

WILSON TIMES: Amputation doesn't slow worker

By Brie Handgraaf

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Linwood Barnes was in his early 30s when he fractured his clavicle, but the prognosis was more devastating than anticipated as doctors determined he had Stage 3 osteosarcoma.

“I did chemo, but the doctors decided that wasn't enough. At the hospital, they asked what we wanted to do, and my choices were to amputate my arm or let the cancer grow,” Barnes recalled. “I said, ‘If that will save my life, we'll amputate.’ It was hard because I was born with both arms, but I thought ‘We have to do what we have to do,’ so that is what we did.”

After recovering from surgery and getting the green light from doctors, the former construction worker was left bouncing between odd jobs and struggling to support his family.

“I was looking for someone — anyone — to give me an opportunity,” he said.

Barnes also was adapting to everyday life without his right arm.

“The hardest moment for me was one day when I was taking my son to day care,” he said. “I was trying to hurry up, but I couldn't get his shoes tied. I was really frustrated and had to put on his strap-on shoes.”

The 54-year-old Hunt High School graduate was diagnosed with cancer in 1999 and spent more than six months in chemotherapy before doctors recommended the amputation. He battled depression, but his faith helped him come to terms with his new normal.

“I was just mad at the world,” Barnes recalled. “I kept asking why.”

A friend of his, James McEachin, recommended Barnes apply to Smithfield Foods in 2007. He met the recruiter, Melissa Marsh, and asked for an opportunity to prove himself.

“Victor Bosarge was the maintenance manager here at the time, and when he gave me the interview, he told my supervisor, Mike Gray, to look at the person, not the handicap,” Barnes said. “When I talked to him, I looked him straight in the eye and said, ‘I just need an opportunity. If I can't do something, I'll be the first to say I can't.’”

He settled into his role on the plant's maintenance staff, striving to set an example for his kids by doing his best.

Barnes has worked his way up, proving to himself and others that only having one arm doesn't hold him back. The Wilson native has risen to the rank of Level 5 processing mechanic, which designates the highest

experience level within the maintenance department.

“Before I got my prosthesis, I used to have my sleeve tucked into the pocket, and Mr. Wilson Yeoman, an engineer at the time, would walk past and see me doing a good job,” he said. “He told someone later, ‘I didn’t even know the man had one arm.’”

Coworker Robert Hardy even made gadgets to help the Wilson native complete various maintenance tasks with one arm.

“If I ever had a problem, anyone in the maintenance department has always helped me,” Barnes said. “No one feels sorry for me because I told them I don’t need them to feel sorry for me. At least give me the opportunity to do something and if I can’t do it, I’ll holler.”

Through the years, he’s helped newer employees learn the ropes. He has become a valued mentor to participants in the plant’s maintenance technician apprenticeship program.

“Linwood is a phenomenal asset to the Smithfield family here in Wilson,” said plant manager Andrea Tucker. “His perseverance, teamwork qualities, mentorship to others and loyalty make him an extraordinary person.”

Together with his wife, Jacqueline, Barnes has six kids and five grandkids. He recently earned a bachelor’s degree in human resources management.

“I’m happy about getting my degree with a concentration in human resources,” he said. “I’m loyal to people who gave me an opportunity, so I would like to use my degree down the line here at Smithfield.”

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