



Jim Morris brings the heat
photo provided by Jim Morris

Big Dream, Long Road

By Lisa Morrow

ON THE EVENING of September 18, 1999, in front of 37,000 fans, under the bright lights of The Ballpark at Arlington, 35-year-old high school science teacher Jim Morris stepped out of the bullpen and into a dream. Three months earlier he was dressing in business casual, the uniform of a man who had long since laid aside his dream of playing major league baseball because it was time to “grow up.” That night, however, he was headed to the mound wearing a Tampa Bay Devil Rays jersey with the number 63 on the back right under his name.

It's a Cinderella story. Perhaps that's

why Disney jumped on it so quickly. The story of Morris' life and journey from coaching a struggling high school baseball team to making the big leagues is depicted in Walt Disney's “The Rookie,” starring Dennis Quaid. The movie is an inspiration to dream big and never give up. With a little imagination, you can almost hear the fairy tale princess singing in the background “...if you keep on believing the dream that you wish will come true.”

Big dreams are often born in the heart and imagination of a child. So it was with ‘Jimmy’ Morris when his grandmother gave him his first baseball, glove and bat at

age three. “I wore everybody out playing ball,” recalls Mr. Morris who was a natural athlete from the start.

As a better than average ball player, his dream of becoming a professional baseball player wasn't unrealistic. But as a Navy brat in a family that was always on the move, there was little time for the dream to take hold. Nevertheless, baseball remained a very significant part of his life. “I made friends playing baseball,” Mr. Morris remembers. “I was very shy but good at athletics. I had teams full of friends even though I didn't have a lot of close personal friends.”

Morris says the dream really began to take shape when he was 15. “I made the varsity baseball team as a freshman in high school,” he recounts. Though the University of Miami was looking at recruiting him as a scholarship player, all bets were off when his family moved from Florida to Brownwood, Texas. “There was no high school baseball team,” Mr. Morris recalls. “In Brownwood it was all about football.” He played football, even being told by his high school coach that football was his future, but he never gave up on his dream of playing professional baseball.

In 1982, the teenager got his shot when the New York Yankees chose him in the 18th round of the amateur draft. Not long after, Mr. Morris, encountered what was, up to that point, the biggest obstacle to realizing his dream, his own immaturity. “I thought I was better than I was,” he recalls humbly. He confesses to only partially following the advice of doctors; learning the hard way the difference between pain and actual injury to his pitching arm. “I was going to do it my way even though others advised me to do things differently. By the time I understood the difference, it was too late,” Mr. Morris says of the injuries that held him back. “I did things



*For his new career, Jim Morris put down the baseball & picked up a microphone.
photo provided by Jim Morris*

my way and I paid for it.” Finally after five or six surgeries he made the decision to walk away from the dream. “The doctor said he could fix my arm so I could play again,” Mr. Morris explains, “but I couldn’t stay healthy enough to move up. I decided I needed to grow up and get an education.”

So he shifted gears, got his degree from Angelo State University and became a teacher.

At that point, the dream of baseball took on a different angle. “I didn’t choose teaching,” Mr. Morris says. “Teaching chose me.” He says he decided to teach because he wanted to coach. “I decided that if I couldn’t play baseball then maybe I could teach kids how to play baseball the right way.”

As a teacher in Big Lake, Texas, and baseball coach for the Reagan County Owls, Mr. Morris had no idea that his dream would resurface. But when he found his team struggling with vision and motivation, he began to look for some

way to inspire them to be the best they could be. He was caught off guard when, on the heels of his best “I Have a Dream” speech, his team turned the tables, challenging their coach to pursue his own dream. He agreed that if the team won the district championship, he would try out for a major league team. Mr. Morris confesses that when he made the bet he didn’t think they had a chance. “I didn’t think they could pull off that big a turnaround. I made the bet and then forgot about it.”

When his players won the championship and reminded him of his part of the bargain, he thought they were kidding. “I had been out of baseball for 11 years. I was 250 pounds and the only place that I had run during that time was to the refrigerator!” But Mr. Morris followed through on his end of the deal when he came across an ad announcing tryouts for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays in Brownwood that summer. “I was sure it was going to be embarrassing but I knew I had to keep

my word.”

Mr. Morris confirms that the tryout scene in the movie is accurate. “I was the only one there with kids!” he laughs. The scout who allowed him to try out had seen him play 20 years earlier. After explaining the situation to the scout and after everyone else was finished, Mr. Morris was allowed to pitch. On the mound he uttered a quick prayer and let the ball fly. Two radar guns and 50 pitches later, the 35-year-old teacher was being congratulated by wide-eyed spectators for throws that clocked in at 98 miles-per-hour and higher. When he returned home there were multiple messages waiting for him on the answering machine from the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. After a serious family meeting and a second day of tryouts to confirm Morris’ speeds, he kissed his wife and kids goodbye and boarded a plane to Florida.

Often the closer one comes to achieving a goal or realizing a dream, the greater the challenges and obstacles become. Mr. Morris started on a Double A team where he was so much older than his teammates that he was mistaken for one of the coaches. “I was playing with guys who were very young and I was basically by myself.” He also struggled with workouts, trying to whittle down his 240 pounds and get back into good physical condition. For the first time since becoming a father, he was away from his children who were eight, four and one. He had no car or cell phone. “I had to help my son with his homework on the hotel phone,” remembers Mr. Morris.

When things got tough at home financially he began to pray that God would give him direction. “Several times I thought about giving up and going home,” Mr. Morris says now. But each time his prayers were answered. First he was offered a glove contract with Louisville Slug-

ger and then a shoe contract with Reebok; the bills kept getting paid.

Finally, it happened. On Friday, September 17, he was told he was being called up to play for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays and he would fly out the next day to join them in Texas. "I thought I was dreaming," Mr. Morris says of his surreal arrival at the stadium in Arlington. "The manager for the Rangers let 150 people into the game who had ties to me. Everybody got to watch me live my dream in my home state in my favorite ballpark against my favorite team."

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Mr. Morris says filming the movie about his life was just as surreal. He first watched the completed film at a Religious Broadcasters' Conference where he was to speak afterwards. "I had to stop crying in order to get up and speak," he recalls. Mr. Morris openly shares his belief that the dream that was placed in his heart as a three-year-old is much more about others than himself. "I think that through all of this God was trying to get my attention," Mr. Morris says. "He did it through baseball with a sequence of events that is undeniable. Then He gave me an opportunity to do something for Him. Now I'm teaching in an even bigger classroom. I'm doing it right," he pauses and then, in his typically humble way, corrects himself, "I'm trying to do it right."

Today Mr. Morris lives with his family in Frisco. As a highly sought after public speaker, he shares his inspiring story with audiences all over the world, encouraging them to dream big and to believe that anything is possible. "You need to surround yourself with the people who want to see you succeed and you need to chase the dream and never give up."

Lisa Morrow is a freelance writer in Plano.

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