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Stallings' beloved son John Mark dies at 46

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John Mark Stallings, the son of former University of Alabama head coach Gene Stallings and one of the most beloved members of the Crimson Tide football family, died Saturday in Paris, Texas, at age 46.

The last of five children and the only son born to Gene and Ruth Ann Stallings, John Mark often joined his father on the practice field at coaching stops from Texas A&M to the Dallas Cowboys to the St. Louis/Phoenix Cardinals and back to Tuscaloosa, when Gene Stallings replaced Bill Curry after the 1989 season.

"There weren't any lives he (John Mark) touched that weren't made better by his influence," said Linda Knowles, Stallings' secretary at Alabama. "He loved life, and he loved Alabama football."

"He had a way of lighting up a room," said Alabama Director of Events Larry White, the school's sports information director during the Stallings years at Alabama.

John Mark, whose health had been declining in recent years, died en route to a Paris hospital after a 911 call sent paramedics to the family ranch Saturday morning.

UA Athletics Director Mal Moore said in a statement Saturday that "for someone who never played a game or coached a game, I think John Mark may have touched more Alabama fans than any other person ever did."

John Mark Stallings was born June 11, 1962, at Druid City Hospital in Tuscaloosa. When a doctor told the family his son was Mongoloid - the term used for Down syndrome at that time - Gene Stallings fainted on the spot.

"When I woke up, the nurses were standing over me and putting smelling salts in front of me," Stallings said in a 1991 interview. "I guess it was the shock. We cried a bushel of tears."

Those tears turned into a lifetime of smiles.

In Tuscaloosa, the family played an instrumental role in growing the Rise School of Tuscaloosa, an education program for children from birth to age 5 who were born with disabilities. Established in 1974 by the federal government as a demonstration program, Rise experienced its biggest growth in the early 1990s thanks to a capital campaign led by Gene Stallings and the University of Alabama.

The building that houses the Rise School is called The Stallings Center.

"Of course, Johnny called it, 'My building,'" said Dr. Martha Cook, executive director of Rise School since 1986, who now oversees seven Rise schools in four states. "Johnny was an unequalled role model to all of us. He had so many gifts of kindness and maturity."

Even after the family retired to their ranch in Paris, the Stallingses continued to make frequent visits to Rise for golf tournaments to raise funds, to attend graduation ceremonies or just to visit when they were in town.

"Johnny would come in and announce, 'I'm back,' to everyone," Cook said. "He loved Alabama and he

loved coming home."

While Gene Stallings was recognized statewide for his success on the football field, John Mark, who suffered from health problems due to a congenital heart defect, was the celebrity when he visited Rise.

"He was such a people person, and he grew up in the public spotlight," said Leigh Pate, the service coordinator at Rise. "He'd come up and introduce himself to someone he'd never met, 'Hi, I'm John Mark Stallings.' A lot of times, we'd have to slow him down because he'd try to overdo it on his visits."

Last week, the Rise School celebrated the Class of 2008 with a graduation ceremony. Gene Stallings was the featured speaker.

"When he was here, he wasn't Coach Stallings, he was Johnny's daddy," Cook said. "He told everyone what an honor it was to be his daddy. He finished his speech by saying if anyone had an automatic ticket to heaven, it was Johnny."

Woody McCorvey, Stallings' offensive coordinator at Alabama, said Gene Stallings was able to spend more time with his son in the 12 years since his retirement from coaching. But even during his coaching days, McCorvey recalled, Stallings "always made time for Johnny."

John Mark remained a steadfast Alabama fan following his father's retirement and still watched Crimson Tide games on TV from the family's home in Texas. The football program's equipment room was named in his honor in 2005. He told his father last year that his favorite Alabama coach was Nick Saban.

"I talked to Coach (Stallings) this morning," McCorvey said. "He wasn't doing good. He and Johnny were very close. This is tough on him."

Funeral arrangements for John Mark were pending Saturday night. News staff writers Doug Segrest and Kevin Scarbinsky contributed to this report sirvine@bhamnews.com

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