

Football star faces his mother's killer

Tampa Bay Buccaneers running back Warrick Dunn writes memoir

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In his memoir, "Running for My Life," NFL running back Warrick Dunn shares his journey as a football star. In this excerpt, he writes about making the emotional decision to speak to the man who's on death row for murdering Dunn's mother.

Chapter one: Face to face

To get to Angola State Prison from Baton Rouge, Louisiana — a distance of fifty-six miles — you go north on Highway 61, then take a hard left on Highway 66. Or you can get there by committing the most serious of crimes.

For years I had wondered about Kevan Brumfield. He had confessed to killing my mother, Baton Rouge police corporal Betty Smothers, in the early morning of January 7, 1993, in an ambush at a local bank. Two years later a jury deliberated a little more than sixty minutes and decided that Brumfield should die for murdering Mom in the fatal attempted robbery.

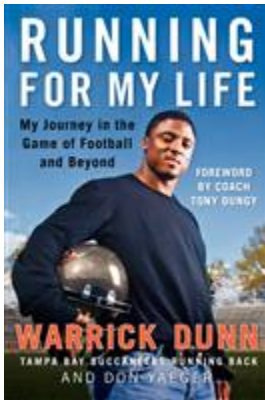
In the months and years afterward, I wrestled with one question that was never answered: Why? What was on Brumfield's mind as he and another man, Henri Broadway, lay in wait in near-total darkness as Mom's police cruiser pulled up to the bank's night deposit box? What did Brumfield think when he and Broadway charged out from behind bushes and fired shots into the car, killing my mother and wounding her passenger, Kimen Lee, night manager at a local Piggly Wiggly store, as she made a store deposit? Did Brumfield understand the severity of his actions as he and Broadway piled into the getaway car driven by a third man named West Paul?

It made absolutely no sense. Why?

Then an opportunity presented itself in October 2007 to go to Angola State Prison and actually get the chance to ask Brumfield the questions that have haunted me for years. Questions that kept me awake for so many nights. Questions that caused me to cry. Questions about a moment that changed my life like no other.

The meeting took months and countless telephone calls to arrange. There were casual and personal conversations with lawyers, prison officials, and football coaches. There

were delays, changes of minds, emotional highs and lows. But it finally all came together on Tuesday, October 23, in a bye week of my NFL season with the Atlanta Falcons. My coaches realized how important this was and they decided to cut me loose for a day.



I flew from Atlanta into New Orleans, where my younger brother Derrick Green picked me up and drove me back to my hometown of Baton Rouge. I was accompanied to the prison by Maelen “Choo-Choo” Brooks, my youth football coach and mentor. I was also accompanied by Don Yaeger, this book’s co-author. Choo-Choo is probably as much like a father as anybody I’ll ever have. He was one of the first people I saw after Mom’s murder, and his guidance and support have been invaluable over the years. Still, Choo-Choo couldn’t believe I wanted to do this. That was the reaction I got from almost everybody. Most people couldn’t believe I wanted to make this visit. But I knew it was important for me to finally face my demons.

Before I went to Angola, I spent hours in conversation with my Atlanta counselor, Pauline Clance. She believed it was a good idea, a positive move, because she clearly understood that there were some things in my life that I would never get over until I sat across the table from him.

It was set.

I found myself in a small break room on Death Row at Angola State Prison, eye to eye with Kevan Brumfield.

The days and nights leading up to the visit were somewhat unsettling. I tried not to let it dominate my mind, even pretending the meeting wasn’t happening. I went to the movies. I slept a lot. I started gathering my thoughts and talking to my brothers and sisters, compiling questions they wanted me to ask. The weekend prior to the trip was difficult because we also lost to the New Orleans Saints on that Sunday. It was our third consecutive defeat and the sixth in our first seven games. Drained and tired, I actually just wanted to relax and enjoy the time off. It was really my first break since the start of the 2007 season.

As I prepared for the visit, however, people often said or asked, “Do you need anyone to go with you? Do you need anyone to be there for you? How do you feel? I’m proud of you that you have the courage to do this. Hopefully, you will find the answers you are looking

for.” It was crazy. I think they made it more of a big deal than I had. The truth is, I was nervous but really didn’t want to let it show. How would the conversation go? What if he said something horrible or acted as if this were no big deal? How would I maintain control?

There were more questions than answers. Friends tried to caution me, prepare me. What I have always tried to tell people is that sometimes in life, you really don’t know what you can do until you have to go through it. If my mom were still on this earth, I would probably tell people that I couldn’t go on without her. But I have overcome that one. I knew that no matter how bad this meeting was, I could overcome that, too.

It was a calm, cloudy morning on Tuesday, October 23. We had an official escort named Chad who drove us to Angola State Prison from Baton Rouge in a prison SUV. While we navigated the long roads in near silence, the text message alert on my cell phone kept going off. It was my sister Summer Smothers and others all sending me notes wishing me luck, praying for me. An earlier text nearly brought tears to my eyes. It was from Hue Jackson, my offensive coordinator with the Falcons, who encouraged me to remain strong. He hoped that I would find the answers and peace my heart looked for.

As we got closer, there’s no question that I became more physically tight. It had been a roller coaster of emotion. One day I was ready for the visit, another day I wasn’t. Earlier dates had been scheduled but were snatched away. I also contemplated asking Summer and Derrick to join me, since they are only a few years younger than me and they remembered that horrific night vividly. While Mom’s murder also had greatly affected them, I just didn’t think either one was in the right frame of mind to meet face to face with Brumfield. I still appreciated their support, along with that of my three other brothers and sisters, because everyone felt this meeting could offer some type of freedom for me.

I also know that Choo-Choo, who I wanted at my side, had concerns about my decision. He wondered what my reaction would be if Brumfield wasn’t sorry or repentant, or if Brumfield simply gloated over the fact that he had taken something away from a successful, professional athlete. Choo-Choo wanted me to feel sorrow, not hatred, for Brumfield if that was the case. I also knew Brumfield might not say anything at all. If that happened, that was fine, but I wanted Brumfield to sit there and listen to what ever I had to say. I wanted him to understand the change he had made to our lives. Another friend wondered how I would react if Brumfield asked for forgiveness. Would I forgive him? I decided in advance that I would do it for me, not for him. I would do it for myself

because my life has been a struggle for so long, and I held on to so much anger and hatred. I had so much bottled up inside that it stopped me from being whole. To let someone know that he has that much control over me and my life, I can't continue to live like that. It took me a long time just to get to this point.

I had to play many years of college and professional football to reach the point where I went to counseling just to seek help so I could be sane and happy. Because I was hiding so much inside, I knew I needed help to get to the point where I wasn't depressed, wasn't sad all the time, so that I could laugh more, smile more. This visit was part of that journey. I was doing this for my soul, for my life. It was time for me to move forward. In God's eyes, you have to forgive. I won't ever forget it, but I have to forgive to get that burden off of me.

In the end, Brumfield and Broadway are going to get what's due in their lives, so I can't hold that hatred inside. I've tried to tell Derrick the same thing. It's crazy because we discussed on the drive from New Orleans that you can't hold onto something for so long, because it eats you up. It stops you from growing as a person — in my case and in my brother's, as men. We are still alive. We are still doing well. We are starting families. We are moving on and starting our own traditions. We're not holding onto the things that woulda, shoulda, coulda been. That's done and over with. This is your path and you have to live that life.

My heart started to race as we closed in on Angola. Usually, when I play football, my heart doesn't race until I get ready to pull up to the stadium. That's just from my love and excitement for the game. This was going to be a lot different because it was not about football. It was about life. Now I would have to face another fear in my life that I didn't know anything about or understand. I didn't know if I was going to talk straight or be nervous the whole time. I could tell I was nervous because my voice was cracking; it was just one of those things where I would have to try to stay calm.

We were en route to one of the most desolate spots in all of Louisiana.

Highway 66 ends at a prison that's known as the most notorious in the South, a prison from which 91 percent of all inmates never leave. They either die on Death Row or because their sentences are longer than their lives. I was surprised when Richard Vannoy, the prison's deputy warden for security, met us at the gates and asked me to get in his truck with him. As I got out of the car, our driver, Chad, looked at me and said,

"Man to man, I respect what you are doing." That really hit me. This was going to happen.

Vannoy joined the prison staff at age eighteen and has worked at Angola for thirty- three years. He explained how inmates on Death Row such as Brumfield and Broadway are locked in single- man cells. They are allowed out an hour each day to shower and an hour alone in the yard five times a week on a rotation basis that's kept a secret even from them for safety reasons. Inmates are moved in full restraints: leg irons and waist chains. The only time their hands are unbuckled from their waist chains is when they are alone in their exercise pen. They are never in the proximity of anyone when they are not fully restrained.

The 18,000-acre penitentiary is surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River. Vannoy also told me that the prison is still run as a working farm — inmates grow and harvest their own vegetables and raise cattle. Vannoy drove me through what seemed like miles of dirt roads to get back to an area that was guarded with rolls and rolls of razor wire. The building's official name is Camp F. It was as dank and dark a place as you would ever see.

This was Death Row.

Brumfield's lawyers, the husband-and-wife team of Nick Trenticosta and Susan Herrero, were very quizzical about my visit. They've represented Death Row inmates for many years and really never had a request quite like mine, to sit down with one of their clients. I tried to explain to them that sometimes you just have to do it, that this was just a matter of opportunity for me to do something that I never before really thought I should even try.

The rules surrounding my visit had changed, however. I had hoped to meet with both Brumfield and Broadway. Brumfield agreed to the meeting, but Broadway did not after he initially said he would. Paul, meanwhile, had been released months earlier from another institution and had returned to Baton Rouge after serving 13 1/2 years of his 25-year prison sentence.

As I walked into the prison staff's multipurpose break room, Room 116, Brumfield was already seated at a round brown table. He wore a white shirt, jeans, and Reebok tennis shoes. His hands were shackled to his waist. He was bald, with glasses; a scar was visible over his upper lip, and I noticed he had gold-capped teeth.

I have to admit that I was shocked when I first saw Brumfield. It didn't seem like this was real. It didn't seem like I recognized him at all. I didn't imagine him looking like he did. I thought he was going to be a smaller man, but he was a big guy, broad and wide-shouldered. At thirty-four years old, Brumfield was just two years older than I was. Still, I didn't think I would see a guy with a bald head and glasses. It had been so many years since I had seen him at his sentencing in a Baton Rouge courtroom in July 1995. I remembered him with hair and looking much different.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Brumfield spoke first. He explained how he had changed as a person, that he shouldn't have done some of the things that he did in the past and that he had grown into a better human being. He apologized for what happened to my family.

And then he said it.

"I didn't kill your mother. They got the wrong guy."

I had been previously warned by Warden Burl Cain to expect that response, and I certainly understood that with an appeal pending, this was the way Brumfield would handle himself. Brumfield has claimed he is mentally retarded, and his appeals have argued that the U.S. Constitution prohibits the execution of mentally retarded people. But judges have ruled that Brumfield's IQ shows that he's not retarded. I listened to Brumfield explain how, because of the life he had lived, he would have probably been dead by now if he hadn't been arrested for this crime that he now claims he didn't do ... but to which he confessed.

Brumfield also told me that he had "messed over" people on the street like himself, but he had never "messed over" a family like mine, that he had never "messed over" hard-working people. Brumfield also pointed out that he had seven children, including a daughter who was in the courtroom when Brumfield was tried and convicted twelve years earlier, and was now in college. I asked him what his daughter thought of him being in prison, and he responded, "She's not proud." Brumfield also showed me the scars on his arms and recalled his shootouts on the streets with others like himself. He told me I needed to understand that when my mom was murdered, the police were looking for somebody. They had to have somebody. "I was that somebody," he said.

As I listened to Brumfield, I realized that most of the questions I had crafted in a spiral pocket notebook that I brought with me, questions that I had compiled from my family,

were suddenly irrelevant. If he wasn't going to admit that he murdered my mom, as he did in his confession to police, I couldn't ask him questions about that night. It changed the dynamic of the conversation I had come to have.

After Brumfield professed his innocence, I told him that I didn't come to Angola to say "you, you, you" and get in his face. I had been through a lot and I wanted to tell him about it. I quickly flipped through the first three pages of my notebook, which had these handwritten questions in black pen:

- *Why did you rob the Piggly Wiggly that night?*
- *How do you feel today about your situation?*
- *Why did you guys shoot a police officer? Didn't you think she had kids, husband, family?*
- *How could you guys do something so dreadful without even thinking who you may be hurting in the long run?*
- *Why would you shoot a police officer and not think about the consequences?*
- *Do you feel remorseful towards what you have done that night?*
- *How would you feel if someone did to you what you did to my family?*
- *Why did you guys agree to the meeting?*
- *What made you guys feel comfortable enough to talk about the killing of our mother?*
- *As you had the time to examine your life and the killing, was it worth the time and effort that you guys put in planning and carrying out this selfish act?*
- *When you took the time to plot and accomplish this killing, what did you think would be the outcome of your deed?*
- *It has been almost 15 years since the killing. If you could say anything to our family, what would it be and why?*

Finally, after listening to Brumfield for a while longer, I decided I just wanted to tell him about what that night did to me and how that night changed my life. I wanted him to know that I used to play football with passion and emotion. I still play with the passion for the game, but I no longer play the game with emotion because the night Mom was murdered took all the emotion from me.

When you loved somebody like I loved my mom, it is as great an emotional experience as you could have. I wanted to explain to Brumfield how it affected the lives of my brothers, Derrick, Bricson, and Travis, and sisters, Summer and Samantha. I wanted him to know that I remembered that growing up as a kid, I wanted to be a father, I wanted to be a

husband, I wanted to be a dad. I wanted him to know that what he did that night to my mom ruined a lot of that for me. I flipped to the fourth page in my notebook. My hands trembled slightly as I began to read:

I have struggled with this loss. My family has struggled.

I don't think you realize the life changing experience it has caused.

You took my life away, changed my dreams and made them desires.

I am the oldest and it was my responsibility to look after my family. My life will never be the same. My best friend in the world was taken away from me by you guys.

Thank God that she raised and prepared me for that day.

Things have not been easy. I've been depressed for years, lying to myself that I am OK.

I've cheated people in my life because I wasn't giving them Warrick.

I've had a tough relationship with my brother Derrick who I love, 'cause you took his opportunity to be my mom's little man.

It has been up and down with my family because I had to become Daddy, not just Big Brother. It wasn't easy deciding someone else's life when you can't decide your own.

I've had some serious issues over the years in my personal life: afraid of commitment, fully committing myself to anything other than my family; not wanting to have kids or get married; not enjoying life, laughing or smiling; not letting people love me.

Over the last few years, I've been trying to be at peace with things in my life because I have to move forward. I am yearning for something new, a new start. Family, kids — just to get my life started.

I guess I am searching for answers. You guys have short-changed my family.

As I looked at this man who I never met, I bared my soul to him. I told him how in the years after my mom's death I had been hesitant about being in a committed relationship, how I've been afraid to lose people. I've been in counseling for many years over this very concept of having a true committed relationship because I don't want to lose somebody I love twice in my life. I don't think I can do it. I don't think I could suffer that pain again.

Tears started to well in my eyes when I realized that I was laying it all on the line for a guy who had killed my mom. As I looked around the room, I realized everyone else in the room had tears in their eyes, too — Brumfield included. I took thirty seconds, paused, collected my thoughts, and finally looked at him and told him:

"If you didn't do it, I don't know why you are here today, but I know why I am here today. I am here because I need to forgive somebody. I am here because it has been fourteen years and it's time for me to move on. I was searching for answers. I've been going to counseling. I've started smiling. I've started laughing. I even had my first drink two years ago during a fun moment. It is time for me to forgive and move on."

Everyone went silent. I had said it. I was there to forgive.

Brumfield stuttered for a moment, then told me that as he watched me on television over the years, he wondered what path I would have taken, or the life I would have lived, if that night never had happened. He promised me that the Lord would take care of me. Brumfield added that he wasn't blessed with a support system and a mother like mine. He told me a story that in 1987, my mother, working security at a store, caught him stealing and made him put back what ever he took. Brumfield said my mom told him, "Boy, get your butt out of here." Brumfield said my mom could have made an example of him that day, but she elected not to. I thought to myself, that was Mom — always giving people second chances to do right.

Brumfield looked at me and asked, "Why now? Why meet?" I told him I was finally strong enough to do this, that years of counseling had made this possible. Brumfield told me not to hold onto my anger anymore, and he said that he prayed for me and my family. I answered that God has a path for all of us, and that I was happy that his life hadn't been taken away. I told Brumfield that it took me a long time to stop blaming God for that night.

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