

Leonard Hamilton: A Coach vs. Cancer

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Leonard Hamilton doesn't get emotional too often. At least not publicly.

But at the end of a recent practice inside the Tucker Civic Center, sitting on the baseline, the Florida State head coach began to cry.

It was a memory from five years ago. It was of love. And death. And family.

A memory most of us can relate to. Because almost everyone has been or will be affected by cancer. It takes people close to us. It takes them away. And what we're left with are the memories.

Hamilton, who reached out this season to partner with the American Cancer Society (including being a part of the Coaches vs. Cancer 3-Point Challenge for the first time) has lost four members of his immediate family to the disease.

His father in 1999 at the age of 76. His mom in 2013 at the age of 95. His youngest brother, Barry, in 2010 at the age of 54 and brother Willie in 2012 at the age of 57.

Hamilton isn't a person who normally opens up about his personal life, but during a recent interview, the veteran head coach talked about the disease that has impacted his family so deeply.

"My brothers always told me they were getting physical exams, and we always encouraged them," said 68-year-old Hamilton. "But the kind of exams they were getting were not the thorough ones. So when my brother Barry got (diagnosed with lung cancer), it was almost right at stage 4. It was right there."

Hamilton pauses for a second, thinking about his little brother and what he went through at the end. He talks about how Barry visited him for 17 straight holiday seasons. He would come for Thanksgiving week. Then come back for the week of Christmas and stay through the New Year.

Barry wanted to be with his big brother, sure. But the relationship was even more than that.

"When I graduated college I adopted (Barry and Willie) and I adopted my sister, Pam," Hamilton said. "I was very fortunate at that time to get some direction. God has blessed me. And it hurts me more because even though I was not much older than them they were like my children."

Children that passed away much too soon.

Hamilton's dad lived into his 70s and his mom into her 90s.

"She had a wonderful life," he said.

When Willie was diagnosed late in 2011 there was no real hope for recovery or remission. It had started in his prostate but spread over his body.

“He realized he was at that stage,” Hamilton said. “And the doctors told him that he needed to try to enjoy the days he had left.”

A long pause.

“And the one request he had was he wanted to spend some time with me.”

Another pause.

“All the things he wanted to do with his life and at that moment he just wanted to be with me.”

One more pause.

“I get emotional every time I think about it.”

Willie died on March 28, 2012.

But before that, he got to spend some time with his big brother.

And that’s why a smile slowly spreads across Hamilton’s face. Because the memory isn’t over.

Willie just happened to be in the arena on Jan. 14, 2012, when No. 3 North Carolina came to town to face the underdog Seminoles.

It will forever be known as the “Deividas Dulkys game” by FSU fans, but for the head coach, it will always be remembered for something else.

After the win, as the team celebrated and high-fived Dulkys for his 32-point performance, Willie was right there with them in the locker room.

He was right there with his big brother.

Clapping and laughing.

And giving Leonard Hamilton a memory he can hold on to for the rest of his life.