AA meeting and led him away.

This time, the judge wasn't so lenient. Wallace was sentenced to seven years with the Department of Corrections.

The cycle continued after his early release for good behavior. After three and a half years sober in jail, he said, "F--- it, I'm going to get loaded."

From there, Jackie simply lived because he wasn't dead. Even drugs "had stopped being an enjoyment a long time ago," he said.

One of his lowest days came in 2013, while sitting at the corner of Martin Luther King Boulevard and Magnolia Street, where he said addicts would gather.

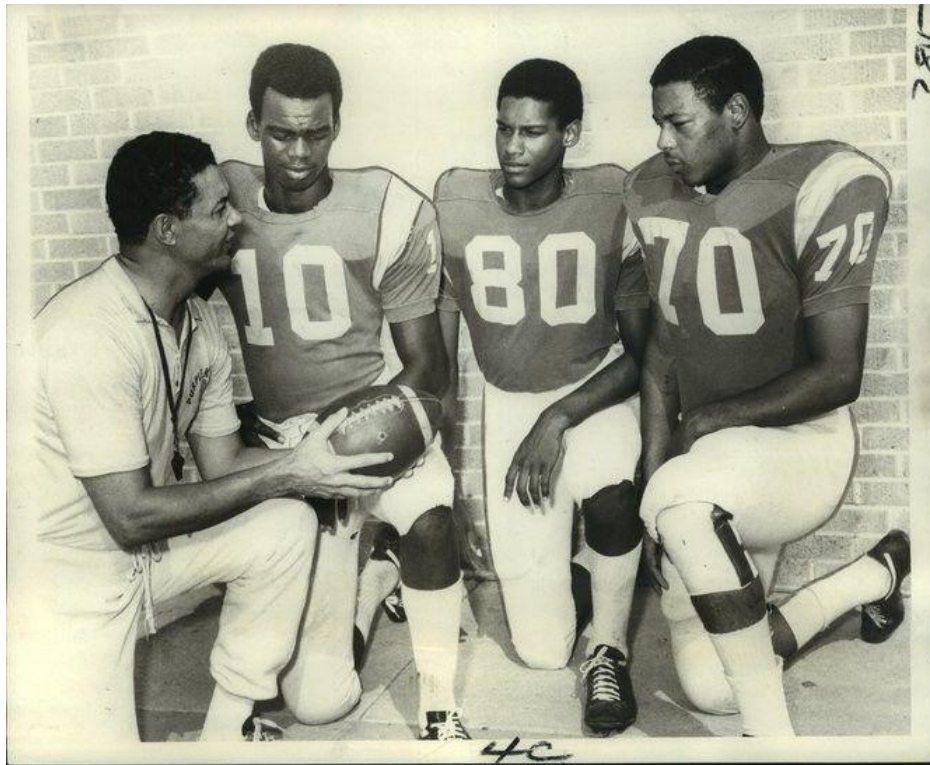
"We'd just sit out there and beg or wait for our relatives to pass," he said. He was hoping his sister, Louvenia, would drive by.

"She had been in the habit of stopping, giving me something to eat or give me a little money, which is the worst thing you can do," he said.

"She passed and she saw me, and she saw me looking real, real bad. She waved and she kept on going."

Jackie pushed his anger down. He knew that his sister loved him, and kept reminding himself of that. Another day, she stopped and said, "The only thing I'm going do for you is pray for you. ... I'm putting you in the hands of God."

It was right before Christmas 2013.



Jackie Wallace was born March 13, 1951, and was raised in the St. Bernard public housing development. He was placed on a pedestal the minute he was old enough to catch a ball. He had received accolades and honors from grade school to high school to college to the NFL. But now, he was a broken, hollow, façade of a man.

Feb. 3, 2014, one month shy of his 63rd birthday, marked 34 years and two weeks since he trotted onto the field to the thundering applause of 103,985 fans for Super Bowl XIV. But on this day, he stumbled into the New Orleans Mission. He was crashing from another first-of-the-month high.

The next morning, Feb. 4, was brutally cold. After a cup of hot coffee and breakfast, in keeping with normal mission rules, he returned to the streets. Most of the men would return for lunch.

Jackie was wearing three shirts to brace from the weather. As he wandered toward the Pontchartrain Expressway, a stiff wind hit him in the face.

He said, "To hell with this. I'm tired of this."

He was sick of living the month-to-month cycle. He was tired of drugs taking all of his money. There was nothing left to his once-exalted life but misery.

As he saw it, there were three options left: recovery, jail or suicide.

He had already ruled out No. 2. He got to the upramp by the mission and turned. He had no power over his legs or arms. His mind was gone. He felt like a zombie.

Walking up to the Mississippi River bridge is no casual task. I've done it several times on other assignments. Nothing feels right up there. Each step feels unsure. The steel and the asphalt moves with the load of high-speed traffic as if it's alive. Holding onto the railing makes it worse, inducing vertigo from the height. The intermittent wind from the traffic pushes you toward the edge, then the vacuum of the speed sucks you back. The roar is unnerving, almost violent.

As Jackie crossed the last ramp, the Tchoupitoulas exit, he looked over his shoulder to avoid the oncoming traffic. He oddly realized how it didn't matter, but he dodged anyway. No one slowed. No one blew their horn. Nobody tried to stop him. He was invisible. He was worse than a dead man walking. He was invisible to the world and to himself. He was no man.

Before he reached the span, an odd thing happened. A cold crosswind caught his face, maybe like the chill of death. Maybe it was the wing of an angel.

Whatever it was, "it woke me up," Jackie said.

He suddenly regained himself, then panicked.

"I'm crazy," he thought. "I knew I was gone."

He headed down the ramp and walked 30 blocks to the Rebuild Center near St. Joseph's Catholic Church, where he asked to be committed. The staff at the center transferred him to DePaul Hospital for an evaluation. The psychiatrist there said, "Jackie, you're not crazy. You've got a substance abuse problem."

Jackie returned to treatment at Gateway. This time, he was in treatment because he wanted to be. This time, he was afraid. In quick order, he completed the program and was evaluated for mental health issues and received counseling. When I visited early last year, the staff said that he made great progress but was highly susceptible to relapse.

Former friends and connections on the streets are often a major stumbling block for clients like Jackie. Gateway's director, Darryl Chandler, said he was happy that Jackie was making better decisions. One of those decisions was to continue to live within the Gateway community.

"He's still in the same (rehab) community," Chandler said, "still around the same people, so he still has access to the after-care group and the 12-steps meetings, if that's what he chooses to do."

That last phrase left me uneasy.

His counselor, Ryan Landry, echoed the others' praise for Wallace's recovery. Ryan said he sees the unique opportunity the former hometown hero has to help others. He remembered his first week on the job as he watched his new group interact.

"The first time I met Jackie," Ryan said, "he was signing the back of another client's jersey."

Ryan asked another client who this guy was.

"That's Jackie Wallace."

"The Jackie Wallace?"

"Yeah, 'the Headhunter,' the old safety Jackie Wallace."

Ryan was shocked. "I grew up in south Louisiana with my father telling me about players like him," he said. "Goes to show you that the disease of addiction can happen to anybody. And now, with a few years clean ... he's an inspiration to a lot of guys here."

"And behold, now he's a friend of mine."



On Feb. 4, 2017, Jackie marked a major milestone in his roller-coaster life. A small room was being prepared across from the First Evangelist Baptist Church in Central City. This is where Jackie got his medicine: Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

In sweat pants and hoodie, Jackie shuffled across the street with friends. His hobbled hip caused him to miss the curb, sending him hurtling toward the sidewalk. Just in time, his friend caught his arm. With regained composure, Jackie struggled up the three short steps to the meeting hall with a death grip on the hand rail. As he entered the half-full room, Jackie flashed his trademark grin and bellowed, “What time does this 5 o’clock meeting start?”

The gathering drew about 25 men and women, middle-aged and older. The group was rowdy at first, but settled down after coffee was poured. Jackie found a chair against the side wall. Even with his crippled, aging frame, he was still a bona fide celebrity in the room. It seemed like everyone wanted to say hello, help him around, laugh at his jokes or grab a selfie.

The group leader, known to all as Darryl P., deftly removed Jackie’s halo when he called him by name, and reminded him that while the world still looks on him as a star, “Here, you ain’t nothing but an addict.” The words struck me as a bit harsh, but Jackie nodded humbly. He certainly knew it was true.

The meeting progressed as most AA meetings do. The personal testimonies were passionate and painful, sometimes vulgar. As the allotted time expired, Darryl offered powerful exhortations and wrapped it up. But before the dismissal, he called for Jackie to come forward. With his arm around his shoulders, Darryl proclaimed, "Three years sober!" and presented him with a gold medallion, a tiny token to commemorate his mammoth achievement.

It might as well have been the Lombardi Trophy as Jackie raised it up. The room erupted in applause. For a man like Jackie, three years was an eternity.

Three years sober. Three years – to the day – since he walked up the ramp.

Jackie left the meeting with Yolanda Stewart, his new girlfriend. She made him smile and livened his spirits. His counselors warn that addicts need to be prudent with their relationships, but Jackie said it was all good.

He also was enjoying a renewed relationship with his family. But during a holiday gathering, Yolanda found him sitting in the kitchen with the children instead of in the living room with the adults. She asked him why.

"Because they're having wine," he said. He said he would never be strong enough for that. He'd learned his triggers. He knew his demons.



Last February, Jackie received a total hip replacement, but the hip continued to give him trouble.

Following the surgery, I dropped by for a visit. I was worried about the narcotics, specifically the pain medications that have led so many addicts back to ruin. Jackie said there was no need to worry.

He didn't blame the NFL for his crippled body, but he was worried that his memory continues to deteriorate. Some words, dates and names routinely eluded him. It seemed to get worse every year. He knew memory loss can be a common result of aging, but he thought back on his old nickname, "The Headhunter," and couldn't help but wonder about all the concussions. Jackie was one of the first to sign up for the class-action concussion lawsuit against the NFL.

As comfortable as Jackie was in a crowd, he seemed most at peace in his bedroom sanctuary, where he spoke often about his spiritual revival.

"If you work the (12) steps right," he said, "it will get you back to a relationship with God."

There seemed to be no secrets between the two of us. He freely admitted the only reason he told me his story in the first place was to arouse enough pity for a handout from me, which he could use for

another round of crack. But he denied the oft-told rumor that he once sold his Super Bowl rings for drugs.

“That’s not true,” he said. “I just never liked rings.”

He said he gave them away decades ago to a charity in New Orleans East. “The game balls too,” he said. “I never kept any of that stuff.”

But he had kept a few reminders, including the three-years-sober medallion, which was prominently displayed on his desk.

He talked often about his ultimate trophy, his crown yet to come. He said he dreamed about heaven.

As we talked, Jackie’s eyes grew tired and his stamina began to falter. With sheer force of will and a groan of pain, he lifted himself from his chair and shuffled a couple of steps to his bed.

“I’ll let myself out,” I said, apologizing for keeping him so long. As gracious as ever, he thanked me for coming, and for telling his story as he lay down and rolled over to face the wall.

I noticed that his sneakers were neatly arranged by his bed. His clothes were neatly folded nearby. He curled up in a familiar fetal position. I made a quick photo and left.

I was happy to see Jackie under a real roof. He understood the war he waged. He had access to a great support system, with people constantly checking up on him, and he knew how and where to get his medicine. He told me of a renewed peace in his spirit, and how his demons struggled much harder to overcome him.



I had Jackie's photograph printed as large as I thought was tasteful for his bedroom — 16-by-20 inches, framed, matted and ready for hanging. I couldn't wait to see his face when I handed it to him, and when we hung it on his wall.

I dropped by and rang the bell. But there was no answer. I knocked, repeatedly. There was no “coming” — no shuffling — not a sound.

I circled the block to the Gateway offices. Maybe Chandler could help. Surely he would know whether Jackie was in trouble.

He said he had not seen him.

I called Jackie's cellphone for days without an answer. That was not totally unusual. Sometimes he answered, sometimes he didn't. Finally, I texted.

"Jackie, I have a framed photo for you. I'd really like to deliver it. ... My story is finished. Give me a call (or text) when you can." He texted back. Mail it to Yolanda, he wrote — and left an address. "Thank you."

I wrote back, “I'd love to drop by to see you. Are you ok?”

“NO,” he texted.

I drove straight to Yolanda's address.

“What is this?” she said as she opened the door and looked at the photograph. I told her of my texts with Jackie. She was surprised to see me, and that he would use her as a connection.

“Jackie’s gone,” she said. “He’s gone back to using.”

I stood in the hallway. I suddenly felt sick.

She invited me in, and we talked about Jackie and their breakup, about hurt and disappointment. We talked about the insidious nature of addiction.

She told me how Jackie cleaned out his Gateway apartment and then suddenly disappeared. She speculated on where he might be living, what he might be doing and where he will probably end up. She said the “drug boys” had gotten him. “They’ll keep him until he gets his NFL settlement,” she said.

Yolanda looked closely at the photograph of Jackie sleeping under the bridge. “This is where he’s headed,” she said.

She shook her head, then promised to get the photograph to him. “This might be just the thing to bring him to his senses.”

When Jackie left his Gateway apartment, she said, “he took all his stuff. The only thing he left behind was the Narcotics Anonymous stuff. He left all that behind.”

I asked about his three-years-sober medallion.

“Yeah,” she said. “He left that, too.”

Ted Jackson retired in November after 33 years as a staff photographer for NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune. He last saw Jackie Wallace in July 2017. If you have information about Wallace's whereabouts, email tedjacksonphoto@yahoo.com.

Correction: *An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported that Burton Burns was a coach of Jackie Wallace’s at St. Aug. Burns was Wallace’s St. Aug teammate for two years and coached for the school from 1977-1979 and 1985-1994.*