

# The Star-Ledger

April 6, 2014

## Player is back on track after Seton Hall shooting derailed her hoop dreams

In her darkest days, when it seemed the hours of rehabilitation would never end and she found herself alone, hundreds of miles away from her family, Nicosia Henry would remind herself of the words from scripture her mother taught her.

“No weapons formed against you shall prosper.”

The weapon was a .38-caliber black revolver.

Nicholas Welch used it to fire into an off-campus party crowded with Seton Hall University students on Sept. 25, 2010, moments after he'd been told he wasn't welcome inside, Essex County prosecutors say.

“Give me the banger,” Welch demanded of a friend after he stepped out onto an East Orange street, his nose bloodied by a scuffle with party hosts who just told him to leave.

The bullet tore into Henry's right ankle, narrowly missing bone and shattering into pieces that are still there.

Three others at the party — Yvan Christophe, Nakeisha Vanterpool and Daryl Elmore — were struck by gunfire. And Seton Hall sophomore Jessica Moore — a 19-year-old honors student from Virginia — was shot in the head and killed.

It was Henry's first college party. She was a freshman guard on the Seton Hall women's basketball team, a prized recruit from Bolingbrook High School in suburban Chicago living out a little girl's dream of playing Division 1 basketball against players she used to watch on TV.

Exhausted from the weeks of preseason practices, she thought of staying behind in her dorm room that night with a teammate who was too tired to go.

“Some days I just kinda wish I didn't go,” Henry said last week in her first interview since the shooting. “I had an instinct that when one of my teammates said they didn't want to go I said I should stay. And they were like ‘no, no, no’ go and enjoy your first freshman party.”

On Monday, a jury in state Superior Court in Newark convicted Welch, 29, of the murder of Moore and the attempted murder of Henry and the others. He faces a penalty of life in prison when he's sentenced on May 30.

For Henry, the past 3½ years have been a journey through fear, renewal, self-doubt, shattered confidence and, ultimately, peace.

The 18-year-old woman, who arrived at the Seton Hall campus in 2010 thinking she'd continue racking up athletic achievements like she had in high school, was led down a very different path when that bullet tore through her ankle at the off-campus frat party.

She would leave Seton Hall at the end of her sophomore year, too mentally exhausted from recurring thoughts of the shooting and the demands of being a Division 1 athlete. Weight training, class, practice, study hall. Repeat.

In a meeting with Anne Donovan, then Seton Hall's head women's basketball coach, Henry poured out her feelings.

"I felt I just couldn't bear it anymore," she said. "I was still having homesickness, dealing with the whole situation from the shooting. I just couldn't focus on what my role was here in New Jersey. I just didn't feel the passion anymore. I just thought I was going to be done playing basketball."

Her mother, Nicosia Johnson-Jones, couldn't be there for her daughter when she had surgery days after the shooting. Pregnant with her seventh child, Johnson-Jones was unable to fly.

She received regular reports about her daughter's condition from a sorority sister who lived nearby.

Several weeks later, Nicosia was released from the hospital and back home in Illinois, unsure if she would ever go back.

"I wanted to run home, but my mom kept telling me there's nothing here," she said. "If you come home, you'll be like everybody else."

It was then her mother recalled the biblical verse from the book of Isaiah popularized by one of her favorite gospel singers, Fred Hammond, in the song "No Weapon."

"No weapon formed against me shall prosper," Hammond sings. "It won't work."

Johnson-Jones tried to convince her daughter that she shouldn't leave behind a four-year scholarship to a top university without some thought.

"Naturally the instinct of a mother is to shield her children and protect them," Johnson-Jones said. "But I felt like I would be doing her a disservice by doing that. I knew that I could not protect her from everything."

Henry returned to Seton Hall.

"There were times when I just wanted to give up and say it's not worth me pushing anymore," she said.

She went at her rehabilitation hard, at full speed the way her father, Nathaniel Henry, had taught her do on a basketball court.

"She's such a good kid to be around," said Margeritte Carlson, one of Henry's athletic trainers at Seton Hall. "She was always so positive, never bringing anything negative."

Watching her teammates running up and down the court at practice left her frustrated. "I just felt lonely being on the sideline," she said. "I didn't like it. I felt useless, like they didn't need me."

Donovan had been at Henry's side during her days in the hospital and tried to encourage her. "My coach would make me feel wanted and needed just by saying 'Girl, we need you to get healthy so we can get you on the court. We need you,'" Henry recalled.

By January, she was back playing again, although sparingly. “She (Donovan) wasn’t expecting a lot out of me,” Henry said. “What she was expecting was me to come out and show no signs of weakness. Just to go out and show you can overcome obstacles.”

Henry played through her sophomore year during two losing seasons for the Pirates – a combined record of 16-45.

By the end of her sophomore year, Henry was at the breaking point.

“I just felt burnt out and felt that I had overworked myself too much,” she said. “I didn’t feel wanted as much as I was in Chicago, like how important me playing on the court was to everyone in Chicago. I started doubting myself and that’s when I started losing my confidence.”

She couldn’t shake the losses or her mistakes.

“It would eat me up inside,” she said. “That’s probably what made me lose my confidence and what made me feel as if I wasn’t as good as everybody else.”

She told Donovan she wanted to leave, without letting her mother know.

“She (Donovan) made me feel comfortable, that it was okay,” Henry said. “She wasn’t going to force me to do something I didn’t want to do. She said, ‘At some point in your life, you’re going to have to do something for yourself, and you’re going to have to make yourself happy, and at the end of the day you’re going to have to live for you.’”

Her mother wanted her to stay at Seton Hall and her father, she said, tried to remind her what it meant to be playing a Division 1 sport.

“I just felt like basketball is basketball,” she said. “It doesn’t matter the division. It doesn’t matter the talent you play against. It’s a sport. You should be able to play it for fun and not a job. That’s how I felt at Division 1. It wasn’t fun for me anymore.”

Donovan said she supported Henry’s decision and smoothed the way for her transfer to Montclair State University because she knew how the shooting had changed the young woman, reordering her life.

“Nicky just kind of embraced the experience and it shaped her outlook from that point forward,” said Donovan, who left Seton Hall in 2013 for a return to the WNBA as head coach of the Connecticut Sun.

“I don’t think there are too many kids who would have handled it like she did. I think it gave her a healthy perspective on life, not just athletics. When you go through something like that you’re forced to figure out that when that little voice inside you is talking to you, you should listen to it.”

During the summer of her sophomore year, Henry transferred to Montclair, which plays basketball at the Division 3 level.

Over the past two years, Henry averaged nearly 12 points a game and 8.6 rebounds for a Red Hawks basketball team that has gone 57-4, with appearances in the Elite Eight and Sweet 16 of the NCAA Division 3 Women’s Basketball tournament championship.

They are the two best years in the team’s history, according to Coach Karin Harvey.

During that time, Henry, now 22, was twice named the New Jersey Athletic Conference's defensive player of the year and in December pulled down 20 rebounds in a win over Moravian College.

"She was pretty shook up," Harvey recalled of Henry's early days at Montclair. "She needed a new environment. She could come in and feel good about herself. Mentally, I just think it was draining and she had to work through it. She needed to have something to work toward. She wanted to be a good teammate."

Henry said she has gotten to the point where she can talk with others about the shooting without getting upset.

She testified at Welch's trial, describing for jurors the scene that unfolded that night. Images from the crime scene shown her by prosecutors brought back memories that remain painful, she said.

In the audience were Moore's parents, James Moore and Phyllis Moore Tolliver.

"Seeing her family and seeing their faces, you just want to live every day like it's your last," she said.

At Seton Hall, she wore Moore's initials on her basketball sneakers. "I dedicate my season every time I play for her," she said.

Last week, with just four days of practice, she ran the 400-meter event at a meet in Pennsylvania even though she hadn't run competitively since high school.

She ran it in 58.97 seconds, for a third-place finish. And she anchored the Montclair relay team that finished first.

She has plans to graduate in the fall with a degree in fashion design and would like to design clothes that fit the bodies of long-armed basketball players like herself.

And she said she's still thinking about playing basketball professionally, perhaps overseas.

"It's challenging because I'm not ready for the real world," she said.

Maybe more ready than most.

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