

SOUL SURVIVORS

FATAL DISEASES DON'T DISCRIMINATE. ALL-STAR NBA PLAYERS, MILLIONAIRE ENTREPRENEURS AND NOTEWORTHY MCs AREN'T IMMUNE. FIVE PEOPLE RECOUNT LIFE AFTER NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

as told to Anslam Samuel *photography* Michael Schreiber

ALONZO MOURNING, 37

NBA BASKETBALL PLAYER (MIAMI HEAT)

ILLNESS Diagnosed in 2000 with local segmental glomerular sclerosis (FSGS) kidney disease

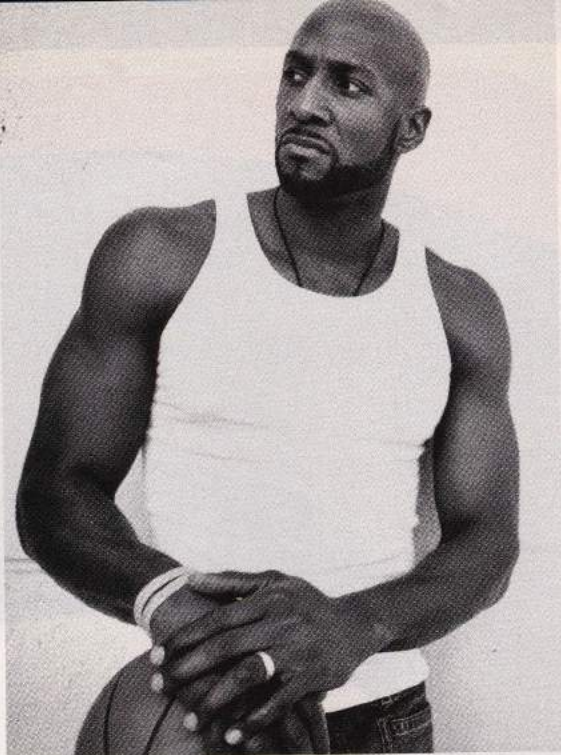
PROGNOSIS Without a transplant, possibly fatal

Before I was diagnosed, I felt lethargic. Because my kidneys weren't functioning appropriately, my body retained a lot of the fluids that my kidneys weren't helping my body

get rid of. It was kinda tough for me [outside of basketball], let alone running up and down the court. When I came home, I was spent, man; I went straight to bed. I didn't have any energy to do anything but sleep and get ready for practice the next day.¶ During my routine preseason physical, the doctor detected some abnormalities in my

CURRENT STATUS

Three years after his transplant, Mourning is wrapping up his 13th NBA season and does regular charity work through his Overtown Youth Center. He will have to take anti-rejection meds twice a day for the rest of his life.



body chemistry. He had a biopsy done to see exactly what was going on, and when my results came back, it showed that I had FSGS. Evidently, I have this gene in my body that was triggered by something. They don't know what, but there's a chance it could've been the anti-inflammatories I was taking over the years because of injuries. Actually, a lot of football players, once they retire, have kidney and liver issues.¶ The doctor told me that unless I was able to find a [kidney] donor, I'd probably be on dialysis for the rest of my life. That's a four- to six-hour process, three to four times a week—a washing machine for your blood, to put it simply—and some people die going through that. I had just won a gold Olympic medal, witnessed the birth of my daughter and was coming off an incredible year in the NBA. My life was going well, and then everything came crashing down.¶ Still, I never had depression. I had lived an incredible life. Even if my life had ended there, I could look back and say, "Man, I did more in my short lifetime than men in their 80s ever had the opportunity to do."¶ Luckily, I was able to find a donor—my second cousin who I hadn't seen in over 20 years. He came back into my life because my grandmother was on her deathbed. He just happened to be in the hospital room when ESPN announced that I had to retire from the NBA because I needed a transplant. He came in to get tested and was a match. We were able to do the transplant on Dec. 19, 2003, which I celebrate as my second birthday.¶ With any transplanted organ, there's a 30 percent chance of rejection, but you can decrease those chances if you take care of your body. So I don't drink or smoke, I eat relatively healthily, exercise quite a bit and I take my meds. I've been given a second chance to live, and I don't want to go through that procedure ever again. It took seven months of rehabilitation to get back to doing what I do best: playing basketball. Every athlete wants to retire on their own terms, so for me to get to come back and win a championship is a relief. You're able to kind of exhale, like finally.

DAMON DASH, 36

ENTREPRENEUR

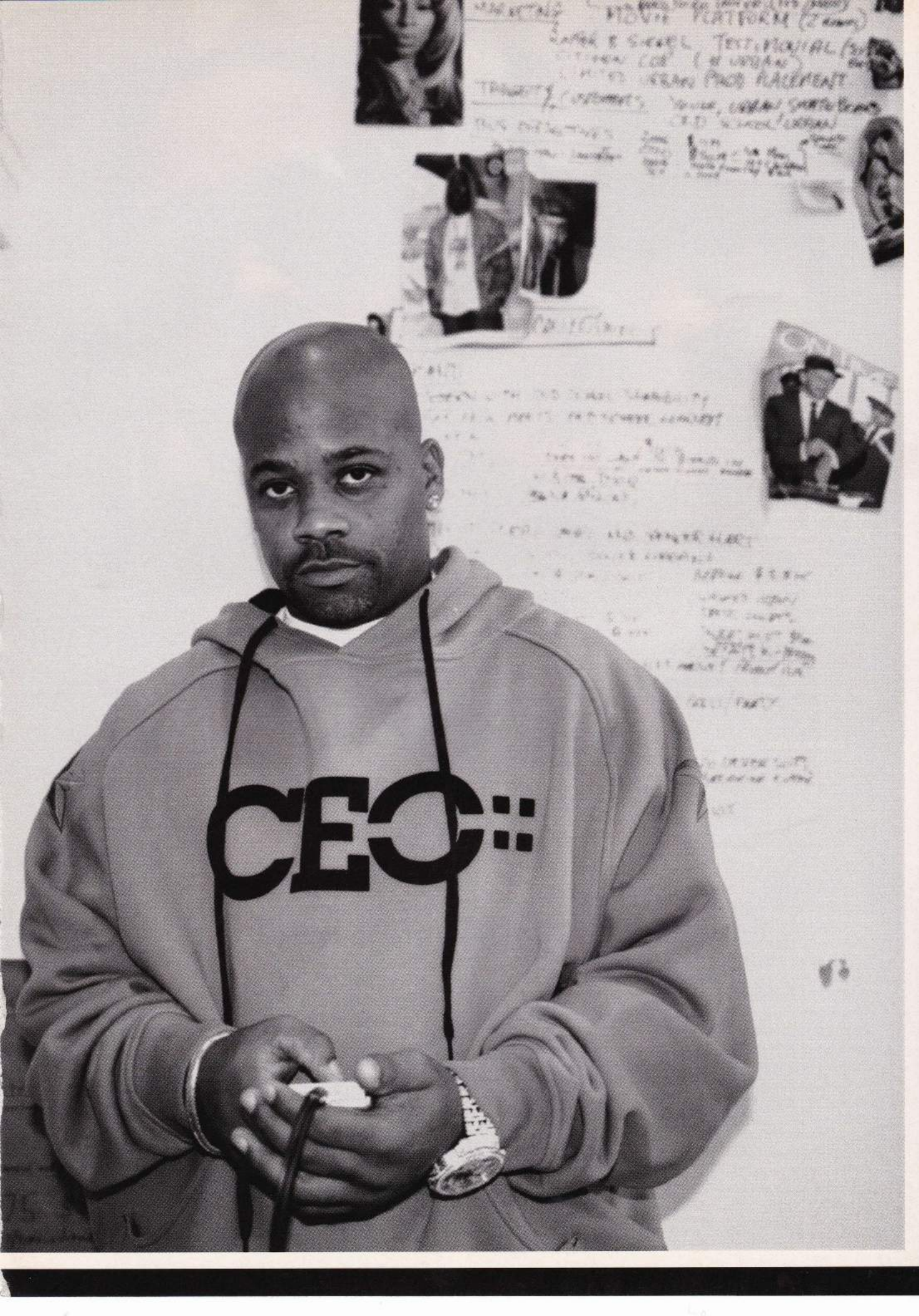
ILLNESS Diagnosed in 1986 with diabetes mellitus type 1

PROGNOSIS Good, with proper care

When I was 15, all of a sudden I just started losing mad weight—I was urinating a lot, and lost my appetite. I thought I had the bomb, like AIDS or something, so I was scared to go to the doctor. I was just too exhausted, and I couldn't move, but eventually [I went]. The doctor was like, "You got diabetes." I was celebrating, like, "Yes!" I embraced diabetes because I didn't know what was wrong with me. I thought I was dying.¶ Nobody in my family has it, so I don't know where I got it. I think it might've been 'cause I was stressed or I was part of a bigger picture—like I was meant to be here so I can be a spokesperson for it, because if you don't understand the disease, you won't take care of it. It took me a long time to really start to understand and take care of it. This is a 24-hour disease.¶ One big misconception is that it's all about sugar, but actually it's all about carbs, which turn into sugar in your body. You really have to monitor your carb intake and take insulin all day. That's why I have a personal chef who prepares my meals and tells me how many carbs are in the food. For every 10 carbs, I have to take one needle of insulin to balance it out. So if something has 50 carbs, I have to take five needles.¶ Diabetes doesn't affect you immediately, but it catches up as you get older. If it's not regulated, your body will start breaking down internally. You can lose your limbs because of circulation; you gotta get your teeth checked out like four times a year instead of two; you gotta get your eyes checked out once a year, 'cause blood vessels in your eyes could pop, and you can go blind. If you don't take care of yourself, you could die—badly.¶ I was living reckless until I was about 25, then I started to be like, I have a bunch of money and kids and don't want to have to get one of my arms or legs cut off, or lose my sight, just from being stupid; I don't wanna die. So I got on my game. I'm lucky to be in a position where I can afford to have the support I have. But honestly, it's the knowledge and education about diabetes that's important, because you don't wanna have your life shortened. You've just gotta take care of yourself.¶ There are a lot of diabetics in the African-American community, like Patti LaBelle and Halle Berry, but you'd be surprised that a lot of people are ashamed of it. I don't know why, man. Being someone influential, I feel it's my responsibility to talk about it, 'cause cool niggas get diabetes too. Of course, I'd rather not have diabetes, but if I got it, fuck it. There are worse things I could have.

CURRENT STATUS

In addition to promoting his various business ventures (CEO Clothing, Pro Keds, Dash Films), Dash is also an advocate for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation. He continues to monitor his diet and take insulin shots regularly.



CEO



MOVIE PLATFORM (2 days)
LARRY & SUELL TEST, VICTORIAL (1971)
CITIZEN COB (1936)
HIT 1970 YEARS PACE RACEMENT
TRAGEDY / CONQUEST
THIS ENTERTAINMENT

ALL
THESE ARE THE 100 MOST IMPORTANT
FILMS IN THE HISTORY OF THE MOVIE INDUSTRY
AND THE WORLD

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LYNISE WALTERS, 33

RAPPER/AUTHOR a.k.a. Queen Pen

ILLNESS Diagnosed in 2002 with a pituitary tumor

PROGNOSIS Uncertain without surgery

I know my body, and I knew for a fact I wasn't pregnant. So when, about four years ago, I was in the shower and noticed my breast leaking, I immediately called my doctor. After he [confirmed I wasn't pregnant], he decided to check my pituitary count and took some blood. The average count is like 30-something, but mine was like 96. I had a pituitary tumor in my brain.¶ The pituitary gland controls your hormones, so the tumor caused my body to have different symptoms, like pregnancy. Even though I'm not 50-something years old, I'll have hot flashes and stuff like that. And my God, the headaches that I get are indescribable. I've been

through a lot of pain. I've pushed out four kids; I know what pain is. Those migraines are right up there with labor, 'cause it's like your whole body locks down, and you can't do anything. The first time it happened it was so bad that I was scared to go to sleep 'cause I thought I wasn't gonna wake up.¶ Usually a pituitary tumor is small...but mine is a macro tumor, which sits next to my right eye, causing damage to my

CURRENT STATUS

Queen works with troubled girls through her domestic violence outreach program, while continuing to write novels. She also plans to launch her own record label. Despite chronic migraines, she continues to refuse surgery until the tumor shrinks to an operable size.

optic nerve. I have bad vision now. I haven't had the tumor taken out yet, 'cause when you're dealing with the brain, it's a very funny thing. They'll open up my head and something else will go wrong. So, nah, I'm not really ready to deal with getting my head cut open.¶ To be honest, when they tell me about surgery, I hear them talking but I don't be listening. I'm not letting them scare me. I mean, anything could happen. I could have an aneurysm on the operating table. It's not a small tumor: It's a huge tumor. God has the last word, yo, and one thing I refuse to give up is my faith. I started taking different medications and treatments to shrink the tumor instead, and the holistic approach worked for me more than anything. It's just I got pregnant with my youngest child, and the herbs I was taking were too strong for the baby, so I had to stop.¶ You know what's crazy? I ain't even going to the doctor no more. Honestly, I just stopped 'cause it's stressful. I had to tell my family and friends, "Listen, I'ma be all right." The best thing I can do is prepare. I pray for the best but prepare for the worst. That's why I'ma make sure my kids are all right, and accomplish everything I've been trying to accomplish in my life. I tell people I have a 10-year goal, but I only have five years to get it done. So I'm working double-time. I can't let this illness hinder me.

REGGIE GIBSON, 36

RAPPER a.k.a. Saafir

ILLNESS Spinal tumor detected in 2005

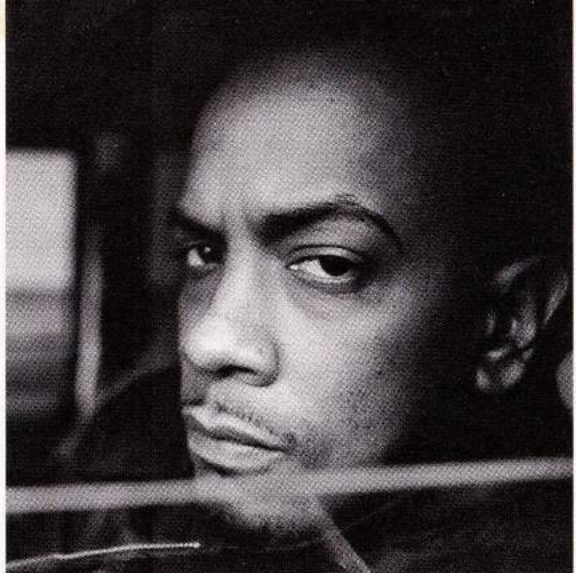
PROGNOSIS Possible paralysis by age 45 if it had been left untreated

Back in 2000, I started noticing that I was going numb in my legs, under my armpits and stomach. I done been through a few things—car and motorcycle accidents, shot twice and stabbed—so I thought my body was just giving out on me, and I ignored it. But the reality of the situation

CURRENT STATUS

Prior to his operation, Saafir recorded his fourth full-length album, *Good Game*, and continues to perform and pursue acting. He still experiences persistent numbness in his limbs but should make a full recovery with rehab.

was that I had a tumor in my spine that was blocking the fluid from my brain that goes down to the nerve endings to the limbs.¶ My stupid ass waited like five years before I went to get checked out. I was like, "Yo, I'm numb. I can't feel this. I can't feel that." So the doctors took an MRI and found the tumor. It was about the size of a bullet and was in the upper part of my spine, like right in the back of my neck.¶ The doctor told me I was gonna lose feeling after the surgery and there was a 50/50 chance I might not walk again. It took me nine months to decide to go through with it. The surgery took seven hours, but because I left it unchecked for so long, my spinal cord was damaged. You have a gang of nerves in your neck...and I'm numb now from the chest down, but it gets progressively better over time. I've only been out of the hospital for a few months.¶ In the hospital, they had to put me in a contraption and roll me to the bathroom, 'cause I refused to go in the bedpan. I just refused. So they got me up whenever I needed to. But, for real, that was like the hardest thing I've ever had to deal with as far as maintaining through it. It takes like a year for an inch of nerve to heal, so I'ma be rehabbin' for a couple years.¶ I didn't really tell nobody I was in the hospital. I didn't want anybody to know, 'cause I was in bad shape, man. I didn't want nobody to see me that weak. I was just depressed about being in a situation where I had to go through a period of disability. I had never been in a position like that, where I had to depend strictly on faith and patience.¶ [When I found out it had spread] I was busting down in prayer every day begging Allah to remove it. I went back three months later; it was all gone. Except for the one at the base of my neck, the tumors on my spine were gone. Disappeared. Doctors were baffled.¶ Just the little time I was in the wheelchair killed me. It tested a nigga's patience for real, like, I couldn't be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. And people who are dealing with that are super-strong mentally, man. At the same time, I embraced the experience because it humbled me—really, it strengthened me—because I didn't have a choice. It was either lay down or get down. Well, I'm getting' down.

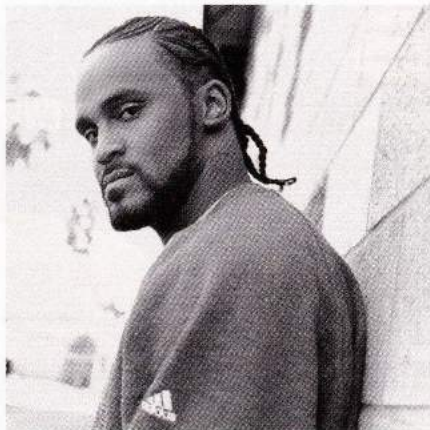


RONNY TURIAF, 24

NBA BASKETBALL PLAYER (L.A. LAKERS)

ILLNESS Enlarged aortic root found in 2005

PROGNOSIS Without regular medication or surgery, he was expected to live three or four more years



CURRENT STATUS

Just six months after surgery, Turiaf was able to make his NBA debut with the Lakers, becoming an impact player off the bench. He is currently off medication but has follow-up visits with his doctor every three months.

I've always had a bigger heart than usual, but it was still within the charts. For some reason, a month and a half after I signed with the Lakers and went in for the usual physical, I found out that my heart had gotten bigger. Actually, I had an enlarged aortic root, which means that my root was two and a half to three times bigger than usual. That condition could have caused my heart to leak and eventually explode. To my knowledge, there's no chance of surviving that kind of heart attack. So we had to make a choice; Either I stop playing basketball, or I have surgery to repair it.¶ I dealt with the news pretty good at first, but then one day I was talking to one of my friends about it, and I let my guard down and was very overwhelmed. I felt like I was letting my family down, because I left my house when I was 14 years old to play ball overseas. I was away from them for all those years, and then for everything to start falling apart? About 10 days later I was having surgery.¶ My valve was healthy and wasn't damaged, so they just replaced the part of my aorta that was too big with some plastic device. They had to crack my ribs open to do the procedure. It was supposed to take about seven hours, but it ended up being like eight because I had a blood clot, and my heart

stopped. It must've been a tough situation for my mom and all my friends who flew down to be with me. I woke up afterward and saw everybody crying around me.¶ Recovery has been long. Sometimes I still feel pain in the scar on my chest if I work out pretty hard for a day or two. I'll be sore for a couple of hours, but it's not a big deal because I've been through such a long process. The first five or six months were hell; I wasn't able to pick up a cup of water or put my clothes on by myself. For a young man to be able to feel so helpless was tough. Just picture yourself on the verge of playing your first season in the NBA and then not being able to put on your sock by yourself. Then your body is craving the drugs because you're hurting so bad. But every day I had a little more hope.¶ I was actually able to play basketball three months after surgery. The first week or two back on court I wasn't nervous at all, but my heart rate was so fast I couldn't last too long. I was scared about getting hurt, but after a while I just forgot about it and played without thinking about it.