

It's Not About You

Have you ever heard the phrase, “there’s no ‘I’ in team?”

That message surely rang true on October 14th at BELIEVES, when Danny Wuerffel, former NFL QB, Heisman Trophy and Draddy Trophy winner with the Univ. of Florida, and current Executive Director of Desire Street Ministries (www.desirestreet.org) led a discussion on “It’s Not About You.”



Wuerffel, who won four SEC Championships in a row in college, and then got drafted by the New Orleans Saints in 1997, may first begin engaging everyone with gridiron anecdotes. Yet, throughout all he shares what is always present is an invitation to look beyond the story and see what’s important, what really matters.

Born in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, to a Lutheran minister who was a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force, and a mom who he says “is the sweetest lady you’ll ever meet,” Wuerffel was blessed to be raised in a Christian home and later got involved with Fellowship of Christian Athletes as he excelled in multiple sports in high school before graduating to go the University of Florida, where he played quarterback for Steve Spurrier and the Florida Gators.

“My thinking definition of being a Christian and my functioning belief system were not the same when I was younger,” Wuerffel said. “My functioning belief system was that being a Christian meant to be a good person.”

He shared that though he was finding success on the gridiron at the University of Florida, during his time there everything fell apart in his life at once – but God brought an older gentleman into his life and that’s when his relationship with the Lord became more personal and relational.

“The thing I found at Florida is that I would get a lot of credit for being a strong Christian because I was the star of the team,” Wuerffel said. “Later in my NFL career when I was not the star, I found around cut time that people’s belief systems and identities would get hit pretty hard and there was a lot of spiritual development that went on then.”

Throughout Wuerffel’s football career, there were many experiences he went through that now he shares with others in a way that brings to light parts of his faith journey.

“In my first start with the Saints in 1997, we were nearing the end of the game and on one particularly play I dropped back to pass,” Wuerffel recalled. “Right after releasing the pass I got hit by a defensive lineman. The crown of the defender’s helmet hit me on the side of my helmet. I couldn’t see anything. Everything went dark.”

What had actually happened was the defender hit Wuerffel and his helmet spun around so it was pitch black for him.

“At the time I thought I had died, and was seeing Jesus,” he chuckled.

One of Wuerffel’s Saints’ teammates on the offensive line went up to him after the play and asked him, “A lot of people think they see a light when having a near death experience. Did you see anything?”

Wuerffel responded, “I saw a light through this hole on the side of my helmet.”

Later in his NFL career when he was with the Green Bay Packers, Wuerffel said every time John Madden would call the game, at some point he would inevitably point out Wuerffel on the sideline and then replay the highlight of the play where Wuerffel's helmet got spun around and tell the viewing audience, "I want to show you one of my favorite plays."

"Let's go back to this play from another perspective," Wuerffel told the packed house of over 40 business men and women at BELIEVES. "Everything is going well for 9-10 guys in that play, but there is one problem – the QB can't see."



Wuerffel mentioned that thinking about the play from that perspective reminds him of a scene from the movie Patch Adams starring Robin Williams.

"There is a scene in the movie where this old guy holds up his hand and asks Patch, 'How many fingers do you see?' Patch responds, 'Four.' The old guy says, 'Four? You're crazy!!'"

Wuerffel goes on to tell that once the old guy leaves, Patch turns to someone and asks, "Who is that guy?"

The response – he is Dr. Arthur Mendelsohn, one of the smartest doctors in the world.

"Patch then went back to Mendelsohn, and Mendelsohn asked him again, how many fingers he saw," said Wuerffel. "Mendelsohn then tells Patch, 'You're looking at the wrong thing. Look beyond the fingers. Everyone sees the obvious. If you want to see what's important, what really matters, you have to look beyond.'"

This is why Wuerffel loves what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:18 – "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Or as Father John Kieran quoted Jesus from John 15:5 in his opening prayer at BELIEVES – "Apart from Me you can do nothing."

Though he's been successful in many things in life, Wuerffel shared with everyone that he feels the greatest threshold where we have moments for things to happen in our relationship with God is through pain, suffering, and failure – which he hates.

"Sometimes I think the best we can do is just to be present," said Wuerffel. "If we have been successful in life, oftentimes we can do lots of things to avoid these moments, but one way God can still get us is through something physical."

Wuerffel knows this from experience.

In 2011 after he had ended his NFL playing career, Wuerffel was in Montgomery, Alabama, working with one of Desire Street Ministries' partners.

“While I was there, I noticed my knees were feeling weak, so I went to see a doctor,” Wuerffel recalled. “Later that evening, in the middle of the night, someone came knocking on the door where I was staying – it was the doctor.”

He asked the doctor what he was doing there in the middle of the night.

The doctor said, “I came to see if you were breathing.”

Wuerffel was soon diagnosed with Guillain-Barre syndrome, a rare autoimmune disease disorder in which the body's immune system attacks part of the peripheral nervous system. The first symptoms of this disorder include varying degrees of weakness or tingling sensations in the legs, often followed by symmetrical weakness and abnormal sensations that spread to the arms and upper body.

Wuerffel experienced all of these symptoms.

If the symptoms get more severe, they can increase in intensity until certain muscles cannot be used at all, leaving a person almost totally paralyzed.

“I went through a really difficult time. It lasted longer than I ever thought it would. But fortunately I feel like all of that is in the rear-view mirror,” Wuerffel said. “I’m healthy and able to be active and exercise, and I’m just very grateful.”

In the midst of this difficult time in his life, he shared there were a lot of things he experienced and learned. One of those dealt with prayer.

“People all over the country were constantly communicating with us to ask how they could pray for me,” he shared. “When I was having some serious stomach and intestinal issues as a result of my medications and having to lie down all the time, I asked for some specific prayer for things to get back to normal in my stomach and intestines. One guy actually drove in from out-of-town and prayed over me for healing for this. Ten minutes later – things were back to normal.”



The whole experience with Guillain-Barre syndrome was one that Wuerffel said was severe, yet filled with lots of mercy and forced him to slow down.

“I think a big reason why we don’t slow down, is so we can stay busy,” Wuerffel mentioned. “A lot of things go on in our lives that we just stuff way down inside – especially as guys. For me being sick forced me to be still. It was really hard.”

On a bigger picture level, Wuerffel said there is an often-spoken quote that this reminds him of which states -- “Almost all the wars in the world could have been solved if men could have sat still for 30 minutes.”

“One of the biggest moments in life is when we finally realize – it’s not about you,” he stated. “I believe it’s how we’re designed to be, that we’re all a part of something bigger, though we each realize this through different experiences.”

Prior to his diagnosis with Guillain-Barre syndrome, Wuerffel shared he also had one of these moments when he and his family were still living in New Orleans, and he was with Desire Street Ministries in one of the worst neighborhoods in the nation.

“When Katrina hit, we had a one-story home and we lost everything in it. Everything was covered in eight feet of water. However, when we were watching all the news coverage of Katrina on TV, I realized we’d lost everything we had, but had all we needed.”

As Wuerffel and his family drove through the city after Katrina had passed, he said in many areas you could see house frames that were still standing but the houses were completely gutted.

“All of people’s stuff was piled in the street,” he recalled. “As I looked at all this it dawned on me that in just a week, all that was treasure was now trash. It just begs the question, ‘are we focused on eternal treasures?’”

It’s moments like these that Wuerffel says we can think back on and realize life is not about you, and if we can catch a picture of that, life can get oriented about the eternal.

Wuerffel, his wife, and their three kids, now reside in Decatur, Georgia. His biggest current connection to football is through his two sons – ages 10 and 8 – and occasional trips to Florida games. However, once a year, he is invited to go to New York City for the Heisman Trophy presentation.

“These days, people want autographs to sell them, so you have to be careful,” he told everyone. “A few years back, I went to New York for the Heisman Trophy ceremony and one kid was particularly persistent. He followed me into the bathroom for an autograph and gave me a mini-Gator helmet to sign.”

Wuerffel asked the kid who he wanted him to make the autograph out to, but the kid wouldn’t answer. Thinking the kid was trying to steal his signature, Wuerffel told the kid that if he didn’t tell him who to sign the helmet for, he wouldn’t give him an autograph.

The kid said, “I don’t know who you are, but I saw you with Tim Tebow and was wondering if you could get his autograph for me.”

“Ego hits are what I deal with,” Wuerffel told the crowd honestly with a smile.



Another time, Wuerffel shared he was going to an event hosted by Tim Tebow. When he was in the airport on the way to the event, Wuerffel stopped to get his shoes shined.

“I thought to myself, ‘Maybe this guy shining the shoes would want to meet a Heisman winner’ – which was a really arrogant thing to think or say,” Wuerffel revealed. “So I asked him if he’d ever met someone famous.”

“The guy said, ‘Son, the only people I meet on pedestals put themselves there.’”

So much of life is about being the best ordinary we can be, Wuerffel said after retelling this shoe shine moment.

The three things Wuerffel wanted to leave the BELIEVES audience with before he closed his remarks were:

1. Are you willing to be open to learn anew?
2. It's not about you
3. Regardless of how you did last quarter, we're not that important – but we're each important to God.

“When I think of the gospel, I always think of the following – ‘You are far worse than you think you are, but God loves you more than you could ever imagine.’”

In the remaining minutes of the BELIEVES session, two business people in attendance asked Wuerffel about Desire Street Ministries and his thoughts on what is missing in the inner city that keeps them down.

Wuerffel shared after Katrina, his Board's direction for Desire Street Ministries was to take care of the kids, rebuild and relaunch in New Orleans, and spread the model of the ministry beyond New Orleans.

Currently, Desire Street is in the midst of an \$8 million project to complete the rebuilding in New Orleans, and the ministry has expanded to support eight urban ministries throughout the SE United States – two of which are in Atlanta.

What's missing in the inner city that keeps them down?

Wuerffel said that's a great question, but it is very complex.

“A lot of things weave together,” he told everyone. “In New Orleans, it hit me hard that the valedictorian of a public high school usually couldn't pass the ACT. When I learned this I thought to myself ‘What!!!’ But then you realize it is hard to make good choices when you eat one meal a day, and it is soda pop and potato chips, and all this other stuff is going on around you.”

Wuerffel and his team at Desire Street Ministries believe that those best equipped to change a neighborhood are those who live there. This is why their model for ministry is to work side-by-side with ministry partners who share a calling to a physical presence in their neighborhood.

“We partner for 3-5 years to develop leaders and support them,” Wuerffel said, “and this joint effort moves us forward to the goal of revitalizing urban communities two steps at a time.”



After speaking about Desire Street Ministries, Wuerffel got one final question.

“If Jesus played football, what position would he play?” one attendee asked.

Wuerffel said, “Well I know if he was the water boy, there would be some water turning into wine.”