

# Rajaan Bennett: Strength and Self-Reliance

by Lynlee Doar

Rajaan Bennett did as Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested. He accepted the place that Divine Providence found for him.

But Rajaan did more than just accept it. He embraced it. He lived it, and he became exactly the kind of young man that Emerson describes when he says that "A man is to carry himself in the presence of all opposition."

Life wasn't easy for Rajaan and his family. His father was killed in a car accident shortly after moving his family from Florida to Georgia, leaving Rajaan to grow up quickly and rebuild his heartbroken family. Of course, he grieved as any child would at age 10, but he also knew that his mother and his younger brother and sister needed him to be strong.

That strength stayed resolute, and he soon garnered more to share with a football team as he discovered a new athletic outlet in eighth grade.

His talent soon evolved into a power that awed many. Sometimes it was surprising coming from such an unassuming young man, but you didn't have to be an academic All-American to know that his effortless style manifested itself in more ways than just a halfback dive.

His expertise as a running back was often at the forefront of the minds of the McEachern High School family, but the most influential legacy that Rajaan left behind was not one of record yards rushing or honors like Offensive Player of the Year. His unique gift is one of a genuine kindness tempered only by integrity and individuality.

As I think of Rajaan, I recall the last time I spoke with him. Friday, February 4.

He stopped by my classroom to tell me that he had signed with Vanderbilt. As one of his teachers, he knew I'd love the academic reputation while also being impressed by the rich football tradition. I instantly teared up and swept him into a massive hug. I was crying proud-teacher tears while I gushed at how much he was going to love Nashville and college.



I asked what helped shape his decision; he told me that being on the Vanderbilt campus "just felt right." He spoke of how the coaches never pressured him, but stressed that he should take his time to make the right decision for his future.

It's not the lure of fame on game day, the dream of an SEC title, or even a possible future in the NFL that drew Rajaan to becoming a Commodore. He was moved by men who respected him as more than just an athlete. He was moved by men who saw a focused student and a family man. Those things moved him because he knew that when the cheering stopped, when the stadium cleared and the lights dimmed, he would be more than a football player. He felt genuinely cared for just as he truly cared for others.

As we talked that day in the hallway outside my classroom, I looked at the shirt that he wore so proudly. It was one of the many that his mother had made for him with iron-on pictures of himself in various football moves. But the beauty of this particular shirt was how it blended his current life as a high school star with a huge varsity-style black and gold "V" that represented his future. He was so intensely proud of that shirt and supremely confident in his future.

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There's no more writing of how he died because how he lived is much more powerful. He lived to love his family, his community and his school; and we loved him right back because it was so easy.

His No. 5 McEachern High School jersey was officially retired before an adoring crowd on Sept. 3, 2010, and a bronzed plaque emblazoned with Rajaan's likeness rests on a carved-stone podium outside the field house of his alma mater's Cantrell Stadium. He would have thought that nice, but it would have thrilled him more that his Indians beat the number two team in the state that night, the day before he was to begin his collegiate career by playing his first game as a Commodore.

When I think of Rajaan Bennett, I am sad that he won't accomplish his dreams, but I find comfort in knowing that he was always true to himself and personified Emerson's "Self-Reliance." Because of that, he impacted countless lives.

It's an odd pairing--a transcendentalist and a football standout--but Emerson's sensible words are as powerful as Rajaan's gridiron moves. "We pity him no more, but thank and revere him,--and that teacher shall restore the life of man to splendor, and make his name dear to all history."





## **"Strength" by Rajaan Bennett**

Rajaan wrote this essay in his Multi-Cultural Literature class on February 10, 2010.

***Somebody once told me that, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Life hasn't been a walk in the park for me, but I'm thankful for the obstacles, hardships, and accomplishments that GOD has provided for me. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be the Rajaan Bennett that you know today. I wouldn't have things any other way.***

***Strength is the ability to do or bear things in the state of being strong.***

***In the year of 2000, I moved from the streets of Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, to the suburbs of Powder Springs, Georgia. A year later, my dad died in a horrible car wreck, and as a ten year-old, I knew he wasn't coming back. This tragedy rattled me to the core. I felt as if there was no need for me to live. I wanted to be as happy as the kids with dads and moms.***

***Some days I would wonder - why me? But eventually, I realized that it was my turn to become a man. As I became older, I came to notice that in life you use strength as a blanket to protect you from this cold world.***

***I am the oldest of 3 and I have a brother with special needs who I have to take care of. I have to balance school, sports, friends, and family - and it gets so hard, but I push myself. I push myself like a sprinter who is neck and neck with an opponent with 10 meters left. With the strength that I posses, I feel like I'm Hercules.***

***I matured faster than all of my friends - and there will never be a time that I will give up. I may complain, I may refuse, and I may even cry about it, but I know I have to do what I have to do.***

***I work hard at whatever I do - just for that man upstairs to smile down on me with the rays of the sun ...and they feel so warm. My drive cannot be stopped or even slowed down, because every obstacle has a way around it. Every day I become stronger from the weights physically, the books mentally, and life emotionally.***

***There is no limit to my strength and at the end of the day, I want to be known as the strongest.***