

## Fostering a new life for kids

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Justin Riggs' life was on the line when he entered Bishop Diego High School, and it went way beyond his position as the biggest player on the football team.

He had been knocked out of kilter by one of the worst hits a young teen ever has to take.

"I was 12 or 13 when my mom died," recalled Riggs, who is now 29. "She had diabetes and got a really bad infection ... And that's when I entered the foster care system.

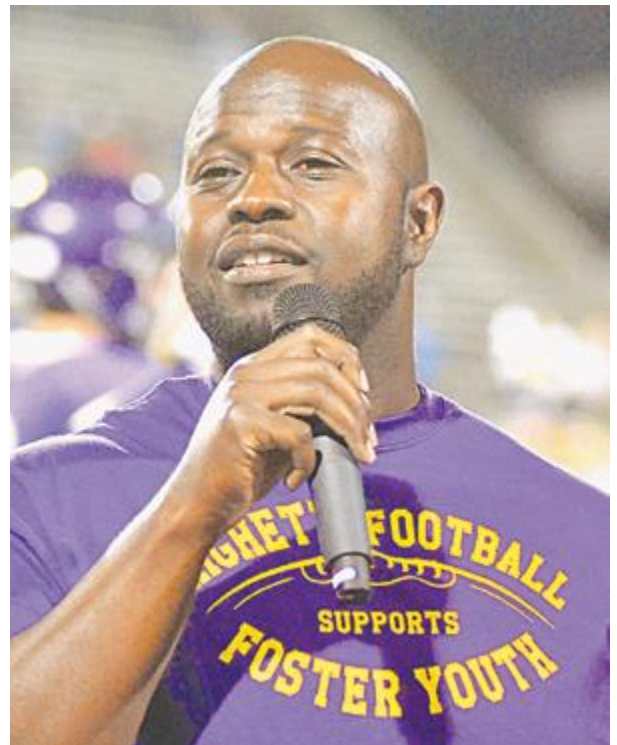
"It was devastating, and I definitely could've gotten into some real trouble after that. In fact, I was starting to head that way. There was a small window of about a year and a half after my mom died that a lot of things could've happened."

By age 14, however, big, bad Justin was intercepted by two loving foster parents. And while his birth mother Regina had given him a "solid foundation," it was Lompoc's B and Linda Williams who guided him toward becoming a good student and teammate, a college graduate, a productive citizen - and how even a father himself.

"I met B on my 14th birthday and moved in with him shortly after that," Riggs said. "They really helped me see the bigger picture. I connected so well with B Williams. His personality was so very open and caring, and he was so honest. My transition was smoother than others I'd heard about because the trust factor was there."

B Williams would pick up Riggs after school every day at Bishop and drive him to their home in Lompoc.

By MARK PATTON, NEWS-PRESS SENIOR WRITER



Former Bishop Diego standout Justin Riggs is now doing his part to support foster children in Santa Barbara County.

BILL MORSON/NEWS-PRESS

"We'd spend that whole hour driving home by talking about everything," Riggs said. "We'd discuss our day, discuss life. We had so many conversations."

Riggs is now part of a bigger conversation, helping to recruit families and support for Our County, Our Kids - a program sponsored by Santa Barbara County's Department of Social Services.

He took the microphone during halftime of Friday's Dos Pueblos High football game at Righetti to recruit support for the 400 foster children in the Our County, Our Kids program. It marked the second-straight year that Righetti has offered the community setting of one of its football games to help the program's outreach.

"We hope families will be inspired to open their homes and hearts for youth and teens in need," Warriors coach Ed Herrmann said.

(To help, visit [ourcountyyourkids.org/sbc](http://ourcountyyourkids.org/sbc))

The program remains near and dear to Riggs' heart.

"I feel like there's a certain stigma that foster children get," he said. "I could see it with myself, when I was young - when you don't know how to control your emotions too well. You lash out.

"Couple that with the stupid things that young people do, anyway ... It's just so important to have people who understand and are patient and are willing to stick with you, and not give up on you."

Although Riggs moved to Lompoc to live with his foster parents, B Williams encouraged him to attend high school at Bishop.

"My mother went to Santa Barbara High, so I thought I'd be a Don," he said. "But B is a religious man, and he thought the atmosphere there, and in particular the smaller setting, would be best for me."

Riggs stood out immediately when he arrived at Bishop during the autumn of 2002.

"He was probably the biggest freshman I'd ever seen," Cardinals coach Tom Crawford said. "I want to say he was like 270 pounds as a ninth grader.

"He was also this jovial, gentle-hearted young man. He was very, very popular when he was here. I know he didn't have it easy, but I watched him mature incredibly during his time here."

Riggs, who had exceeded the size limits of the local Youth Football League when he was a child, was excited to finally get the chance to play organized football. He was a guard on offense and both a tackle and a nose guard on defense. As a senior, he stood 6-foot and 310 pounds.

"He was actually very athletic," Crawford recalled. "He even played on our basketball team."

Riggs helped the Cardinals reach the CIF-Southern Section playoffs during his senior season in the fall of 2005.

"The thing I remember most was just the camaraderie aspect of being on the team, especially at such a small school," Riggs said. "We had maybe 25 guys on the roster, and everybody was really close."

He continued on to Grambling State University in Louisiana where he earned a bachelor's degree in economics. He played recreational sports there for fun and fitness, and trimmed 50 pounds off his frame.

"When he came home during a break from school, I didn't even recognize him," Crawford said. "He had transformed himself physically."

Riggs now lives in Lompoc and works in the construction industry. His son, Miles, is one year old.

"It's amazing," he said of becoming a father. "It's the best experience of my life so far."

"It's definitely a lot of work for Monique and I, but being a parent is a lot more fun than people let on."

Riggs had good examples. He had such a trusting relationship with B that he even talked him into revealing that his first name is actually Barclay.

"He told me that when he was younger, people would always get his name wrong," Riggs said. "Going by just B made it easier."

"I guess it was one of those things that he didn't go around talking about, but we did have that kind of relationship."

And it helped Justin Riggs make a name for himself.

Mark Patton's column appears on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. Email: [mpatton@newspress.com](mailto:mpatton@newspress.com)

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