

Howard Returns After Trials and Tribulations

Three-year Absence for Former Top HSU Recruit Teaches Life Lessons

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David Howard was at the crossroads in the summer of 2011. One path led to destruction, and the other path led to life.

He already had been on the road to ruin for three years. A weakness for the party life gradually took control, beginning upon his arrival at Humboldt State in fall of 2008. Two years later he flunked out of school, lost his basketball scholarship and then became homeless.

But in June of 2011 he found himself face to face with his grandmother, Mavis Thames, in Chicago.

Grandma was dumbfounded by the chain of events in David's life. "Why are you out of school," she asked. "Why are you not going to attend school next semester?"

David didn't even tell her about the last four months when he had bounced from one friend's couch to another, successfully avoiding life on the streets, but never having a place he could call home except for a garage where a friend let him stay.

"She was the one who made me open my eyes back to the gifts that I was given," Howard said. "It was an eye opener for me. What am I doing? I'm living in a garage!?! We got to talk about life habits. She directed me back to where I started, which was focus on my life with God at the forefront."

One would think that after three years of fast and loose living, the transition back to being a good citizen would take time. That was not the case for Howard.

"Everything changed in that moment I talked with my grandma," Howard said. "It all flipped. I was sitting in my dad's house in Chicago that night, crying, just thinking of all the stuff that happened the last couple of years, and how far I fell from where



David Howard's 20 points per game lead the team and are second in the CCAA.

I was and to where I was at that moment."

How far had he fallen?

He arrived at Humboldt State in the fall of 2008 as a scholarship student-athlete — the top recruit for the men's basketball team after four years as a standout at the Army Navy Academy in Carlsbad, Calif., near San Diego.

"He was special," said HSU head basketball coach Steve Kinder who was the assistant coach at the time. Kinder was the one who recruited Howard. "When you first see David play, he is unique in the way he gets shots off so quickly. From the time he pivots and triple threats, the moment the ball releases from his hand is special. His quickness off the shot is special. Watching him in high school, I knew then we had a special player. He can shoot off balance, he can shoot off the bounce, and he can shoot over the top of another player."

While Howard showed some

promise on the basketball court, there seemed to be something holding him back.

"He was free, free at last," said Tom Wood who was the HSU head coach at the time. "I think he wasn't ready to handle the freedom. He didn't do very well in classes. And by his second year with us he was into the idea that he was going to make music. It got to the point that everything else was secondary, including classes and including basketball."

"It was a lot of partying," Howard said of his gradual demise. "It was an experience, to say the least. Those two years taught me some lessons."

But he didn't learn those lessons immediately.

Making music, as Coach Wood said, had indeed come to the forefront of Howard's life. After posting substandard grades at the end of his sophomore year, he lost his basketball scholarship. He half-heartedly

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returned to HSU in the fall of 2010 to try to climb out of academic probation, but eventually withdrew from all his classes.

"I traveled a lot that year for music, up and down the coast of California. Just recording and meeting new people," Howard said. "I made 185 songs that year. But with the life of a musician came parties, girls, parties, girls and drugs. That just kept going until I hit the wall."

When he used up his financial aid early in the Spring 2011 semester, Howard again withdrew from all his classes. With no money, he could no longer afford rent. At first he didn't seem too concerned about his new lifestyle of moving from one friend's couch to another. He rationalized that it was less of a burden because he didn't have to come up with money for rent or utilities.

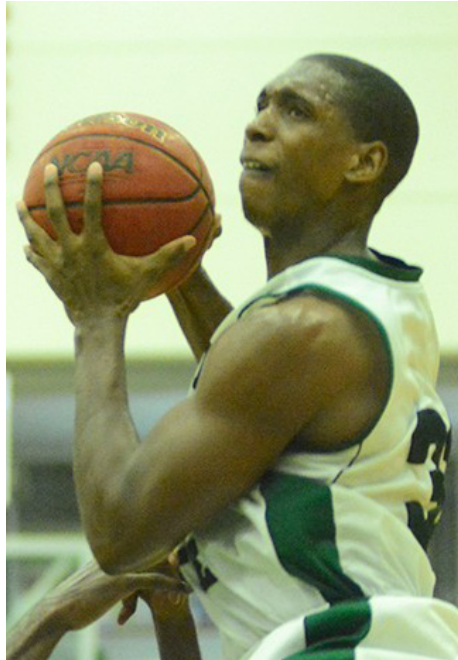
"I was just going from place to place. I was a travelin' man with a bag in my hand. My hobo sack," Howard said. "I was always blessed with somebody to help me out. Always. But being homeless was the biggest low point to learn from."

Then came the epiphany with his grandma that summer.

"The rest of that summer all I did was read the Bible and play basketball. And eat and sleep now and then," Howard said.

"I'm in Virginia at my mom's house," Howard recalled. He had spent the nights that week praying for a wife, knowing that he needed someone to help him in his restored calling to academics and basketball. "And I knew I wouldn't be able to be successful if I was running around frivolously chasing women," he said.

He had been talking fairly regularly with Jasmine Smith but did not see her as wife material because he believed she was out of his league. They had met when Howard was a freshman at HSU almost three years



earlier.

"I wouldn't hang out with him every day because we were doing different things," Jasmine said. "He hung out with the boys and partied."

Then came a day that summer when a personal and powerful experience would forever change Howard's world. It was part Outer Limits and part burning bush.

"It's sunny. It's super sunny," Howard said. "The birds are flying around, whistling. It's a great day. I sit on the back porch. This is nice! All of a sudden the TV starts to make the storm watch sound."

The screeching alert noise indicates a bad storm is coming. Then all the power goes off in the house. Howard goes outside, and it's still sunny. He thinks maybe God is trying to send him a message.

"I'm getting scared because there is a storm watch but no storm," Howard said. "I get out my Bible and read some out of Proverbs, things about what a king is supposed to do and not do. Then it starts thundering. The thundering gets louder. I go back to reading a different part of Proverbs. Then there is a huge cloud over the house, thunder and lightning, lightning crackling across the sky."

With each crack of lightning, Howard is motivated to try a different part of Proverbs. He reads chapter 31:

"A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. Her husband is respected at the city gates. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised."

Only one person came to Howard's mind.

"It was really weird. I could see it in my head: Jasmine. And, I was like, 'hrhuh?' And the TV comes on. And the lights came back on. And it went back to being sunny. It was powerful. It was amazing. That night I started to talking to her more, piling it on."

On his birthday on July 27, Howard gave himself a present. He called Jasmine's mom and asked permission to date her.

He had found his companion. But he still had a ways to go.

At the time he did not know what it would take to get back into the good graces of Humboldt State as a student or as a basketball player. If he knew the road ahead of him, he may have had second thoughts.

First, he had to figure out how to get back into Humboldt State. Then he had to figure out how to become eligible again for basketball. And he definitely wanted to figure out how to get out of that garage.

In August of 2011 he met with Coach Kinder who was now the head coach. Kinder directed Howard to talk to the compliance officer who mapped out a plan.

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“I just followed it bit by bit by bit,” Howard said. “I chopped away at it. By following the plan, I made sure I was putting myself in the position to do what I wanted to do.”

It was a two-year plan — one year at the local junior college as a part-time student to earn the right to get re-admitted to HSU, and another year at HSU as a part-time student to raise his GPA. The plan did not address how to make ends meet financially.

Howard started doing odd jobs to earn money so that he could get out of the garage and into an apartment. Odd jobs like setting up chicken coops, grass patches, gardening, pulling blackberries, staining and resurfacing decks. All while taking 11 units at College of the Redwoods.

“I remember how hard he worked,” said Jasmine. “We both went to CR together. It was inspiring to me, because I have been up and down with school myself. I remember how hard he worked, and he got

really good grades.”

By January of 2012 he had enough money to move out of the garage, and he had a successful academic semester behind him, too. Spring brought more academic success, and he was reinstated to Humboldt State for Fall of 2012.

And he still had to go through the hard part.

Being a student at Humboldt State was much more expensive than the junior college. That meant getting a full-time job while going to school. The couple that had hired him for most of his odd jobs — Joe and Nancy Wheeler — put in a good word for him at Timber Ridge, a local adult care facility. Howard was hired in August of 2012.

“I worked from 10 at night until 6 in the morning with class at 8,” Howard said. “Class goes until 1 or 3. Every now and then I would try to play basketball. Everything is a blur from that year because there was hardly any time for sleep. There had to be time for eating and doing

homework. Sometimes I would get four hours of sleep before waking up at 9 p.m. to take Jasmine to work, then go to work myself. There were many days I didn’t sleep.”

Howard worked at the Timber Ridge facility in McKinleyville, just north of Humboldt State, while Jasmine also worked at Timber Ridge, but at the Eureka location. They were caregivers.

“Taking people to the bathroom. Changing people. Cleaning up after them. Moving around those who were bedridden,” Howard recalled some of the duties. “Make sure they are comfortable. Bathe them. Lift up their heads. Feed some of them. Clean all the bathrooms. Give out medication. Respond to patient’s call buttons. Write reports. Make sure all the meds are accounted for. It was kind of a lot. I would play basketball every now and then and went to school during the day. It was tough.”

“Then on top of that,” Jasmine said, “we’re still trying to make it to church on Sunday morning. We were so tired.” They attend Faith Center in Eureka.

“One sermon Pastor Matt (Messer) was talking about falling asleep on the job. And I could not stay awake for it,” Howard said.

One reason why Howard was able to survive the crazy schedule is that he had survived four years of crazy schedules at Army Navy Academy where he attended high school. The Academy is a military boarding school for boys.

It’s a school where Howard got up at 6 o’clock in the morning, put on a particular uniform to go to mess hall, then came back to change into his work clothes to do chores before school. Then it was time to change uniforms again to go to school. When he was finished with school, he got into practice gear for basketball. After practice, it was back into work clothes to do more chores. Then study hall, and then sleep.

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Howard was selected with two others to be in the pilot program to bring inner city youth from Chicago to the Academy in Carlsbad, Calif. The other two students went home the first week. It was a tough transition, and Howard was thinking he should go home, too.

"It was shellshock," Howard said. "It was a school of strict structure. When I was leaning toward leaving, Major Marshall told me this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. He said, 'If you leave this, what are you going to do? What are you going back to? Don't let this be one of the things you regret. One of the failures where you could have succeeded.' That conversation made me decide to stay."

"He was there all four years," Kinder said. "He had a great, productive, four-year athletic experience at Army Navy Academy. He was a prolific scorer and rebounder for their team."

Howard had other basketball scholarship offers besides Humboldt State. Long Beach State, Cal State Dominguez Hills and others were visiting him and offering official visits to their campus.

"Coach K (Kinder) came down to see me, and that was the first visit that I had from a college coach. I had other coaches come down, but he was the first one. Then in February I came up to Humboldt for a visit. Of all the places I've ever been, and I've been to a lot of places, at Humboldt everybody is across-the-board genuine. They either love you or hate you. It's not fickle. It's real. That stood out to me. That's where I wanted to be."

Kinder remembers Howard in his Academy days as a well-mannered young man.

"He would look you in the eye, shake your hand firmly, and it was 'yes sir' and 'no sir.' I thought we were getting not only a terrific, prolific player, but we were getting a structured individual who was a polished, mature young man at the time. Com-



ing here with the liberties and freedom of Humboldt and our culture here, he got sidetracked for sure."

Howard was part of a stellar freshman class for the HSU basketball team. Kyle Baxter and DJ Broome were the other freshmen. Both played four years for the Jacks, including two with Howard. Broome is now an assistant coach for the team.

"Coming in with D How, he was definitely different than the group as far as his confidence," Broome remembered. "He was still kind of wild in a lot of ways, but I don't think there was anyone close to him with his skill set. He definitely had some maturing and mindsets to fix before he was going to see the court a lot."

One practice in particular still stands out for both Coach Kinder and Coach Wood in regards to Howard's maturity level during his early tenure with the Jacks.

"We're practicing at Halloween time," Wood remembered. "Dave's flighty. Sometimes you never know what he's going to do. I don't know if it was because he was high or because he was a knucklehead. We're at practice, and I'm looking around. I look at Dave, and he has kaleidoscope contact lenses on. There was nothing serious about him being at practice. I was trying to get us ready

to play someone. I told him, 'Get out of here.'"

"This is a college basketball practice, one of the first practices of the year," Kinder said. "And he is showing up silly. That's not what we do here. That was a sign of immaturity at the time."

Howard's side of the story?

"I was thinking the contacts would make me look fierce, help me to psych out the other team," Howard said. "I wanted to see if I could practice in them, because I'm not going to wear them in games if I can't see in them. It wasn't geared toward looking cool. I wanted to scare the other team. I'm glad Coach Wood made me take them out, because I'm sure I would have scared more than just the other team. Another learning experience."

Howard showed flashes of brilliance in those two years, mostly in his freshman year. He led the team in scoring twice and in rebounding four times. He scored 18 against CSU San Bernardino when he was 7 of 9 with three 3-pointers and nine rebounds. He started seven games his freshman year but did not start any his sophomore year.

"As a basketball player in those days, he was always flighty," Wood said. "He looked good sometimes, but then he did things that just killed you. He was on fast forward a lot."

"I was young and inexperienced to the college game," Howard said. "But my mental state was locked in and ready to go my freshman year. But my sophomore year I got injured and out of the rotation. So I wasn't quite as focused. More of the life of partying took its control in my life."

With the party life came the bad grades, the loss of the basketball scholarship and the homelessness.

"It was all supposed to happen. I learned so much about life. I am indebted to those years," Howard said. "The guy that came here freshman and sophomore year needed to be

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redeemed. He needed to be put to the test. I am wiser now in basketball and in music and in life.”

Howard worked at Timber Ridge for a year. In that time and with his near sleepless schedule, he changed his major to music and was able to pass the necessary classes to restore his GPA above a 2.0 and become eligible again for basketball. He was welcomed back with open arms and a scholarship by Coach Kinder last August.

At first it appeared that Howard would have to sit out the fall semester from basketball in order to re-establish his progress toward degree. But a rarely used NCAA two-year non-participation exception made him immediately eligible. In fact it was the first time that exception had ever been used at Humboldt State for a returning student-athlete.

He and Jasmine were married on August 10.

Howard has made the most of his return to the basketball court. He is scoring 20 points a game (second in the California Collegiate Athletic Association) and pulling down 6.9 rebounds per game. His points per game (44th) and field goals made (20th) are among the nation’s leaders for Division II.

“He’s uncanny at how he can find a shot, how he can create a shot, and his consistency in making shots,” Kinder said. “He’s at the top of the conference. He’s a tough cover. He’s a nightmare for the opponent. I wouldn’t want to play against him.

Teams double team, triple team him, take away his catch areas, yet he still finds himself with the ball and makes spectacular shots. He is the real deal.”

“He is a survivor,” said Coach Wood. “He has definitely turned himself around. I’m proud of him. From the seat I have now, I see he is in control. Once in a while he gets out of sync, but most of the time he is reliable and trustworthy. I would not have used that term to describe him in the first two years, trustworthy.”



David and Jasmine were married on Aug. 10, 2013

“He is proof that you can get out of those dark pits and get back on the right track,” Broome said. “Now he’s married. It seems that everything is rolling in the right direction. He put in the work, so he deserves it. It’s easy to get lost and lose that determination when something bad happens. I have had other teammates who have things happen to them, and they never come back. But D How has come back and been such a positive influence on the team. He is the unspoken leader. The guys look up to him a lot.”

“I’m trying to be as good a leader as I can,” Howard said. “That’s not saying that I’ve been doing a good job as a leader. It’s just saying that

I’m making those strides to get better at that.”

With all the newness — a new team, a new wife, a new outlook — comes challenges, as well.

“Time and time again there are times where Jasmine and I say, dude, I just want to give up. In those times Jesus is the topic that comes up. You think about what you’re going through compared to what he went through, and the last statement of the conversation is always this: ‘It’s not supposed to be easy.’ “

“What I’m so grateful for is how our relationship started,” Jasmine said. “It started with God. That’s what keeps us together.”

“I will never be back to where I was,” Howard said. “There is an expectation for me. I try to continue to meet that expectation. Or continue to go higher than that expectation every time I

step on the court or in the classroom or talk to my wife. Or make as song or write out a part-writing for my theory class. I try to keep pushing because I know if I don’t, everything will fall back out of place.”