

Mark Cuban's hero: ex-Mavericks guard with a dream

By LYNN ELBER, AP Television Writer Apr 21, 2:03 pm EDT



LOS ANGELES (AP)—When Ray Johnston's fledgling career with the Dallas Mavericks was ended by leukemia, he turned to a new dream.

"Ray Johnston Band: Road Diaries," an eight-part series debuting 8 p.m. EDT Sunday on HDNet, focuses on his pursuit of music as well as his fight against cancer.

Billionaire Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, who founded the HDNet channel designed around high-definition programming, said he knew Johnston to be a compelling person before his bravery was sharply tested.

"Ray has been one of my heroes and inspirations since I first met him," Cuban said in an e-mail exchange. Johnston, he said, has more "determination and courage" than anyone he has ever met.

Johnston, 31, whose upbeat attitude is striking even in a phone conversation, was lighthearted in response.

"I was a season-ticket holder so he's probably trying to butter me up," Johnston said, then turned serious about Cuban. "He's a great person. He means so much to me as well. He's a guy who believed in a kid who moved to Dallas and didn't know anyone."

The Alabama-born Johnston was a 24-year-old loan officer—and a hoops fan with Mavericks season tickets—when he caught a scout's eye at a 2004 event in Dallas. A Mavericks tryout followed and earned him a spot in the team's summer league, which included Josh Howard(notes) and Devin Harris(notes).

Acute promyelocytic leukemia, a rare form of the blood and bone marrow cancer, was diagnosed after Johnston suffered a shin injury that lingered. His health quickly deteriorated and he suffered kidney failure, seizures and collapsed lungs and twice had to be shocked back to life.

Despite continued treatment and relapses, Johnston assembled a band and persuaded club owners to give him a try. He's in remission but remains part of a clinical trial.

The TV project was launched after Cuban heard him play ("As a musician, he is obviously skillful, but his music is also fun and soulful," Cuban said) and learned that Johnston planned to hit the road.

"Road Diaries" captures a year of traveling for singer-guitarist Johnston and his band mates. Their first album, "Sweet Tooth," was recorded last year and they continue on the road.

Music is only part of what inspires him to play, said Johnston, who lives in Dallas.

"The band gives me a platform to push things that would be harder if I wasn't on stage," he said, including his relationship with The Ryan Gibson Foundation, a Dallas-based nonprofit that supports leukemia research.

On the Net:

http://www.hd.net

www.rayjohnstonband.com

The Ryan Gibson Foundation: www.trgf.org



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