Jason Collier’s legacy lives with his daughter

By Chris Vivlamore - The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Dear dad,

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Jason Collier's legacy lives on in his daughter Ella who shoots baskets at the family home on Tuesday, Sept. 17, 2013, in Canton. Much has been done to celebrate and honor the life of Collier, the Hawks player who passed away suddenly Oct. 15, 2005.
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Hello I know you can’t say hello back.

But I had some questions for you. I know I can’t hear you though but so here are the questions. What does heaven look like? Oh and what does God command you to do? I hope you answer me in my dreams.

- Ella Collier

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This is a copy of a family photo of Jason Collier and his daughter Ella taken shortly before he passed away suddenly in 2005.
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Daddy’s Box won’t close.

A wooden case that contains the cremated remains of Jason Collier, prominently displayed in the family room of his wife and child, has a special place for mementos. It has been stuffed for eight years with cards, letters and pictures from a little girl who has few precious memories of her own of life with her father.

No relief will come for those stressed hinges. Ella makes frequent additions.

**Related Photo**

Ella and Katie Collier show off their No. 40 wristbands in honor of Jason Collier, at a Hawks game in April where the wife and daughter awarded a trophy named for the former player.
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Much has been done to celebrate and honor the life of Collier, the Hawks player who died suddenly Oct. 15, 2005. Life marches on. Still, nearly eight years later, we are left to wonder: How does a legacy continue, especially for one gone too soon and under tragic circumstances?

For Jason Collier, he lives in his daughter Ella.

“I would say once a week she puts something in that box,” his wife, Katie, said. “She brings something home from school. She will color a picture about his favorite food. We openly talk about it. … I would say having him cremated and having that box in the house has been unbelievable.”

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Jason Collier's daughter honors her dad

Ella was 20 months old when Collier died at the age of 28, just entering the prime of his NBA career. The sudden end came in an ambulance en route to Northside Hospital Forsyth after he had trouble breathing while asleep in the family’s small home on Lake Lanier. The official cause of death was sudden cardiac rhythm disturbance caused by an enlarged heart. Collier’s heart weighed 640 grams, much greater than the 540 grams normal for a person of his 7-foot height.

Today his 9-year-old daughter already stands 5-foot-3 and wears size 9 1/2 women’s shoes. She is the spitting image of her father. Everyone says so. Katie has a picture of her smiling child at a Hawks game last season, wearing a jersey bearing her last name and turning toward the camera. She sees her husband.

Family members see the countless similarities between father and child. Ella has the same smile, eyes, sense of humor and ability to recite lines from movies. She has the same mannerisms, down to the way she turns pages in a book. It is a source of comfort for mother, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends.

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Ella is quickly showing her athletic side. According to his parents, as a 10-year-old swimmer she had four top-16 national times, two in the breaststroke and two in freestyle. Ella took up swimming for the first time this summer. She joined the White Columns Waves swim team this summer. With no previous experience she became one of the team’s best 9- to 10-year-old swimmers. Ella swam the breaststroke leg in the team’s third-place finish, out of 93 teams, at the Atlanta Swim Association meet in July at Georgia Tech, Collier’s alma mater. She was named the team’s most-improved swimmer and will compete with Swim Atlanta this winter.
Ella is eager to play other sports — especially basketball. She wants to wear No. 40.

Those close to Collier, including his wife, parents and the Hawks organization, continue to cope with the loss. “Everything has changed,” his father, Jeff, said. “Our whole lives have changed.”

**Life must go on**

It hasn’t been easy. Tears still flow when loved ones talk about Collier.

“In a sense I have moved on,” said Katie, who wears Collier’s wedding ring on a necklace. “Maybe I haven’t moved on, but I have gotten stronger. There is not a week that goes by that I don’t cry.”

Moving on, as much as one can, started with a conversation with Bobby Cremins, Collier’s coach at Tech, who called to check on her.

“I was sobbing on the phone,” Katie said. “He said, ‘You can’t do this anymore. Jason would not like you doing this.’

“I just couldn’t get it together. I wasn’t moving forward. He said, ‘As I would tell Jason as a coach, you’ve got to pull your boot straps up and you have to stop this. You have to move forward. You just have to. You have to for Ella.’ I’m trying, but it’s been hard.”

Katie and Ella moved to a horse farm in Alpharetta. She finished the home on Lake Lanier that the couple was building at the time of Collier’s death. Collier had wanted to retire his parents to the home and build another on the adjoining lot.

A small house sat on that lot. It was the home the couple owned after Collier played with the Rockets for three seasons after he was drafted 15th overall in 2000. They had the place when he was not re-signed and passed on a contract in Europe for a stint in the NBA Development League in Fayetteville, N.C.

Ella was born in Georgia, one of the reasons Collier opted to stay stateside. She spent her first 10 days in intensive care. The couple returned to the house when Collier was signed to a pair of 10-day contracts by the Hawks in 2004, news of the first came as the family was returning to Atlanta for one of Ella’s doctor’s visits, and then a two-year deal in the offseason. It was the home with the glass front door held shut with a wooden stick. The driveway held the pickup truck Collier, ready for an off-the-bench role, would use to make the long drives back and forth to Atlanta for practice and games.

Life was good in that house. Collier had his college sweetheart turned wife of four years, one young child and plans for more and he was living his NBA dream. It all disappeared on the terrible night. It became only the house Collier was last in when his life was cut short. Memories turned from good to bad. Katie had the house torn down.

“For the longest time, I blamed basketball,” Katie said. “I said ‘If Jason hadn’t been playing basketball, this would never have happened. It was in my head all the time. It made his heart big. They overworked him.

“You say things to people that you don’t realize. I think I lit into (then Hawks coach) Mike Woodson, or Jason’s mom did, because you feel like he was pushed too hard, and that killed him. But that’s not what happened. It’s taken a long time to realize that it might have happened even if he wasn’t playing.”
**Looking for hawks**

Collier’s mother, Joyce, always keeps an eye toward the sky. She is looking for hawks or at the moon. The bird has become a symbol for the family of Collier’s presence.

Joyce recently went for a walk near the family home in Springfield, Ohio, and spoke a message to her son. “Jason, if you are OK, let me see a hawk today.” Not long after she was greeted by a rather noisy hawk announcing his presence from the limb of a tree. Collier’s younger brother, Jared, was on the track team at Ohio State. The equipment shed at the school was home to a hawk.

Once the Ohio State track coach shared a dream he needed to share with Jared. A man came to the coach at practice and asked how Jared was doing. Later, the coach looked up a photo of Collier online, and it was he who was speaking in his dream.

Family members have said they’ve seen Collier’s face in the moon, looking down and smiling.

For Joyce, none of it is coincidence.

At Collier’s funeral, Joyce already was wondering about how to continue Collier’s legacy. “What did you do today to make the world a better place?” she asked those in attendance. “Let Jason’s legacy continue by asking that same question at the end of the day. You might see a smile that is Jason’s smile.”

Joyce still keeps a pair of Collier’s size-18 basketball shoes in her kindergarten classroom at Simon Kenton School. The children don the sneakers during dress-up time and use them as measuring tools for math activities.

Each year she gives the Jason Collier Sixth Grade Hero Award to a student at the school who exhibits the attributes of her son — leadership, responsibility and good citizenship. The student gets a plaque and another with the list of all previous winners hangs in the school.

“I always feel Jason did so many good things for people,” Joyce said. “I try every day to do something kind that no one knows about. Just like Jason would do. … I was proud to be his mom.”

The gymnasium at Catholic Central Junior and Senior High, the small school in Springfield that Collier attended, named the facility after the player who helped his team to a state championship in 1996. Collier and the team were recently inducted into the school’s Hall of Fame.

**Honoring their player**

Just inside the door of the Hawks players’ lounge at Philips Arena hangs a framed jersey and photo of Collier. With the summer departures of players Josh Smith and Zaza Pachulia and coach Larry Drew there are no more members of the organization — front office, coaching staff or players — that were with the team at the time of Collier’s death.

It’s easy to walk by the adornment without notice, or contemplate its meaning, in the hustle of the NBA life.

The morning after Collier died, Katie called then-general manager Billy Knight to inquire about having the No. 40 retired. Katie soon got a call from one of the team owners who said that no player would again wear Collier’s number. Although it is not officially retired, it is out of circulation.
The Hawks wore black shoulder patches that season. The young group opened the season by losing their first nine, and 16 of 18, games. Many believe it was the tragedy that ultimately brought the young core of players together. After the following season, the Hawks now have a current streak of six consecutive playoff appearances.

That season, the Hawks renamed their community service award the Jason Collier Memorial Trophy. It is given annually to the player who “best exemplifies the characteristics Collier displayed off the court as a community ambassador.” Former public relations director Arthur Triche said naming the award after Collier was a “no-brainer.”

“Jason was one of the most active guys in the community,” Triche said. “We always knew we could count on him. It was an easy choice because of his involvement in the community. He will never be forgotten because of the award. His spirit will live on with those who win the award.”

Josh Childress won the first two trophies named in Collier’s honor.

“It was a great honor for me not only because I was recognized for work in the community but because it was named after Jason,” Childress said. “He was always smiling, always so active in the community.”

The Hawks bring Katie, Ella, Collier’s parents and other family members back at the end of each season to present the award. They wear Collier jerseys and buttons with the center’s smiling face. The presentation is the one public opportunity for Ella to be a part of her father’s world. As a 2-year-old Ella clung to a grandparent during the first presentation. As a 9-year old she has expressed an interest in singing the National Anthem the night of a future presentation. Katie doesn’t put it past her precocious daughter to do so.

“It’s been great for Ella,” Katie said of the annual event.

Following Collier’s death, the NBA now requires all players to undergo a yearly echocardiogram. Such a test would have identified the enlarged heart of Collier, who had a physical two weeks before his death.

The NBA Development League named its sportsmanship award after Collier in 2006. Collier played for the Fayetteville Patriots and was a D-League first-team player in 2003-04. According to the league, the award is named in Collier’s honor because he “was a player and person who exemplified the qualities of a faithful teammate, husband, father, son, brother and friend.”

Tech invited Katie and Ella to last year’s opening of the McCamish Pavilion, the school’s new basketball facility. The two didn’t mind being the only females in attendance.

“I’m grateful for all the Hawks have done,” Cremins said. “Maybe we need to do something at Tech.”

Jon Babul was a teammate and roommate of Collier’s at Tech. He introduced his friend to Katie. Now, the manager of event marketing and sports programs for the Hawks, Babul said that through contributions from the Collier Foundation and the Hawks preliminary plans have been made to offer a summer basketball clinic for underprivileged children, including some who grew up without a father. The organization will sponsor a number of children in Collier’s name.

Looking toward the future
Katie oversees the Jason J. Collier Charitable Foundation. It was funded by substantial donations made by the NBA and others at the time of Collier’s death. She has made contributions to several educational and medical organizations. Still eight years later, she describes the foundation as in its infancy and wants to see it grow into something bigger.

“I would really love to get this charitable foundation off the ground,” Katie said. “It’s been eight years and I haven’t, but it’s never too late.

“It’s something that Ella can do when I’m gone. She can carry this charitable foundation forward.”

And continue her father’s legacy.

My name is Ella a good and nice talented girl. This story is about my life. My dad died when I was 20 months old. He did seven years ago. It’s very hard to lose a dad when you are 20 months old. But he was a seven feet tall man. He played for ATLANTA HAWKS and GT. It was basketball. And here is the last thing I’m going to say about this, he was a very strong man.

- Ella Collier