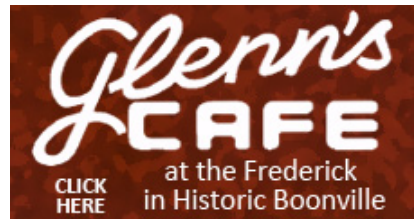


MIZZOU

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Shane comes back

One student's odyssey

Story by Marcus Wilkins | Photos by Nicholas Benner

Eight years ago in America's high desert, amid the tumbleweeds and roadrunners, a lanky seventh-grade boy with an affinity for sports writing eschewed lunch hour for a date with destiny. As his schoolmates skipped into the thin air of the Sierra Blanca Mountains, he remained inside to take his teacher's advice. He Googled the words "top journalism schools," and a few clicks later, he was sold. In his mind, the 13-year-old was already a True Son.

More daunting than the 950-plus miles separating his Ruidoso, N.M., home from Columbia was the financial, academic and personal odyssey before him. With two brothers and a single mother living on government subsidies and food stamps, he would need to be resourceful to leave New Mexico after high school. He would need unshakable optimism and a winning personality. He would need steadfast faith.

Fortunately for Shane Hoffman, he had all those things and more.

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Most of Shane's 22 years divide neatly into thirds. The middle child of triplets (fraternal brother Cody is two minutes older; identical brother Dillon is 28 minutes younger), Shane has always shared birthday gifts, socks and bedrooms.

The Hoffmans are the only triplets in the history of Ruidoso, and they grew up somewhere between celebrity and anonymity. They sing three-part harmony, duel bitterly at rock-paper-scissors and at 6-foot-6, 6-foot-5 and 6-foot-3, form a formidable frontcourt.

"When I was pregnant, I had a sonogram, and I saw three images," says mother Dawn

Hoffman. “One was dancing, one was singing, and one was on his knees like a preacher.”

But the boys found out that individuality comes at a premium when you’re a triplet, even when most residents in a town of about 8,000 know your name.

“I didn’t want to apply to any other school because any other school wouldn’t have been my dream school,” Shane says.

“It’s completely unfair when people box us in and say, ‘That’s the athletic one,’ or ‘That’s the academic one,’ ” Dillon says.

Shane discovered a gift for public speaking through the encouragement of Diorly Stierwalt, his eighth-grade English teacher and Optimist Oratorical Competition coach. All three brothers are solid students, but for college, mom wouldn’t be able to foot the bill.

“We grew four inches and three shoe sizes a year for four straight years,” Shane says. “Keeping up with that would be a burden for anyone.”

After graduating in 2006 from high school, Cody and Dillon followed scholarships to New Mexico State University in Las Cruces and Willamette University in Salem, Ore., respectively.

Shane applied to Mizzou — and only Mizzou.

His grades were solid, and he was accepted in 2005. But his score of 26 on the ACT fell just short of qualifying him for almost every out-of-state scholarship. He could have remained in-state, but he stayed his course.



Listen to two of Shane Hoffman’s KBIA-FM radio features, both of which won regional awards for journalistic excellence.



The Hoffmans, from left, Dillon, Dawn, Cody, grandfather Roy, Shane and grandmother Elayne, gathered for this photo in December 2009 in their Ruidoso, N.M., hometown.

“I didn’t want to apply to any other school because any other school wouldn’t have been my dream school,” Shane says.

Yet he had no driver’s license, hadn’t even visited Mizzou and might have arrived on campus sight unseen had it not been for the generosity of another teacher’s husband, who purchased him a plane ticket to MU for spring break 2005.

After visiting, he loved it. The next year, his guidance counselor drove Shane cross-country to start college. He arrived with \$18,000 in loans and a new pair of black-and-gold size 16½ Adidas. His shared room in Hudson Hall was the largest personal space he’d ever inhabited.

“To tell you the truth, I thought I was going to live in Jesse Hall,” Shane says. “When we first drove up, I remember thinking, I really want that room in the dome where the light is.”

Shane hit the ground running. After his first semester, a 4.0 GPA gave him the confidence to approach Brian Brooks, associate dean of the School of Journalism, and ask for financial assistance. Brooks offered Shane a scholarship with the proviso that he maintain a 3.5 GPA. He came through with a 3.8, and he landed a summer job in 2006 as a gas station attendant in Kansas City, Mo., where he lived with a high school teacher’s sister and brother-in-law.

Now a Missouri resident, he applied to become a Residential Life peer adviser in Cramer Hall. Shane felt like a sultan with his room and board provided; he subtracted \$8,000 from his college expenses.

“He came here on a wing and a prayer,” Brooks says. “He’s been dogged in the pursuit of his degree. This is not a word I use often when it comes to students, but I admire this kid.”

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When Shane went home for Christmas 2008, things couldn’t have been better. All three brothers were enjoying collegiate success, and Dawn was living at a Ruidoso cabin resort where she was a full-time office employee. For the first time in their lives, the Hoffman family had comfortable digs with a little legroom.

But over break, Dillon learned his mom was about to be laid off. Because the cabin was part of her compensation, the family would be homeless.



At the KBIA studio, Mizzou's National Public Radio affiliate, Hoffman, a senior broadcast major, edits audio commentary for one of his stories.

"It was a big turning point for me because I'm someone who likes to plan ahead," Shane says. "When you don't have a home to come back to, you can't think like that because there are so many questions."

Back at Mizzou, Shane continued to excel. In Professor Greeley Kyle's notoriously challenging Broadcast 2 class, Shane earned an A+ despite being limited to Columbia without a car. Other students typically travel to Jefferson City and various Missouri locations for stories.

Several months later, another bomb dropped. Cody received a MySpace message from a woman claiming to be one of his three half-sisters — daughters from the triplets' estranged father's first marriage. With no prior knowledge of his sisters' existence, Shane called 29-year-old Jessica.

"I said, 'Hi. My name is Shane Hoffman. I'm apparently your half-brother, and I've known this for exactly 30 seconds,'" Shane says. Jessica shrieked with joy. She and 25-year-old sister Megan had been searching for the triplets for 15 years.

When the subject of the boys' absent father inevitably came up, Jessica revealed that he had terminal liver cancer, among other health problems.

Again, Shane wasted little time reaching out. In November 2009, he said a quick prayer and called his father, Doug Newell, for the first time.

"In a Southern drawl, he answered, 'Now why is someone calling me from New Mexico?'"

"Because this is your son, Shane."

They made awkward small talk. In subsequent conversations, the Vietnam War veteran admitted to drug use and alcoholism when the triplets were young. He explained that he

initially demanded the boys take the Newell name, but with six child payments on a mailman's salary, he relented. He apologized to Shane, heaped praise on his son for his articulate manner of speech and berated himself profusely.

The son then unexpectedly thanked his father for making what Shane calls "the right choice" back in 1990.

"We were spared from a life torn between two parents," Shane says. "To grow up in a close, loving family, we could have had all the money in the world, and I wouldn't be the same person I am today."

"He came here on a wing and a prayer," Brooks says. "He's been dogged in the pursuit of his degree. This is not a word I use often when it comes to students, but I admire this kid."

On the other end of the line, Doug Newell cried.

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Until fall 2009, Shane had never had an out-of-town guest visit him in Columbia. So he saved up his dining hall meals, bought his mom a plane ticket and scored some Mizzou-Nebraska football tickets. He wanted to make sure she wouldn't have to spend a dime as a guest in his Mark Twain Hall double room. It was the ultimate Mizzou vacation.

"When I came here and saw that everyone knew him and all his teachers wanted to meet me, I was the one who felt like a real celebrity," Dawn says, laughing.

But it's the relentless Shane Hoffman who has become one of the most recognizable undergraduates at MU.

On Feb. 21, 2010, he was named to the Mizzou '39, a Mizzou Alumni Association honor that recognizes outstanding seniors for their academics, leadership and talent. Five days later, Shane, his mother and Cody sat with Chancellor Brady J. Deaton at the banquet.

"The story of the university and the School of Journalism was inspiring to him," Deaton says. "He formulated a goal and remained committed to it even through circumstances that would have ordinarily led someone down a very different path."

On April 8, Shane became one of 20 McNair Scholars, a program that helps first-generation college students pursue a post-graduate education. So far, Shane has managed to pay off more than \$16,000 in loans and has kept his bank account balance above zero.

In November 2009, Newell told Shane he had received a 100 percent disability rating from the federal government, which made his son eligible for funding



As a peer adviser in Mark Twain Hall, Hoffman

that alleviated most of his remaining college debt. Now he's having second thoughts about his path toward sports journalism in favor of teaching, although he certainly appreciates having options.

raised \$650 to fund 250 "finals bags" for students studying for exams. Here, he and hall coordinator Laura Denlinger distribute the goodies.

"In some ways, I feel my funds in college have been like the biblical feeding of the 5,000," Shane says, referring to the New Testament story in which Jesus feeds the multitude with only seven loaves and fishes.

As for his family situation, relationships are still forming as father, sons and sisters get to know one another. On Dec. 29, 2009, Jessica gave birth to Noah, making the triplets uncles. On July 6, 2010, in San Antonio, the boys met their father, two sisters and nephew for the first time. The family ate Mexican food, went bowling and did a lot of talking. After a five-day visit, Shane returned to Columbia with a greater appreciation for his serendipitous life at Mizzou.

Shane says he hopes his story convinces students and parents that, even in a down economy, you can pursue your dreams. With his McNair Scholarship, the post-graduate world is his oyster. But he'll probably stick close to the Columns.

"Love is the strongest word in the English language," Shane says. "But it doesn't come close to the way I feel about Mizzou."

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