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FSU med student defies odds: Formerly homeless Jimmy Moss now thriving

By Doug Blackburn • DEMOCRAT Senior WRITER
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Sometimes the apple falls far from the tree.

Jimmy Moss landed in an entirely different orchard.

His story seems more the stuff of Hollywood than real life, yet Moss is as real as can be.

Built like an NFL linebacker and blessed with an engaging personality, Moss is six weeks from earning his medical degree at Florida State University. In June he will begin a three-year residency in internal medicine at the esteemed Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville.

Dr. Jimmy Moss.

Local physicians describe him as the best of the best, "a star."

No one — not even Moss — could have possibly imagined this two decades ago.

Twenty years ago Moss and his grandmother, Ella Jackson, were in survival mode.

Moss, the oldest of three children and about to turn 10, was living one day at a time. His father was in and out of jail; his mother was battling diabetes and unable to work.

They shuttled from one Broward County public

housing complex to another, trying to hide their tracks from Moss' father. Jackson's janitorial jobs provided what little money they had.

In 1992, when Moss was 12, they moved to New Jersey, where Jackson figured her 17 brothers and sisters would be able to help out.

Instead, Moss and his siblings found themselves in a homeless shelter.

"It didn't get better," Moss said. "It just got different. It got real bad. You wear out your welcome going from one relative to another."

He remembers living in the basement of a house with no electricity. He was able to run an extension cord from the house next door so they could use a hot plate to prepare meals.

Moss tries to tally how many addresses he and his brother and sister claimed between first grade and high school. He loses count at 21.

At age 13, Moss got a job at a tire factory and became the family bread winner.

Saved by school

School was his salvation, his safe place. Always.

For reasons that defy explanation, Moss excelled in the classroom even though his life away from school was a daily struggle.

"It always came pretty easy to me and I took pride in knowing I could do something. School was a face saver because I didn't have to be in the classes with people who would tease me," he said. "I was never picked on for being smart.

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"I went to a lot of schools. It actually helped me," Moss added. "I was able to get into new situations and adapt. I learned all the 'poor kid' jokes and started telling them on myself."

College was a different story.

He started out at Temple University in Philadelphia — he knew about it only because it's Bill Cosby's alma mater — on a partial scholarship. He realized midway through the first semester he didn't have enough money to make it work.

"I was intimidated," he acknowledged. "I had kids in my classes driving a Lexus and I didn't have a textbook."

Moss developed a long-distance relationship with a young woman in Florida who was a student at Florida A&M. They eloped and he found himself in Tallahassee.

The marriage did not last, but Moss found everything he was looking for in Tallahassee, starting with Tallahassee Community College. He also found role models through different outreach programs he signed up for at TCC and FSU, where he majored in biology.

"I never saw a black physician until I got to Tallahassee," he said. "I didn't know it was even an option."

"I thought to be a doctor you had to come from a family with a lot of money."

Moss was inspired and hungry to learn. He was accepted into FSU's College of Medicine. He volunteered at the Bond Clinic and spent time shadowing Dr. A.J. Brickler at North Florida Women's Care.

Brickler was amazed when Moss eventually shared his personal story.

"His background would have swallowed a whole lot of people up and made them dysfunctional," Brickler said. "He was able to keep his eyes on the prize. He is one of those people who you know is going places."

His comments are echoed by Dr. Terry Allen at John D. Archbold Memorial Hospital in Thomasville, Ga., where Moss spent most of his third and fourth years in medical school.

"Every day Jimmy is bigger, stronger, faster. He's going to be a star some day," Allen said. "I see him 10 years from now the head of a department somewhere."

"He's everything we look for in a med student," Allen added. "He's super bright. He's someone who really wants to learn and goes out of his way to do it."

He also believes in sharing and inspiring. Moss frequently gives talks at local Boys & Girls clubs, at churches.

"Any time there's a window to talk to minority youth, I try to take advantage of it," he said. "There's always a way out."

While Moss has blossomed — he's also re-married — his siblings have struggled. His younger brother, like his father, has been in and out of jail. His younger sister, a mother of four, had her first child at 16. Moss and his mother are trying to re-establish a relationship.

Moss is at a loss to explain how he has thrived. He shakes his cleanly shaven head back and forth, not sure what the answer is.

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"Somebody had to be looking for me," he said. "It wasn't just luck and hard work. I can't explain it — I really can't."

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