

'This is a miracle'

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FULL TEXT

"I thank the Lord that I'm here. I thank him every day. I was scared, but thank God and everybody who was there. Now, I'm here practicing and playing."

Jeroy Ellis

Survived cardiac arrest during a high school basketball game

Jeroy Ellis heard his name called at a varsity game for the first time on Jan. 4. Jeffersonville was up nearly 40 points, allowing coach Chris Moore to utilize his entire bench.

Ellis, who normally plays junior varsity, walked past his delighted teammates to the scorer's table. At the end of the bench, the Jeffersonville trainer sat ready.

"I looked at my (automated external defibrillator) to make sure I still had it right there with me," Daniel Thomas said.

An opposing player missed a layup and Ellis grabbed the rebound. He passed the ball to Luke Melin, who pushed for a fastbreak. Ellis ran alongside him.

"OK, he's in the stat book," Moore thought.

As they crossed halfcourt, the Jeffersonville players rose to their feet. Melin passed the ball to Ellis. There was a collective gasp in the stands, all wondering —hoping —he would score.

In one swift action, Ellis took a dribble and laid it up with his left hand off the backboard for the first two points of his varsity career.

Celebration erupted as if the school had won the state championship.

"I didn't even realize we had the student section that night until that happened," Moore said.

The reason players and fans described the scene as "crazy" and "insane" and "nuts" is simple: Ellis isn't supposed to be playing basketball. Quite frankly, after suffering a heart attack during a game, he's not supposed to be alive.

'He was not breathing'

On Dec. 9, 2017, Jeffersonville hosted Madison. As customary, the freshman team played in the auxiliary gym on the second floor while the junior varsity team played in the main gym prior to the varsity game.

Ellis, then a member of the freshman team, attempted a free throw a few minutes into the game. He turned around and shouted at his teammates to get back on defense.

Then, he collapsed.

"I was coming down the court and my vision just went black," he said.

Teammate Deydrian Hughes, one of the players running back on defense, remembers hearing a loud thud, then a whistle. He thought someone got fouled, but when he turned around, he saw Ellis on the ground, immobile.

Someone shouted that Ellis didn't have a heartbeat.

"That's when our teammates got scared for him," Hughes said. "They took everybody away."

Assistant coach Cory Norman ran outside of the gym to find Thomas, who was sitting at the end of the team bench in the downstairs gym watching the JV game.

"I just happened to look up on Cory and he gets my attention, like I need you, and points toward me," Thomas said. Thomas, who was in a post-op brace because he had torn his patellar tendon, hobbled up the stairs. As he limped, Thomas called the ambulance because he said he could sense an urgency in the way Norman called for him.

Leste Ellis, Jeroy's mother, was also in the downstairs gym when she got a call from Jeroy's brother, who was watching the freshman game, that her son had collapsed. She hastily made her way up and found a few people surrounding him.

"It was the worst day of my life," she said. "That was the worst experience of my life to see your child laying there lifeless. No parent should have to go through what I went through. All I knew was to get down on my knees and start praying."

Thomas and two nurses —mothers of players on the Madison team —tended to Ellis in cardiac arrest. Thomas asked one of the players to get the AED from downstairs while the nurses performed CPR on Ellis.

"He was not breathing," Thomas said. "We check for a pulse. No pulse. Go get the AED. We got to shock this kid. We got to. We cut his jersey ..."

Thomas paused for a moment. He says it took him six months to recover from the ordeal.

Kristen Mundt, a registered nurse at King's Daughter Health in Madison, was one of the two nurses who performed CPR on Ellis. Mundt said she did the compressions while the other nurse, Amanda Kent, performed the rescue breathing.

"I'm a former emergency room nurse so at that moment, all you're focused on is doing it the right way the way you're taught so that we can get him back. Get him to have a pulse," Mundt said. "Because I know in the emergency room, when we have a code come in, more likely than not, it is not a good outcome."

When the nurses couldn't locate a pulse after two rounds of CPR, the AED came and they shocked him twice.

"Everything slowed down and we were all focused on what we had to do," Thomas said. "(The nurses) went through compressions. We hit him with the AED and it couldn't get a rhythm. Second time, it got a rhythm and we had a pulse. We just tried to keep him stable.

"I watched it on film. It lasted like 10 minutes. Those 10 minutes felt like seven hours."

Ellis' heart stopped beating twice, the first time for three seconds, and again for two seconds. He was 14 years old. By the time the fire truck and ambulance arrived, Ellis had begun taking shallow breaths. Leste took off in the ambulance with Ellis, where she continued praying and he finally regained consciousness.

"Mama, I'm OK," he whispered to her.

Ellis said he doesn't remember anything between losing his vision and waking up in the ambulance.

At Norton Children's Hospital, doctors ran multiple tests, but all came back negative, Leste said. The cardiologist did note that a blood vessel by Ellis' heart was thicker than what's considered a normal size. The doctors also could not determine the cause of the cardiac arrest.

They also performed an electrophysiology, an electrical study that tests the electrical activity of the heart for the doctors to look for any response or irregularity. The study was done to figure out what might have caused the episode, but to no avail.

Ellis was discharged on Jan. 4, 2018. On Jan. 7, his 15th birthday, Ellis had another surgery to insert an implantable cardioverter defibrillator, a device that can detect cardiac arrhythmia and shock the heart back to a normal rhythm. Leste said Ellis, who is 6-foot-5, weighed 255 pounds, which is considered obese in the BMI index, when he collapsed. Dr. Chris Johnsrude, the director of pediatric arrhythmia at Norton Children's Hospital and associate professor at the University of Louisville School of Medicine, said that if the cause is unknown, Ellis' weight wasn't a factor in the cardiac arrest. Johnsrude did not treat Ellis.

"That happens in older people. That doesn't happen in teenagers," he said. "If it's already been said that they don't know what did this, that means all the (weight-related issues) were already looked for."

Since the incident, Ellis has been taking two pills of Nadolol twice a day, once before eating and the other before exercising, to help thin the blood vessel and prevent it from getting thicker. He hasn't had any heart issues since.

"This is a miracle," the doctors told Leste.

From lifeless to spirited

Life didn't just return to normal after Ellis was discharged, though. He missed about a month of school to recover from the surgeries. In the meantime, his grades dropped so low that Ellis said even if he were cleared to play, he

would not have been academically eligible. He says he was a little bit depressed and filled his day playing "Fortnite" and "NBA2K."

"I was heartbroken," Ellis said. "I wanted to play ball badly."

The usual goofy teenager was nowhere to be found but in his room, dejected. Leste often had to bring food to his room because he wouldn't come out. "NBA2K" was the closest connection Ellis still had with his love, basketball.

"Before the incident occurred, Jeroy was a basketball fanatic. After he had the episode, he fell into depression," his mother said. "He didn't want to do anything. He didn't want to get out of bed. He was just bummed because he knew that he couldn't play basketball. He would literally just sit and play games and I would sit and watch him."

Before he collapsed, she would plead for him to stop playing games. But after the incident, she couldn't muster up anything to say to him. Leste was just glad to have him next to her, alive.

"Once that happened, I looked at life totally differently because we take stuff for granted every day," she said. "I would never take my kids for granted because they could be here and gone just like that."

After getting discharged from the hospital, Ellis was on a healthy heart diet, but stress and boredom contributed to weight gain. He weighed as much as 365 pounds, over 100 pounds more than at the time of the heart attack.

"When he's bored, he eats," Leste said. "He would get bored and go into the kitchen, make him some rice, make him some oatmeal and noodles. Now, me knowing what I do know, he definitely shouldn't have had that many steaks and potatoes. I was just shocked that he had gained all that weight because it wasn't like we weren't trying with his food. He ate way more than he was supposed to."

That changed on Feb. 27, 2019, when Ellis was finally cleared to play basketball, more than a year after his heart stopped beating.

There was no hesitation for Leste to let her 17-year-old son reconnect with the sport.

"If my son wants to play basketball, by all means, I'm going to let him play until the doctors tell him that he can't play," she said. "If I felt like something was going to happen, then I would probably be wary of him playing."

Ellis began playing half-court basketball at the local YMCA, then full-court. He started working out too and, to this day, is losing weight. He's lost at least 25 pounds so far.

How Ellis perceives life has changed, too.

"I thank the Lord that I'm here. I thank him every day," he said. "I was scared, but thank God and everybody who was there. Now, I'm here practicing and playing."

Moore also didn't want to deny Ellis the chance to fulfill his dream, resulting in his first varsity points.

"My guess is most coaches wouldn't have given him an opportunity, one because of his size and conditioning and two, because of the situation that happened," he said. "I'm not saying I'm better in that regard at all. I certainly didn't want to be a guy not giving him an opportunity because I was scared something would happen. I spoke to his mom and she felt the same way. I don't want him to not have the opportunity to do what he loves."

'You are in this world for a reason'

In the game following his varsity debut, the junior scored seven points against New Albany in the JV contest. He didn't dress out for the varsity game; in fact, there weren't enough seats on the bench, so he had to sit in the stands behind the bench in sweats.

Not even Moore knows when Ellis, who has a doctor's appointment every six months, will play again in a varsity game. It might not come until next season.

"But I would never say never," Moore said. "Even when he's out there in practice, if he posts up and seals, not many guys can get around him. He finds open guys, too. He'll get a rebound and zip it out. Two out of three times, something good can happen."

The goal of being on the varsity team motivates him to push harder. But every day is a gift for him and his family. His mother reminds Ellis of that, regardless of what level basketball he plays.

"You are in this world for a reason."

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