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# ONE WOMAN'S REFUSAL TO LET LOSS HAVE THE FINAL WORD

Ucal McKenzie, BSBA '99, died long before his time. Suzanne McKenzie, BS '00, is making sure that his joyous spirit lives on.



#### **FEATURES**

By Alyssa Giacobbe | Photograph by Faith Ninivaggi

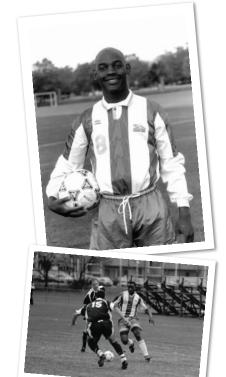
In early 2009, Ucal McKenzie, BSBA '99, was playing a semi-pro soccer game at Moakley Park in South Boston. He left the field to get some water, teammates remember, and a few moments later, collapsed on the sidelines. Someone performed CPR, but by the time paramedics arrived, it was too late to save him from cardiac arrest. He was just 32 years old.

His wife, Suzanne McKenzie, BS '00, remembers Ucal had complained a bit of chest pains in the weeks before, but they'd both brushed it off. He had no family history of heart disease, no previous issues. "There's a chance that the pain was more serious, and he didn't tell me because he wanted to play," she says. "It's something that I'm regretful for not catching. But I don't think I could have known."

Suzanne was consumed by grief following the incident, unable to believe that her husband, Suffolk soccer player and youth mentor, was so suddenly gone. She knew she needed to find some way to honor him, further his work—and help herself heal.

Within just a few months, she launched the Ucal McKenzie Breakaway Foundation (UMBF), not quite sure what the foundation would do at first; she just knew it would be dedicated to fostering connection and wellness through soccer and health education, that it would benefit the people who needed it most, and that it would be a way for Ucal's work to live on.

Soon that vision coalesced into a Soccer and Health Camp, a weeklong sports and education camp for girls and boys ages 8 to 18. Since then, it has grown to about 100 kids per session in Boston, plus another week in Hartford, Connecticut, and a third planned for New York City by next spring. Many of the kids are from underserved communities and attend for as little as \$75 for the entire week, thanks to Suzanne's outside efforts to fund the foundation. That includes the clothing brand, Able Made, a public benefit corporation that Suzanne, a designer and entrepreneur, started in 2013, part of whose proceeds help fund UMBF.



On a sunny day in late July, Suzanne, now 45, stands on the sidelines at Wentworth's Sweeney Field in downtown Boston. It's the second day of the camp, and cheers and laughter come from all sides of the field as kids run through drills and high-five each other and their coaches.

From the camp's start, it was important to Suzanne that it focus on more than just soccer, and cover a variety of health topics—including mental health, nutrition, and hands-only CPR with AED awareness training—in a fun and engaging way. "Youth sports is out of control," she says. She's wearing a Kelly-green hat featuring a UMBF patch and a white Able Made T-shirt, looking very much the former youth soccer player she is. "When I was young, my friend's parents coached us for free. The idea that people are getting rich off youth sports gets me mad because it comes at the cost to the families—it's not affordable or accessible. There's no reason for that, especially when you can do it differently."

That first year, she ran the camp with the help of many of Ucal's former teammates and student athletes, many of whom have returned every year since to volunteer their time. As the camp's reputation has grown, so has its coaching staff; its roster now includes collegiate and professional coaches from the likes of the University of Connecticut and the New England Revolution Academy—a testament to Suzanne's hard work but also to how much her husband meant to people when he was alive.



### A shared passion for soccer—and for working with kids

Ucal was born in Jamaica and came to the United States with his family when he was 16. He was a natural athlete and gifted soccer player—quick, agile, and very fun to watch. He arrived at Suffolk University in 1993 as a forward and wasted no time making the field his stage: His freshman year, he was named "Rookie of the Year" after helping lead the team to a 10-4 season following a 2-8-1 record the previous year. "He helped turn the entire program around," recalls longtime University Athletic Director Jim Nelson.

Suzanne remembers one game when Ucal made a goal from nearly half-field. "He just blasted a shot and he scored," she says. "He was always scoring. I think he could have actually played Division I. I would say Suffolk got lucky by discovering him."

But what people remember most about Ucal was his laugh. That he was humble, and

kind. That he enjoyed making people happy, and comfortable. He was easy to be around. He loved music and people. Everyone loved him, too, but especially Suzanne.

They met as floormates at what is now Smith Hall. At first they were friends, part of a diverse crew that they dubbed "the UN," kids from Jamaica, Argentina, Puerto Rico, Cape Verde, and the US. "Different backgrounds, different cultures, but we all just gelled," recalls Suzanne, who grew up in Maine. "It was a really formative culture to be in. Probably the best college experience I could have had."

She had been a three-sport athlete back in high school—soccer, basketball, and softball—but arrived at Suffolk eager to figure out who she was "without sports attached." Watching Ucal play, however, made her realize how much she missed soccer. They bonded over their shared love of the sport and began to spend more time together when he agreed to help her start a women's club team at Suffolk. The romantic progression, she says, was natural.

After graduation, Suzanne and Ucal moved into a condo in Dorchester. She pursued a career in graphic design, working for Arnold Worldwide and Continuum on major brands such as Sprint, American Express, ESPN, and Timberland, as well as on social-minded campaigns like the Truth campaign against smoking. Ucal worked as an accountant before going back to school at Lesley University for his master's in school counseling, eventually landing a job as a high school guidance counselor and head varsity soccer coach at Newton North High School.

Ucal's true passion was working with kids, and especially kids in need. In his downtime, he coached for Valeo Futbol Academy, a Newton-based nonprofit focused on developing leadership skills in high-level athletes, regardless of socioeconomic status. On the field and at school, he made a point to connect with his students and his players; finding out what drove them, what dreams they harbored, what support they needed to achieve those dreams. He and Suzanne were married in 2007 by the ocean in Pine Point, a section of Scarborough, Maine, just outside of Portland.



#### A creative game-changer

Shortly afterward, Suzanne launched her own branding and consulting business in Boston, working with high-profile clients in the fields of fashion and design, but, as much as she was able, specifically on social-mission focused campaigns. After Ucal died, Suzanne

returned to that work, but everything she did came back to UMBF. When a poster calendar she designed to raise money for the foundation became a smash hit—thanks in large part to contributions from famous branding designers, including Alan Dye from Apple, whom she'd connected with professionally—she decided she might try her hand in fashion design. She had no direct experience, but by then she had plenty of professional contacts.

Suffolk had primed her well for the work. "At Suffolk, I was able to be really entrepreneurial," she says. "I started out in advertising but was able to connect with art school faculty and get myself into the graphic design program, where I had the opportunity to grow. I feel like that was a really good springboard."

She moved to New York in 2012 to work for the Museum of Modern Art's design group, and consulted on the side for Tom Ford, Supergoop, tennis star Maria Sharapova, and others working in the fashion industry. At the same time, she was inspired by Ucal's memory to create Able Made—an upscale line of ready-to-wear apparel and accessories with a focus on organic and sustainable fabrics—dedicating the brand to him. "It was another way to raise awareness and funding for the foundation, but in a way that felt elevated," Suzanne says. She launched Able Made in 2013 with \$75,000 in angel investments and lots of hard, after-hours work, beginning by seeking out designer collaborations with brands such as Nike and Puma. Eventually, and organically, she grew the brand enough to not only help fund the foundation but also to partner with like-minded organizations, such as VH1's Save the Music Foundation, to fund music education for children.

"Partnerships were how we built the foundation, so it was natural for me to build the line in the same way," she says. At the same time, she could make up for her lack of a name in fashion by collaborating with trusted brands. "We could strategically draw upon other people's audiences."

That strategy worked. Slowly but surely, the line garnered attention and accolades from the fashion industry, as well as some famous fans—including Boston Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla, Patriots wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster, and the WNBA's Sue Bird. Shielding herself behind other brands also helped her be with her grief a little while longer. "I probably wasn't ready to lean into the story and really talk about it every day," she says. "I feel a little bit more comfortable with that now."

Suzanne kept her day job until 2022, when she finally decided to relaunch Able Made with less reliance on others for support. "Finally, I was like, let's step away from these collaborations, develop our own point of view, and focus everything on just the foundation," she says. "And since then, it's exploded. I wish we'd done this earlier."

The company now has stores in New York and Connecticut and is in the process of raising \$1.2 million in funding to expand further. "Soccer style is really universal right now," she says. "We're really speaking to the athlete mindset. If you like sports and style and sustainability, it's your jam."

## A campaign to save more lives

Suzanne saved perhaps the most important project, though, for this year. On a hot evening in late July, she stands before a crowd of friends, family, and supporters at Moakley Park to announce the launch of the UMBF's AED project—an effort to bring automated external defibrillators (AEDs) to public parks around Boston and, eventually, nationwide. A partnership between the City of Boston, UMBF, Able Made, Tufts, and the In A Heartbeat Foundation, the project recognizes the fact that had an AED been available to Ucal on that day in May 2009, he might have lived.

"The AED project has been there in my head since the very beginning, and a swirling conversation for a while, but for some reason, this past year, it just clicked," she says. "Someone performed CPR [on Ucal], but your chances are so much better when you have an AED." Her work had connected her with In A Heartbeat founder and President Mike







Papale, who was literally brought back to life by an AED after suffering cardiac arrest in 2006, and now uses his foundation to provide organizations around the country with AEDs.

Suzanne was able to connect with Boston Parks Commissioner and fellow Suffolk alum Ryan Woods, MPA '18, and pitch him on her idea. "It doesn't matter your age," she says. "Cardiac arrest can affect anyone." She points to Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin, who collapsed last January while playing, and to Bronny James, LeBron's son, who collapsed while playing basketball for USC and was brought back to life with the aid of an AED.

"We'd never thought about putting them outside, mostly due to the weather and maintenance," Woods says. "But if this pilot works out well, we'll pick other parks where we can implement the devices and then maybe eventually golf courses, outdoor theaters, all other sorts of places." They'll see how it's used over the next few months and ideally start rolling out more in the spring.

At camp, says Suzanne, the hands-only CPR and AED training session is one of the week's most popular. "Kids are empowered knowing that they could save a life," she says, "and they take the education home to their families." Woods is hoping to see similar education in schools and from coaches who use the public parks. "I think more exposure will make it just a little less scary," he says. Moakley Park was chosen as an ideal first location because of its heavy year-round use—but it's also fitting given Ucal's story.

Suzanne is ready, now, to talk more about it. "I don't think you ever stop missing the person or the impact of them not being here. You never really stop grieving," she says. If you're Suzanne McKenzie, you also don't stop trying. You focus on your goal, gather your team around you, and take your best shot. Like Ucal.

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