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Jets' Barrett Learns Years Later About Loss of Mother

By [KAREN CROUSE](#)

HEMPSTEAD, N.Y., Sept. 28 — An N.F.L. defensive back would never make a play if he always tripped over the memory of being burned on a touchdown pass. [Jets](#) cornerback David Barrett had no way of knowing it at the time, but his childhood provided a study in revising the past to avoid becoming haunted by it.

His two older sisters were the last line of defense in shielding Barrett from the truth about their mother, Willie Ann Rucker. They became so adept over the years at redirecting his questions that it was not until Barrett was on his way to the N.F.L. that he learned she had not died in a car accident when he was a year old, as he had been led to believe.

In a telephone interview, Barrett's oldest sister, Kim Moss, recounted how Rucker left her three children with a baby sitter at home in Waterloo, Iowa, one day in 1979, and never returned. Twenty-eight years later, she is presumed dead, but the case remains unsolved.

"We've had private investigators work on the case," Moss, who was 10 at the time of her mother's disappearance, said. "We think it was an ex-boyfriend who killed her, but we've never been able to prove it."

Barrett, who leads the Jets in solo tackles through three games with 22, knew none of this until he attended a family reunion on his mother's side after his senior year at Arkansas in 2000. An uncle let the truth slip out.

"It was a shocker," Barrett said. "I had gone all my life trying to figure out what actually happened. Every time I'd ask somebody, they'd be like: 'Go ask him. Go ask her.' They kept pushing it around."

Barrett, who was drafted in the fourth round by the Arizona Cardinals in 2000, does not share the unshakable conviction of Moss and his other sister, Deena Rucker, that their mother is dead. In his eight years in the league — including the past three-plus with the Jets — he has traveled all over the country for games, and in every city he has entertained the fantasy that his mother may miraculously appear.

"I see people with her last name, and I wonder if they are any kin to me, any relation," Barrett said. "Because who's to say that she's not still out there living her life and not knowing what's going on?" He added: "It's kind of that taboo subject in the family. Everybody's very touchy and emotional when you bring it up."

When their mother didn't come home, Barrett and his sisters were taken in by their maternal grandparents,

who were nearly done raising the last of their nine children. When Barrett was in the ninth grade, he moved to Arkansas to live with Moss, who had just completed her undergraduate degree in accounting at Henderson State.

Moss became his legal guardian, assuming the responsibility that had been abdicated by Barrett's father, who lived in Iowa but saw his son so rarely that Barrett said he could count the number of visits on one hand.

At Osceola High School in Arkansas, Barrett crossed paths with the football coach, Clinton Gore, who became the nearest thing he had to a male mentor. From the start, Gore saw promise in Barrett, who was fast enough to star on the track team and tough enough to absorb — and inflict — punishment on the football field.

"We have two or three tapes of him that we still show our players," Gore said by telephone. "One is of him hitting a guy and knocking him 5 yards out of bounds."

Barrett lettered in track and baseball in high school, but football was his favorite sport. "I liked it because it was O.K. to hit someone," he said, laughing, "which was good if you had a lot of tension in you that you needed to get out of your system."

At the N.F.L. rookie symposium the year he was drafted, Barrett filled out a form that contained the question, If something happened to you, to whom would you turn? Barrett wrote Moss's name.

His affection for his sisters is as plain as his smile when he talks about them. It is a smile, Moss said, that Barrett inherited from their mother. Rucker's smile, the smell of her perfume, the sound of her laugh; these are precious details that are lost to Barrett, who was too young to have any recollection of her.

Moss has told Barrett that he was the apple of their mother's eye. Barrett wishes he didn't have to take her word for it.

"I always felt that not having a mom was a big factor in my life," he said. "I missed never having that person you can come home to and call Mom who will put her arms around you and tell you she loves you."

Barrett, who will turn 30 in December, is nearly two years older than Rucker was when she disappeared. "I think about that all the time," he said.

He has a recurring dream in which he stalks whoever is responsible for his mother's disappearance and drives that person six feet under. "Many a time that's ran through my head," Barrett said. "But that's not going to solve anything by going through life trying to get payback on someone."

To know Barrett's back story is to understand his equanimity in the face of a scratched cornea that sidelined him for three games in 2005 and a sports hernia that plagued him throughout the 2006 season.

"After what our family's been through, it's kind of like what my sister says: 'Everything else is all in a day's work,'" Barrett said, adding, "I always look at it like this: I'm blessed to be alive."

The Jets drafted Darrelle Revis in the first round this year, presumably to take Barrett's place, but Barrett had other plans. In the Jets' win against Miami last Sunday, he was named the team's defensive player of the week after registering eight tackles.

Moss, who talks to her brother regularly, did not know about the honor until she read about it on the Jets' Web site. Barrett would sooner hide than hype himself, perhaps because he realizes no amount of attention can fill the hole created when his mother went missing.

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