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Grassroots Giving



Kansas City loves a good sports comeback story.

Quarterback great Len Dawson returning from a leg injury to lead the Kansas City Chiefs to victory in 1969's Super Bowl IV. Hometown favorite George Brett batting .370 in the World Series, including a four-hit performance, to help the Kansas City Royals rally to win the 1985 World Series. Superstar golfer Tom Watson being the oldest man to have the lead after any round of a major championship at the 2009 Open at Turnberry; he played a stellar game, even though he lost the legendary event by six strokes.

There's one poignant and compelling Kansas City comeback victory that began on July 7, 1991, and is still in motion today. The incident happened hundreds of miles away, off a playing field, on a dark street in Dallas and didn't involve athletic prowess, the roar of fans in the stands or the hope of breaking a long-standing sports record.

What started as one human's desire to aid fellow humans in distress went terribly wrong that hot summer evening as 41-year-old MLB umpire Steve Palermo, in Dallas to call a Texas Rangers game, and another man intervened in the mugging of two waitresses. Steve is humble about his role of trying to be a Good Samaritan and emerging a hero.

"There was no phone booth in the restaurant that night," says Steve. "We reacted quickly when we heard those women were in trouble. We weren't thinking about headlines."

The mugger's bullet that nicked the baseball umpire's spinal cord and came within a breathtaking millimeter of severing an artery forever changed Steve, a brilliant career and a five-month marriage to the love of his life, Debbie.

“The shooting was a metaphor for ‘richer and poorer,’” says Steve. “Debbie once joked there wasn’t anything about me getting shot in our vows. I told her it was in the fine print.”

“Stevie and I had been married such a short time,” says Debbie. “It was definitely not a turn of events I bargained for.”

Doctors plainly told Steve that he wouldn’t walk again. Steve turned a deaf ear to that statement and fortified himself with a superhero’s strength and determination to prove them wrong.

Today Steve walks with the aid of a single cane and a shortened brace following years of grueling physical therapy and a risky 11-and-a-half-hour surgery in 1993. He’s a Major League Umpire Supervisor. He’s an engaging public speaker, weaving a rich tapestry of inspiration, motivation, perseverance, heartbreak, humor and even a bit of romance to describe his personal and very public comeback.

Steve and Debbie, a vivacious and genuine couple who embrace life and all of its challenges, clouds and silver linings, have taken the major curveball of a life-threatening spinal cord injury that hurled him and their relationship into another dimension and translated it into a speed bump. They bundle up the experience, strength and hope acquired in the months and years following the shooting to comfort people in life-altering situations.

“It’s more essential now, post-9/11, to be there for others,” says Steve. “As a society, we’re jaded and sometimes look at other people with suspicion. The good people far outnumber the bad.”

When Steve walked across the stage at the recent American Royal Boots and Barbecue lunch for 800 Kansas City businessmen and women, the audience wasn’t prepared for the former umpire’s soliloquy that concluded his story.

“If the shooter is rehabilitated in prison and released, I would like nothing more than to go around the country and speak to audiences like this with him,” Steve said. “The criminal and his victim in front of a group, showing true consequences for misguided actions.”

The Palermos work behind the scenes with others who have spinal cord injuries, giving them encouragement to face their situation and get back in the game of life. The Steve Palermo Foundation for Spinal Cord Injuries, established in 1991, raised more than \$3 million to help establish a world-class research facility at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center to help fund research projects around the country.

“There’s also the Steve Palermo Nerve Regeneration Laboratory in the Life Sciences Innovation Center at KU Medical Center,” says Debbie. “If we’re going to get involved, we get involved. We don’t just give our name to something and step away.”

Debbie is adamant about the powerful lessons she’s learned throughout her journey with Steve and wants to share those on a more intimate, one-on-one level with people. “If I can say just one thing to someone to make a difference in their life, in their particular situation,” says Debbie, “there’s real purpose in that—if all of us could just help one person.”

The Palermos are familiar faces in charitable fundraising in Kansas City, co-chairing events and often personally visiting a facility that’s the benefactor of their efforts.

Most recently the couple did a 12-hour Larry Stewart Memorial Radiothon (named after KC’s famous Secret Santa who gave away millions) on 610 Sports Radio to raise \$75,000 for the Salvation Army Children’s Shelter, which has helped more than 6,000 area kids in crisis since opening its doors in 1981. Not only were the Palermos on-air for the duration of the fundraiser, they also went to the center where children are cared for who have been removed from their homes due to abuse and/or neglect. The fundraiser brought in \$92,000.

“Debbie and I were so moved when we visited the center,” says Steve. “We know these kids can get on a good path in life, where it’s worth getting up every day.”

“It made a deep impression on us, seeing the children’s faces firsthand,” says Debbie.

Debbie’s grandmother was fond of a rhyme that the couple embraced as a personal measuring stick during Palermo’s tortuous rehabilitation process.

“‘Inch-by-inch, life’s a cinch. Yard-by-yard, life is hard’ was our mantra,” says Debbie. “I share that with people all the time, and it makes a profound impact.”

That is the real epicenter of Steve and Debbie Palermo’s philosophy. Giving back, one person at a time, one day at a time.

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