

TERRENCE'S STORY



The Beginning

It's 2007 and Terrence Ridley's grandmother has just passed away. Thoughts of her occupy his mind as he glumly heads into the William S. Baer School for what he expects to be just another normal day at school...except there's someone new here; someone he doesn't recognize. The man has the biggest smile on his face, and he can't wait to meet Terrence!

The man's name is David Slomkowski, and he spends the day racing down the hallways with Terrence and his classmates and talking to Terrence's mom, La'Kesha, and all of the other parents about his idea for something called "Athletes Serving Athletes." It's a day that he and his mother remember fondly — a day that was going to change their lives.

Fifteen years later, Terrence is still racing and training with ASA, making him one of the organization's longest-participating Athletes. He loves every minute of it.

"He did the very first Hopes Heroes race with ASA," La'Kesha recalls. "Back then, he actually raced in his own wheelchair since they didn't have a jogger for him yet. His Wingman didn't know he knew how to put the brakes on, so he kept messing with her and stopping the chair — we all had a good laugh about it afterward!"

Terrence has participated in hundreds of races since then, and both he and La'Kesha have recruited many more Athletes and Wingmen along the way.

"He loved it so much that he encouraged everyone he met to get involved," she said. "He was getting his teachers to volunteer, and at one point his speech therapist even helped him add a pre-programmed message to his communication device telling people to join ASA!"

In addition to the racing and training opportunities it presented, ASA also provided the perfect space for genuine, positive social interaction. Before he knew it, Terrence had established many close, long-lasting relationships with Wingmen and other Athletes.

"We keep coming back because of the people," La'Kesha said. "The other Athletes are his friends!"



The Parents

While Terrence was busy developing lifelong friendships and becoming ASA's first unofficial Athlete Ambassador, La'Kesha found herself bringing the same energy to sharing the program with their parents.

"In the beginning, parents were wary about the whole idea — especially about their kids running with strangers," she remembers. "But they warmed up to it once I explained the process, and that was an integral part in growing ASA: recruiting the parents."

As ASA grew, more and more parents were meeting people who faced the same struggles of raising a child with limited mobility. Establishing those connections helped La'Kesha and countless others realize that they're not alone, and reaffirm their sense of belonging.

Not only did group runs and races become a space for Athlete parents to connect and bond over their shared experience, but sometimes they were also a family's first introduction to adaptive equipment.

La'Kesha explained that many had never seen a racing jogger before joining ASA, but after watching one completely transform their child's mobility, it inspired parents to seek out other tools and equipment to improve quality of life beyond training runs and races.

The Reason

But the main reason that Athletes like Terrence return year after year isn't because of the equipment or races or group runs (although it does play a crucial role) — it's because of the people.

"What makes ASA different from the other groups is that you're running with the same people and getting to know them," La'Kesha said.

"Even though he's nonverbal, the more time Wingmen and volunteers spend with Terrence, the more they learn to understand him and his unique way of communication."

That kind of human connection helps Athletes like Terrence feel accepted for who they are; not rejected for how they're built. It also helps parents like La'Kesha to exchange the stigmas of disability for pride in the people their kids have become.

"I'm glad that everybody knows I'm his mom," she said. "I'm just a mom with a big mouth on the sidelines. I'm always cheering!"

