

Knicks' Turiaf Driven by a Cause at His Very Core

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GREENBURGH, N.Y. — The shy boy at the [Knicks](#)' lunch table converses mostly in one-word answers and gentle smiles.



He plays four sports, but he loves basketball. He plays forward, but he prefers point guard. He roots for Villanova and the Knicks. He names his favorite Knick without speaking. Jack Gilroy just grins and points his plastic fork across the table.

At the other end of the fork, Ronny Turiaf kiddingly protests, “Don’t pressure him,” then graciously accepts the compliment. For Gilroy, a floppy-haired 12-year-old from Nanuet, N.Y., this was an easy call.

In 2005, Turiaf needed open-heart surgery to repair an enlarged aortic root. Ten months later, Gilroy, then 7, had a heart transplant. At the time, Gilroy knew nothing of Turiaf. But the two seemed like natural lunch partners Monday at the Knicks’ training center.

They talked about scars and echocardiograms, fishing and boogie boarding and Jack’s smooth 10-foot bank shot.

“Nice form,” Turiaf remarked in his thick French accent. “Quick learner.”

In recent years, there have been dozens of visits like this for Turiaf, a 6-foot-10 center who brings equal amounts of frenetic energy to defense and heart-health awareness. Turiaf becomes agitated about public ignorance and livid over the lack of [defibrillators](#) in high schools — a situation he is trying to remedy by supplying them himself.

“When I see a 10-year-old kid that’s telling me that he had a heart transplant, it makes me furious, angry in a sense,” Turiaf said. “It’s a shame that people do not realize that heart issues, heart ailments, is the No. 1 cause of death in the United States.”



This is Turiaf's cause and his calling. In 2009, while playing for the Golden State Warriors, he created the Ronny Turiaf [Heart-to-Heart Foundation \(ronnyturiaffoundation.org\)](http://ronnyturiaffoundation.org) to help pay for echocardiograms for children. Turiaf brought his efforts to New York when he was acquired in an off-season trade.

After being selected by the [Los Angeles Lakers](#) in the second round of the 2005 draft, Turiaf had a routine physical examination that turned up an abnormality. He was sent for more tests, including an echocardiogram, which might have saved his life.

Turiaf [underwent open-heart surgery](#), and the Lakers initially voided his contract. But he recovered quickly and [re-signed with them in January 2006](#). Two years later, he joined the Warriors for four years and \$17 million, a sum that allowed him to start his foundation.

“I want people to understand,” Turiaf said, “that if it can happen to me — it did happen to me — it can happen to anybody’s cousin, brothers, mothers.”

Or son.

John Gilroy said that Jack was a perfectly healthy and energetic child until the day he came home from a birthday party, complaining about a strange feeling in his chest.

“He said, ‘My heart’s beeping too fast,’ ” Gilroy recalled. “He was at his best friend’s birthday party, so we thought: maybe cake and ice cream.”

A few days later, Gilroy’s wife called from the pediatrician’s office. She needed to know how quickly he could get there.

“The worst moment of any parent’s life, and undoubtedly mine,” Gilroy said.

They took Jack to NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia hospital, where doctors offered a grim assessment: Jack had cardiomyopathy and was in heart failure. Medication could treat it, but he would eventually need a transplant.

Eventually kept getting closer — 12 years, 1 year, then an urgent directive: “Bring him in this week.” Jack had surgery on May 26, 2006.

The Make-a-Wish Foundation arranged for Jack to visit [Walt Disney World](#) that year and has been keeping tabs on him ever since, said Thomas Conklin, the president of [Make-a-Wish of the Hudson Valley](#). When the Knicks, through their [Garden of Dreams](#) program, asked about children who had a passion for basketball, Conklin nominated Jack.

“He’s just a great hoopster,” Conklin said. “Always has been.”

Jack watched Monday’s practice from start to finish and met nearly every player. Then he spent 15 minutes shooting with Turiaf, who whooped his approval at every basket.

“It makes me smile to make him smile,” Turiaf said, “but it’s also tough on my psyche. It’s not easy to see that others are affected as well, and especially when it’s young kids.”

At lunch, Turiaf mostly asked Jack about his hobbies (baseball, soccer, lacrosse and [surf casting](#)). Then they compared notes on chest pads, which both need to protect their hearts — Turiaf on the court, Jack on the pitcher’s mound.

Jack later joined Turiaf for a visit to [Maria Fareri Children’s Hospital](#), where they would meet with other children coping with serious health concerns.

Jack’s own recovery is continuing. The medications he takes to accommodate the donated heart can be toxic to his other organs. Doctors have said he may need another transplant someday.

When the Gilroy family sits down to dinner each night, they say a prayer and include thanks for Jack’s anonymous donor.

“When we see him playing ball, scoring and sliding into home and whatever else he’s doing,” John Gilroy said, “it kind of makes me think we got a good one.”

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/02/sports/basketball/02turiaf.html?_r=3&ref=sports