



IT IS ABOUT WHO YOU KNOW

by Traci Rhoades

The phrase is common, “It’s not what you know, but who you know.” As a young college graduate from rural Missouri, the phrase made me very nervous. For just about all I had was a degree in hand and a few new acquaintances; including a classmate from college, John Sanders. Certainly no one to provide me with a golden opportunity.

John and I met our senior year in college. As communication majors, we had a few classes together. He was intelligent yet a class clown; everyone’s friend yet not someone most girls would consider “boyfriend” material; enjoyed sports yet was artsy as well. One could say John embraced every aspect of life; academics, sports, art, friends and family . . . all that and quite an entertainer.

John was the student manager for our university’s men’s basketball team. I interned with the sports information office. Add to that the three classes we had together, and we saw each other often. In particular, we both had a computer class early mornings twice a week. John didn’t show up much but when he did, we’d see each other there. We also had a photojournalism class together. He did show up to that class, and had his buddy, the school’s sports photographer, help him develop his class photos; which most certainly explains why he got an A and I got a B in the course. Yet, we didn’t run in the same social circles.

College graduation came and went for John and myself.

As we weren't really close friends, we didn't keep in touch. I did hear he'd gotten an internship with a nearby NFL team and was instantly jealous but otherwise, I didn't give him much thought.

Fast forward three years to when I lived in a "big city," hopping from job to job in various public relations/marketing roles. When I encountered John again, I had a position as director of marketing for a financial planning firm. Although I had selected a major in communication so I could enter the sports world, the opportunity didn't afford itself easily, and I took the first decent job offer I could find. It brought me to my current position.

That summer, I attended a wedding of a close friend from high school in my hometown. Also in attendance was a member of my college photojournalism class. We spoke briefly and our conversation naturally matriculated to mutual acquaintances. He spoke of John, who was working for an NCAA athletic conference in the same city where I lived. I got his email address and thought I would just touch base sometime to see how he liked the job and what else John was up to.

When I emailed John, we caught up a little and he invited me to a baseball game. Looking back and knowing John better now, he probably hoped it would be "a date," but I just saw it as a free baseball game, which I never passed up. We had a fun time—laughed a lot—just as I remembered doing with him in college. Again, as I went home that evening, I thought very little about John. He was just someone I knew that I had seen again after a few years.

About two weeks later, John called me at work and asked if I had any interest in a marketing position with the Conference office where he worked. I nearly fell out of my chair. Here I was, in a decent job, enjoying my work, when a guy I knew in college who I really didn't know at all called to offer me a chance at an absolute dream job. It seems weird to express this now, but I had a hard time making the decision to switch. In the three years since I had graduated from college, I had held four full-time positions with four different companies and it

felt good to be in a position of “permanence.” Although I had a lot of interest in the job, I reluctantly entered negotiations with the Conference commissioner.

In the end, I accepted the position. I sat in a cubicle next to John’s and for nearly two years, I partnered with him doing Conference administration and tournament planning and execution. A dream job indeed! John became a close friend, a confidante, a mentor. He worked hard and was intelligent, but his gift was networking. If you put John in a tournament situation, by the end, he would know the tournament managers, sponsors, VIPs, student-athletes, coaches, student managers, ticket window clerks, custodial workers and on up and down the line. John was all of five foot on a “high-heeled” day, yet he stood tall with confidence and likeability.

After getting married a few years ago, I resigned from my job with the Conference and moved to Michigan. I left behind a number of friends (John being one of them) and took with me a ton of happy memories. After settling in to my new town with my new husband in my new state, I called the athletic director for marketing at Oakland University to see if there was anything I could do to get involved. Before I knew it, I found myself immersed yet again in the world of collegiate athletics. Dream job, new location. I often thought of John and the opportunity he offered me, a mere casual acquaintance. That one offer took my life in so many positive directions.

On November 1, 2004, my husband and I were eating breakfast. It was a relaxing Saturday morning with a whole day of nothing planned projected ahead of us. The phone rang and I recognized the voice of a former co-worker of mine from the Conference office. My expression immediately brightened as I prepared for a friendly chat. The conversation didn’t just go downhill fast; it crashed quicker than the speed of light into a brick building. My college acquaintance - my friend, my mentor - John Sanders, had died in a car crash on Halloween the evening prior. It was a tragic accident and they were calling all of the friends of the Conference to relay the news.

To this day, I can’t describe what emotions I felt upon

hearing the news. I didn't just lose a friend or a co-worker, I lost the person I attributed my "golden opportunity" to.

I made travel arrangements to attend the funeral. I kept thinking about how I had more to say to him. I called him friend and for the most we had good, light-hearted times together, but I never told him my career took a turn for the better because of his call. I never told him I had gotten not one but several dream jobs because he recommended me. Why would someone take the time to say that to a friend whom you just get together and laugh with from time to time? But I would tell him today if I could.

His funeral was just so "John." The Commissioner spoke, several Conference administrators, a girl he'd played softball with for years, and a Division I basketball coach for whom John had been a student manager. He would have puffed up with pride at the list of important people who felt the need to pay him one last tribute. Those he knew spread far and wide throughout the sports world. With much regret over losing our friend so young, we said our goodbyes.

That March, I worked the Conference tournament. Stories of John kept coming up no matter who I talked to. In a touching ceremony at halftime of one of the games, they hung a banner in his honor. It showed him just as I remembered, a little cannon going off over what he considered a bad call. I smiled though, because I knew 30 seconds after the camera captured that shot, he cracked a joke that made the person sitting next to him laugh. Also during the ceremony, his family came forward and presented the first of an annual scholarship given to a Conference student-athlete in John's name. He would have been so proud of the recognition.

John passed away almost three years ago now. On occasion, I remember him and think of the opportunity he afforded me, which ultimately led me right here. John taught me the truth of the phrase; "it's not what you know, but who you know." That saying doesn't make me nervous anymore because I've learned that who you know doesn't have to be your best friend, a close family member or your current boss. They may

be no more than a casual acquaintance. So, it's important to be good to everyone you meet, because you never really know the role they'll play in your life until later. And if at all possible, keep in touch. John knew all of this intrinsically. And thankfully, he passed the lessons on to me.