

After a life-altering car accident, Nick Burd is inspiring others as Matoaca's basketball coach

Nick Burd notices details about the world around him that he overlooked before his accident.

Things he walked over — cracks in the sidewalks, potholes and slanted pavement — are more noticeable in a wheelchair. And everyday tasks that he took for granted — getting out of bed, putting on his pants and driving to work — feel more meaningful without movement in his legs.

Burd, a 2004 Matoaca High School graduate who broke his neck in a 2005 car crash, says the day-to-day challenges of his medical circumstance have heightened his ability to appreciate the little things, and the opportunity presented by each day.

“The accident itself just changed my outlook on everything, made me enjoy life itself more — the good, the bad, the ups and the downs,” said Burd, who was hired in late October to be the Warriors’ new boys varsity basketball head coach.

“There’s no reason to really be that upset, because we still have the ability to coach the next play, in a sense, to use basketball terms. So it’s always good to be able to wake up and attack the day and take advantage of the opportunity that you’re given and blessed to have.”

Burd, 34, feels particularly blessed to have the opportunity to lead a program that’s part of a community he cherishes. He said members of the Matoaca community in Chesterfield County donated money and helped renovate his house to accommodate his living needs upon his return from a lengthy rehabilitation process after the accident.

Charles Payton coached Burd when the latter was a Matoaca player for three seasons. Now the Warriors’ athletics director, Payton remembers Burd as a tenacious, versatile, 6-foot-3 center who could handle the ball, shoot, block shots and rebound. Though undersized for his position, Burd played bigger than he was, a testament to his competitive fire, Payton said.

The former coach would not have been surprised at the time to learn that Burd — a “glue guy” for Payton’s program — would one day become a coach himself. He comes from an athletic family; Burd’s brother is former University of Virginia wide receiver Kris Burd.

Burd attended the Naval Academy Prep School in Newport, R.I., after Matoaca, but came home at the end of his first semester and began taking classes at Southside Virginia Community College. His plan was to transfer to Virginia Military Institute and play basketball with his friend Reggie Williams, who went on to play in the NBA.

On his way home from school one day, he fell asleep at the wheel. He woke up in the hospital.

Burd doesn't remember much from the day of the accident. After he woke up, "they basically told me that I'd never be able to do anything on my own again," Burd said of his doctors. The crash left him paralyzed from the chest down.

Payton visited Burd at VCU Medical Center shortly after the accident. He prayed with a fellow coach and Burd's mother.

"He really fought through, he was fighting for his life," Payton said. "It was really tough to see him in that state."

Though the prognosis was bleak, Burd was never deterred because he had faith in his support system.

"Thanks to the support I got the whole time, it wasn't really a problem. Matoaca had my back from the moment I got in the accident," Burd said.

"My family was there, good friends, good people, I had lots of visitors, lots of people come and let me know they had my back. So it was really just fight the fight, it wasn't really too sad of a thing, I was comfortable because I knew people had my back."

Burd spent more than a year at VCU Medical Center and a rehabilitation center, and the rehab process continued long after that. It took him four to five years to reach the point he's at today, where he can feel his whole body and perform tasks like getting in and out of the car and putting his chair together.

Basketball had been Burd's passion his entire life, and yet, for a time after the accident, he wasn't sure if he'd have a future in the sport.

But when a few kids from his neighborhood got cut from their high school team and needed a place to play, Burd wound up finding them a league and coaching them — and so began his career on the sidelines. He returned to classes at the community college, where the coach offered him a spot on his staff while Burd was still a student.

"Once the kids reached out to me and I got a taste of it I pretty much couldn't stop. I knew that was what I was supposed to be doing," Burd said.

A few years after the accident, Payton crossed paths with Burd again, and Burd told his former coach he'd started coaching with an AAU program. As more years passed, Payton would occasionally see Burd at different Matoaca sporting events, from youth league contests to soccer matches and, of course, varsity basketball games.

During those years, Burd became an assistant at Hermitage High School under varsity coach Rob Rice. Both had been mentored by Collegiate School boys varsity coach Del Harris, and Harris recommended Burd to Rice as a candidate to join his staff.

“We hit it off instantly,” Rice said. “Just his passion and enthusiasm was evident on our first phone call, and then through two years together, his work ethic was tremendous. I was just trying to convince him to stay with me long enough because I knew that he would be running his own show soon.”

The thing that separates Burd from other coaches, Rice said, is his ability to establish connections with his players and communicate instructions. At Hermitage, Burd spent a lot of time outside of practices and games with his players developing meaningful relationships and serving as a mentor off the court.

“My coaching is not even really about basketball, per se,” Burd said. “It’s more about just being a good person and taking advantage of every opportunity that you get so that you don’t feel bad about anything you’re doing, so that you can go to sleep, wake up in the morning tomorrow and try again. If you’re taking care of that, then basketball takes care of itself.”

Rice said having Burd as an assistant was akin to having a second head coach. His perspective on life, in particular, and how he imparted that to his team, was invaluable, Rice said.

“We were about using basketball to help these kids get ready for life after basketball,” Rice said.

“Our biggest thing was teaching them how to be positive influences in society. ... And I think he represents all of that, the hard work, not taking things for granted, attention to details, small things matter. He encompasses what a coach is supposed to be.”

In those years, Hermitage had a word wall that included words like “relentless” and “unselfish.” The point of the word wall was to help players translate lessons learned on the basketball court to everyday life. It’s the ability to bridge that gap, Rice said, for which Burd possesses a truly special knack.

“He’s done more for me than I could ever even explain,” Rice said. “I was more excited for him getting that job [at Matoaca] than I think he was about getting that job.”

After Rice left Hermitage, Payton found out Burd had been hired as the school’s junior varsity coach. It was then that Payton began to envision Burd rejoining the program that had over the years meant so much to him.

Burd applied for the varsity job at Matoaca about two years ago, but at the time didn’t have enough experience at the varsity level, Payton said. So Payton asked Burd to be his JV coach, a job Burd accepted last year. But Burd ended up finishing the year as both the JV and interim varsity head coach.

Although other well-qualified candidates applied, Payton said Burd's success and instant connection with the players rendered the decision of who should take over the program a relatively easy one.

"I was really, really impressed with Nick. The kids really responded to him, they respected him, the parents liked him, and I was really impressed with his knowledge of game strategy," Payton said.

"His practices were very organized, his kids were disciplined, they all play for each other in a way that just wowed me."

One of the lessons Burd focuses on imparting to his players is that few high school athletes turn into professionals — and few high school coaches reach the NBA.

"But we are all going to be husbands, fathers, employees, employers, citizens in the community. So we need to try and be the best those that we can be," Burd said.

"So take advantage of what you can, focus on the things you can control. ... So I try to teach them to grow as a person, to use basketball as a tool in your toolbox, a weapon in your arsenal."

Burd's plan for the future isn't focused on wins and losses. He's a strong believer in the mantra of taking care of what you're supposed to take care of — your mindset and attitude, for example. If you just focus on that, the wins will come along. So his goal is for the Warriors to be the most fundamentally sound team in central Virginia, and a defensive menace collectively.

"It doesn't take the most skill to set a good screen, or to step over for help and take a charge," Burd said.

Burd and Payton foresee a seamless transition into his head coaching tenure, because Burd is already familiar with just about every player in the program on the varsity and JV levels.

When Payton made a Facebook post announcing the hire, it garnered nearly 400 likes and more than 100 shares. He said the pride the Matoaca community has in Burd is constantly evident in how the coach and community interact with each other.

"He's very supportive, he's out at the games. Nick is a guy that if it's not a basketball game Nick is still out there supporting it," Payton said. "Nick supports everybody in the community."

In taking the head coaching position, Burd said he sees an opportunity to give back to a Matoaca community that has supported him through the toughest of times.

"This is my chance to repay it, repay it by all the people I went to school with, all the people who looked out for me, came to games. I get a chance to give back to their kids, their grandkids, their nieces and nephews," Burd said.

“Whoever may come through those doors, I get a chance to help the Matoaca name, the town, the community. I just want to give back.”

Burd’s family, too, has always been a cherished source of motivation and support for him. His mother died from breast cancer a couple of years ago, and everything he does, he does to make her, and the community he loves, proud.

It’s that selfless nature and the attention to details overlooked by many that made Burd the right coach to take over Matoaca’s boys basketball program, Payton said.

Despite the success he’s enjoyed in his coaching career, Burd doesn’t like to get in team photos, even after winning tournaments and championships.

“Because it’s not about me — I don’t even like this,” Burd said at the end of his interview for this story. “I want to say stuff about the kids.”

“I don’t do it for any type of notoriety, accolades. ... I’m just here to make sure we stay together.”

Five former Lee-Davis athletes want the school to change its 'Confederates' nickname

Standing at the front of his English class during his senior year at Lee-Davis High School, Eduardo Lopez argued that the Confederate flag should be banned at school. Occasionally, classmates laughed during the presentation. But Lopez, a 2009 graduate and standout soccer player, paused and continued, determined to finish.

He felt strongly that Confederate representation shouldn't have a place at his high school. Lee-Davis sports teams play as the Confederates, the only remaining school in the United States to do so. The school is named after Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate States Army, and Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederate States.

"It made me upset, it made me angry at the fact that I'm walking onto a soccer field and they're saying, 'Introducing the Lee-Davis Confederates,'" Lopez said. "I felt no pride in that."

The name "Confederates" is the subject of an ongoing lawsuit between the Hanover NAACP and the school board. The board has moved to dismiss the case - a judge has scheduled a March 9 hearing on that request. If the case is allowed to proceed to trial, it would begin May 11 in U.S. District Court in Richmond.

With the issue returning to public discussion, five former students spoke to the Richmond Times-Dispatch about their desire to see the school's name changed. They said they wanted to give voice to students inside the school who may feel they can't speak up on the issue.

But the name has many supporters, too - in 2018, the school board voted 5-2 to keep the name, citing a survey that found most people in Hanover didn't want it changed.

Grayson Jennings, a 1970 graduate who supports keeping Confederate representation at Lee-Davis, recalled a different era in which the school was a symbol of Southern culture.

In Jennings' time, a mascot dressed in a Confederate uniform would ride out onto the football field before games. Cannons were shot when a touchdown was scored, and the drill team carried Confederate battle flags.

Jennings said the push to do away with Confederate representation feels like an attack on Southern ancestry. He said many Hanover residents are descended from Confederate soldiers who fought on the same land they call home.

"That's their grandfathers and stuff they're talking about, they're trying to call them evil slave holders, this that and the other," he said. "You know, it's just today's narrative. I don't know how we got there."

Lee-Davis was opened in 1959 and integrated in 1969. Today, more than 1,500 students attend — about 10% are African-American, according to the Virginia Department of Education.

One of those black students was Latrell Scott, a football and basketball player at Lee-Davis in the early '90s and currently the football coach at Norfolk State.

“First and foremost, I want to say that my athlete experience at Lee-Davis was exceptional,” he said. “I met some of my best friends, my coaches were great. I had coaches that understood that some of us as black players were bothered by the Confederate logo.”

He added: “I think times have changed tremendously where this generation of kids has more questions than we had, and I think it’s great. The whole thing for me is that the young people that are actually having to live through it today have a voice.”

Scott said decisions regarding the name and mascot have been made at a county and school board level, far away from those directly affected. He added that athletes, in particular, have a unique experience while attending the school.

“None of the people that are actually in those meetings have to wear a Lee-Davis jersey, or have to run out when the PA announcer says, ‘Here come your Confederates,’” he said. “So I think it’s very important that we involve the young people in the decision making process.”

In response to questions for this story, Hanover schools spokesman Chris Whitley responded on behalf of the school board: "Due to pending litigation, we are unable to provide specific responses to your inquiries."

Representatives of the Board of Supervisors did not respond to requests for comment.

One of the former students who spoke out against the name was Avi Hopkins, a football player who graduated in 1994. He said students today bear a heavier burden than in his time.

Hopkins pointed to the statewide movement to do away with Confederate representation as representative of a shifting tide.

As of 2018, 31 schools in Virginia were named for Confederate figures. According to the Hanover lawsuit, 18 of them had been removed by the end of last year.

America, Hopkins said, is having conversations today that it was not when he attended Lee-Davis. He hopes the conversation can reach a point at which mutual respect for competing opinions eliminates guilt and blame.

“Many times injected into the race conversation is blame. And the result of that is someone walking away feeling as though they have done something wrong,” he said.

“And so I think in those conversations, what we need to be seeking is more understanding about why people feel a certain way about some words that are on a building, and a pictorial representation that represents a community of people.”

Jennings said no harm is intended by the name, it is merely a celebration of heritage.

He helped organize what used to be an annual tent at the Hanover Tomato Festival, where Confederate flags were flown and Southern history taught.

“The sheriff would come by, everybody loved it,” he said of the tent. “We don’t hurt anybody, it’s just our heritage. We’re just Southerners.”

To Jennings, his alma mater’s slogan, “Where Tradition and Pride Run Deep,” references a set of values synonymous with southern culture. He called Lee and Davis “good Christian men” and “great Virginians.”

“I guess we’ve let our heritage and stuff get trampled on without giving a whole lot of pushback until recently,” he said.

As the debates, and now a lawsuit, continue, these are the experiences of five students who said they are ready to go public with their desire for a name change:

Latrell Scott, football and basketball, 1989 – 1993

Scott said he is proud to be part of the Mechanicsville community. Currently the football coach at Norfolk State, he spoke glowingly of the relationships he maintains in the area.

He never experienced an instance of racism while at the school, and said coaches and administrators made a point of accommodating players and keeping them out of negative situations.

But Scott said he has some difficulty feeling pride in his alma mater. He’s immensely proud of the school’s athletes, and is in constant contact with current football and basketball coaches, always asking about their teams.

He's also very close with his own coaches from the '90s and former teammates who still live in Mechanicsville.

But he does not own any Lee-Davis apparel. The only clothing he still has are the jerseys he played in. He did not get a letterman jacket, specifically because of the name and mascot.

Today’s generation, Scott said, is much more free to ask questions than his own. He added that factors such as the expansion of social media and divisive political climate render the experience of today’s Lee-Davis students very different than in his time.

“With some of the issues that you’re having in the country these days, it’s tough to have a young African American kid, or a Latino kid, those kids have to wear stuff that says ‘Confederates.’ I think that’s extremely difficult.”

Eduardo Lopez, soccer, class of 2009

Lopez, a “military kid” who moved from Alaska to Virginia in 2005, enrolled at Lee-Davis as a sophomore, and was always perplexed and frustrated by his school’s name and mascot.

Lopez is a first-generation American. He identifies as Afro-Latino, and his family is from Panama.

He attended most of his elementary school years in Alaska. There, when he learned about the Civil War, it was about slavery, he said.

“So I correlate the Confederacy with pro-slavery, segregation and things of that nature,” he said. “So when I was told that I was gonna be going to Lee-Davis, named after General Lee and [President] Davis, and their mascot is actually the Confederates, I was ... I was confused, I’ll say it that way.”

Lopez said his time in a Lee-Davis uniform was marred by not only the name and mascot, but by overt instances of racism.

During his sophomore year, his first at the school, an opposing player called him the N-word during a match.

“It was one of the first times that I can vividly remember someone calling me that,” he said.

The next day, the principal pulled Lopez out of class to ask how he was doing. Lopez said he was fine, and the principal told him that the opposing player had been suspended from the soccer team for one week.

“There was just a huge lack of response from the administration, from the coaches, from everyone,” Lopez said. “And as a student at that time, I was 15, 16 years old, I didn’t even know how to address it.”

A current Lee-Davis official noted that the interaction took place two administrations ago, and did not involve people currently employed at the school.

Lopez hopes his experiences can contribute to the discourse surrounding Lee-Davis’ name and mascot.

“I can understand the other perspective of why people would want to preserve history, I think history is meant to be remembered and learned. But history like that ... we should handle it a little differently,” he said.

Lopez said most people are somewhat shocked when he tells them there’s a school in Virginia called Lee-Davis, and its mascot is the Confederates.

“The facial expressions I get when I say Lee-Davis, it’s as though they understand where that is and what type of experience I probably had.”

Amanda Lineberry, track and cross country, class of 2010

Lineberry recently graduated from the University of Virginia School of Law, where she [wrote a research paper](#) concerning the constitutionality of Confederate mascots.

But she said she didn’t grasp the significance of her high school’s name until a year into her undergraduate studies at the University of Richmond.

“As a white woman, I was privileged to not really feel a deep sense of discrimination from Lee-Davis’ mascot,” she said. “So my perspective on all this is really secondary.

“It was only after studying the history of Confederate memorialization that I came to realize just how shameful of a mascot it is for a public high school.”

Some of the same theories she researched, Lineberry said, are present in the Hanover NAACP’s ongoing lawsuit against the county school board.

The suit argues that Lee-Davis and Stonewall Jackson Middle School violate the rights of African-American students by forcing them “to champion a legacy of segregation and oppression in order to participate in school activities.”

Lineberry acknowledged that it’s difficult for students to speak out, partially because high school can be a social vacuum. So, she echoed Scott by stressing that enabling students to have their voices heard is imperative to the conversation.

“High school is hard, and I think that being a vocal opponent in a social network like that is hard,” she said. “I hope that what alumni and other community members can do for students is feel like they can speak out, or help speak for them if they do feel afraid to do so.”

Maddie Grimesey, field hockey, class of 2014

Grimesey threw out all of her high school T-shirts that said “Confederates,” but not for some time after she graduated from Lee-Davis. When she was there, it was not abnormal to see a Confederate flag at a sporting event or on the back of a truck.

Grimesey said it wasn’t until she was in college that she realized just how “problematic” the name and mascot are.

When people brought it up while she was there, it was dismissed as “not that big of a deal,” or “a stupid thing to get upset about.”

“I don’t think anyone realized how big of a deal it was,” she said. “And I think that kind of makes it more of an issue, that fact that we’re not even taught sensitivity to this history that we’re being taught to embrace in our school’s heritage.”

Her roommate in college was African-American, and involved in the Black Lives Matter movement. Grimesey said conversations with her roommate helped her realize that “things needed to be different.”

“There were so many things that I didn’t understand. Nobody had taught me. I’d been in this hub of an environment where certain things were OK in Mechanicsville, Virginia, that aren’t OK,” she said.

Now, Grimesey worries about students’ experiences at her old school, particularly students of color.

“What is the cost of not changing the names of our schools?” Grimesey said. “We force, even white students who aren’t proud of this history to walk its halls, and for students of color to walk the halls and feel even more disenfranchised by this education system.”

Avi Hopkins, football and wrestling, class of 1994

Hopkins' experience at Lee-Davis was dichotomous.

In sports, the all-state running back and standout wrestler saw opportunities to build friendships, to compete and to be a part of the community.

While doing that, he tried to keep his feelings regarding the name and mascot within those close relationships, because he didn’t want to deny himself opportunities.

“It’s hard when the representation of you as a sports team is not one that’s embracing of you as a person,” he said. “The people that I played with, we had a true relationship in that we appreciated each other. Now, the feeling of putting on a uniform, of representing a school whose mascot is the Confederates? That’s certainly problematic for any African-American.”

Hopkins heard racist comments about his athleticism from other students. He and fellow black students discussed going to the administration to voice their feelings about the name and mascot, though ultimately they didn't.

But despite all the challenges he faced, Hopkins said he learned a great deal. He learned how to communicate with and understand people who didn't hold the same views as he did, and how to navigate those relationships.

Hopkins said students today deal with a "heavier" weight than he did in the '90s. When he was at Lee-Davis, many people "knew and quietly understood it was not a situation that was comfortable."

But he and like-minded classmates were not having the conversations America is today.

"Even though it was brought up in pockets, it wasn't what you see now," he said, pointing to other Virginia schools changing names which honor Confederate figures as an example of a shifting tide.

"I think as America has become more diverse and we've moved further away from that bygone time of slavery, I think it's becoming more prevalent, these conversations around, 'How can we be more of a receptive community to all people?'"

As school districts call off winter sports, some parents and students want to play on

This was supposed to be Omari DeVeaux's time to shine.

A senior basketball player at Douglas Freeman High, DeVeaux is one of many who lost his or her final high school season Monday when Henrico County Public Schools became the 18th Virginia school system to cancel its winter sports season because of the pandemic.

Though the Virginia High School League is allowing winter sports tryouts and practices to begin Dec. 7, decisions on opting out ultimately fall on localities.

DeVeaux's mother, Mesha, was one of as many as 55 participants in a Zoom call Monday dubbed "S.O.S.," or "Save Our Season." Comprised of mostly parents of athletes, the Zoom meeting was intended as a forum to organize an initiative calling for Richmond Public Schools and other school systems, including Henrico, to rescind their decision to cancel winter sports.

"As a parent, I am hurt, sad and enraged all at once," Mesha DeVeaux said. "But it's not about my emotions. My child was depending on this season for his time to really shine."

DeVeaux and other parents said they wished administrators had reached out to parents, coaches and other team personnel to discuss alternative measures to canceling the season, such as eliminating spectators or pushing back the start date.

"It is not fair to these kids that worked so hard and was looking forward to something so meaningful," Mesha DeVeaux said, adding that her son has worked tirelessly to maintain a 3.73 GPA in hopes that his academic success might help draw interest from college basketball coaches.

"Us as parents have to fight for our children. We cannot let this go by silently."

Omari DeVeaux started a [petition](#) Monday on [change.org](https://www.change.org) calling for Richmond and Henrico to return to play. As of Tuesday afternoon, the petition was approaching 600 of the desired 1,000 signatures.

"Just think about all the seniors that are counting on this year to make a big impact to possibly get into their dream college for sports," Omari DeVeaux wrote on the petition homepage.

"What about those seniors that miss out on their senior night? What about those friendships that last a lifetime from having teammates? What about having a great connection with your community? This is what sports is all about and canceling them will have a huge impact on everyone."

Dennis Parker hosted and helped organize the Zoom call and corresponding “Save Our Season” Facebook group. Parker’s son is a basketball player at John Marshall.

Parker and other John Marshall parents wrote to Richmond Public Schools superintendent Jason Kamras imploring him to allow RPS winter sports to continue before the school system announced Nov. 9 that it would not play.

“We understand where we are with the issue of COVID, we understand that we want to keep our children and families as safe as possible,” Parker said.

“We don’t think that you have to do it at the exclusion of a season. We think that there are a number of protocols that could be put into place to help address that.”

Parker suggested an array of measures to facilitate a return to play, including an online waiver for parents to sign acknowledging the risk their children are taking in participating in sports; in-game use of hand sanitizer during stoppages of play; sanitizer foggers to cleanse gyms before games and at halftime; social distancing in the form of separated practice pods; as well as livestreams for parents and coaches to watch games from home.

He also called for student-athletes to be allowed access to athletic facilities. “If they’re not going to have an opportunity to compete, they should be able to maintain their skills,” he said.

Parker added that the decision to cancel sports brings effects that go beyond athletic competition. When student athletes are not in the controlled environment of competition, it contributes to such issues as crime rates and teenage pregnancy, he said.

Parker also said the cancellation hinders some kids’ ability to “break the generational curse” in their family of not attending college because they may miss out on athletic scholarships.

Practice for basketball season was scheduled to start in a week. For the time being, Henrico, which includes nine high schools, is the largest school system in the state to cancel winter sports — boys and girls basketball, gymnastics, indoor track, sideline cheer, swimming and diving, and wrestling.

Ailen Lacey, another parent who participated in Monday’s Zoom call, has sent Kamras multiple emails imploring him to reconsider the decision to call off winter sports. Lacey’s son, Ty, is a senior basketball player at John Marshall.

“It can be done as long as they follow the proper guidelines,” Lacey said. “I just don’t think they realize how much time these boys and girls put into their sport, having to maintain GPAs, training, going to games. My son has been doing this for five years, and you kind of feel like the rug has just been pulled from under them.”

Lacey noted that there’s already precedent for school systems reversing their decision to cancel winter sports. In mid-November, Arlington Public Schools rescinded a decision to call off winter

sports just days after the initial announcement following backlash from parents, coaches, students and school board members.

The Virginia High School League encompasses 318 member schools. As of Tuesday, 33 had announced they would not participate in winter sports. The Spotsylvania County School Board voted 5-1 on Monday night to allow the winter sports season to commence later this month.

“I respectfully understand them wanting to cancel,” Parker said. “But I don’t think it makes as much sense because you’re actually hurting the community and, more importantly, you’re hurting kids opportunities to make their lives better.”