

Passionate purpose

How Jeff Battcher found his path to happiness

By **Hannah Jett Moore** | Photography by **Matt Odom**

The quote Jeff Battcher has at the end of his e-mail speaks volumes about the person he is. “A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives.” It’s a quote from Jackie Robinson, the man who broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball.

And it’s the walk Jeff walks. Not for attention, and surely not for approval from others, but for the benefit and well being of those who are in need. When Jeff was growing up, you could say he was in need, too. He had a vast void in his life as a child, and that vacancy was happiness.

If you took a snapshot of Jeff at this very moment, he’s probably working on something that benefits someone else. And smiling. He is joyously and tenaciously enthusiastic, but he wasn’t always that way. In fact, he only attributes his new outlook on life to the last 10 years. Jeff grew up in east Macon, in a broken family and always had a sense of searching.

“My dad left when I was about 7, and my mom struggled to find work. My childhood was not happy at all, and I think that affects me to this day of wanting to be so happy and make others happy,” he said.

He’s done that by planting seeds where he wants to see ideas or projects grow. He has the tone and infectiously intense and inspiring attitude you want to see in the dugout or on the sideline,

but here’s the catch: He’s not a coach. Helping others is simply his life’s call. Some attribute success to a sense of fulfillment, but Jeff’s gratification comes from making sure that others’ futures are full of opportunities.

“Sports got me through my childhood,” Jeff said, while reminiscing about his time at Northeast High School. Darryl Jones, his head football coach at Northeast, went to Stratford Academy and took Jeff with him, which obviously turned out well. Jeff will be inducted into the Stratford Academy Athletic Hall of Fame this October.

“I mean, I didn’t know what Stratford was, I thought, ‘isn’t that a college?’” he said with chuckle. “It was a completely different way of life. But that molded me into who I am today.”

A couple of years ago, he gave a speech at the senior send off during commencement ceremonies weekend at the University of Utah. Jeff had attended college there and lettered in football and baseball. He talked about his path to happiness.

“My whole childhood, I didn’t want to be an astronaut or a professional football player. I just wanted to be happy. That’s all I ever wished for. Every candle that I blew out, every star that fell from the sky, I thought, can I just be happy?” What an answer he’s gotten.

He went on to receive his Bachelor of Arts degree in Business Communications from Mercer

University. He was the sports director and anchor at Macon television station WGXA in the late 1980s and early ‘90s. But his course took a prominent turn when he joined company executives atop the corporate ladder.

CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER

He was with top companies like BellSouth and Delta, where he led the companies’ global public relations. He couldn’t have strategically planned what would happen next, though.

“When I was with Delta, that’s when I thought I was happiest. I was riding on the plane with the CEO and going all over the world,” he said. Then, former CEO Richard Anderson fired him.

“I thought ‘this is the happiest I can ever be. All of the sudden, I get fired. I’m like me? ‘You’re kidding?’”

“My wife, Janet, called it the ‘year of Jeff.’ With guaranteed first-class travel in my departure package from Delta, I went everywhere. I went to Greece; China for the Olympics, and more, but it was during that time, through my travels, that it really sunk in. What makes me happy is helping others, more than anything else. That’s when I started formulating my plan of coming back to Macon full time. I was laying the groundwork. The epitome of getting fired was ‘stuff,’ didn’t matter,” he said.

“The simplicity of what I asked for as a kid has helped, and I’ve gone through my life looking for happiness,” he said.



He's found happiness at a basic level – having gas in his car and being able to go to the grocery store. Things we all take for granted.

“I still think that's one the greatest places on earth,” he said of the grocery store. “How lucky we are to be able to go in and buy pretty much whatever we want. I genuinely appreciate all of the very simple things in life, and that's what's made me so happy and all of the things I am.”

Jeff is very dedicated to his efforts around the community. He champions organizations at a grassroots level and helps paint the broader picture. He has an “if not now, when? If not me, then who?” mentality that spills over into his everyday life. Jeff may be ordinary in his hopes for a better world, but he is extraordinary in his efforts to make it happen.

“I've always said, what's the sense in me having these resources and connections if I'm not willing to share them?” he said.

HUMBLE AND ENERGETIC

Among his current responsibilities, he sits on the board of directors of the Otis Redding Foundation.

“Jeff is an extremely humble and energetic person,” said the foundation's executive director, Karla Redding-Andrews. “He is passionate about the causes he stands for in his community and works every day to make sure they remain relevant.

“He never expects to be recognized for any of his efforts. He only wants people to know the importance of supporting the causes he holds near and dear to his heart.”

He also sits on the boards of the Macon Sports Hall of Fame, the Robert McDuffie Center for Strings at Mercer University and Central Georgia C.A.R.E.S. He is a member of the Macon Sports Hall of Fame, and the co-founder and president of AIM Sports Reputation Management. His involvement doesn't stop there. He also champions Daybreak Macon, an organization that works with Macon's homeless population. With his

help, Daybreak raised \$86,500 dollars at its sleep-out fundraiser in February.

In fact, he's been asked to join the Depaul USA national board. Depaul USA has homeless initiatives in six U.S. cities, including Macon. He's very excited to be able to help in cities such as Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia and St. Louis. He's also excited about the USA board being invited to go with the Depaul international board to meet the Pope in October.

“Can you believe a guy like me is meeting the Pope?” he said.

It all feeds into his wanting to provide hope and opportunity in future generations who were also searching for happiness; those who face challenges many of us can't imagine.

“I'm the kid I'm trying to help. I'm always looking at how I felt and the people who helped me along the way like my Little League baseball coach Vernon Sinclair. I'm always trying to help the kid that I was.” He dedicated his induction speech into the Macon Sports Hall of Fame to Sinclair, one of the most influential people in his life. He also gave the eulogy at his funeral. Since his father left when he was 7, he has always looked up to father figures.

“I remember being at Stratford and Bubber Adams, the baseball coach, before an away trip came up and said, ‘Jeff, I know you don't have a lot of money and we're going on an away trip. If you need anything just let me know.’” Those 30 seconds still move him to this day. Now he's doing the same thing, with the same sport and the same agenda: to use baseball as a way to include, a way to encourage.

He is truly stepping up to the plate for the kid he once was. RBI Macon, which stands for “Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities,” is a youth outreach program designed by Major League Baseball. Locally it operates out of the Tom Fontaine Field complex in west Macon, in an area with a poverty rate among the highest in the state, according to the organization.

MAKING KIDS FEEL LIKE SOMEBODY

The United Way of Central Georgia and Boys & Girls Club of Central



Georgia both played key roles in bringing this positive outlet of softball and baseball programs to Macon, where Jeff is RBI Macon's league administrator and responsible for its inception in the area.

More than 300 boys and girls from ages 6-18 are not merely told, but shown, that they are not forgotten about.

Nationwide, RBI serves 260,000 young people, and in the program's 26-year history, more than 200 players have been drafted by MLB teams. Jeff's vision is not necessarily about getting kids drafted by professional teams. It's about being able to go somewhere and have someone that makes them feel like a somebody.

The organization's vision for 2017 is to improve drastically upon the two existing fields, and with assistance from the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation, the Bibb County Board of Education, the United Way of Central Georgia, Macon-Bibb County government and the Macon

Boys & Girls Club of Central Georgia, build an all-purpose sports field. Jeff is bound and determined to see that through.

In 2015, 12 local boys and their coaches made an all-expenses-paid trip to MLB's All-Star Game in Cincinnati, Ohio, as part of the RBI program. The kids had never been out of the Macon.

"I had grandmothers come up to me and say, you know they always thought that college is what other people did, they went to Xavier (University where the kids and coaches were housed during their All-Star trip), and said, 'huh, this is pretty interesting. I'd never seen a college. I'd never seen kids like me going to class.' That experience, might have changed some lives. Again, I'm the kid I'm trying to help," Jeff said.

He was also immensely proud of the impact RBI made on Sasha Norman, who was only one of 12 recipients from around the nation to receive a \$20,000 college scholarship from the "RBI for

RBI Scholarship Fund."

United Way of Central Georgia President & CEO George McCanless jokingly said Jeff is like nitroglycerin.

"In small doses, he can save your life, but in larger amounts, he can blow things up," McCanless said with a laugh. "I think that Major League Baseball found that out. He won't take no for an answer."

Jeff makes no apologies about his persistent and utterly compassionate nature.

"There is nothing more powerful than knowing that you're doing something for somebody who cannot repay you," Jeff said. "What's that old saying? Takers eat well, givers sleep well. I sleep great because every night I go through my head and ask, 'what have I done well today? Who have I helped today? What can I do better tomorrow?'"

Jeff Battcher is proof you'll never strike out by helping others.

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