Reggie Brooks

(Class of 1999)

Reggie Brooks came to Notre Dame in autumn 1989 from Tulsa, Oklahoma. He majored in management information systems and was a standout running back on the Notre Dame football team. After graduation he played four years in the NFL and two years in Europe. He returned to the university in 2004 and now serves as manager for monogram relations. He and his wife, Christina Arnold Brooks (Class of 2014), and their five children live in Granger, Indiana.

"DID YOU SIGN THAT LETTER OF INTENT?" MY FATHER ASKED.

"Yes sir," I replied.

My answer prompted my father to hang up, leaving me alone on the phone with only the dial tone and my word. I had called him hoping to gain a sympathetic ear concerning my desire to transfer from Notre Dame.

My freshman year had been tough. Everything about Notre Dame was foreign to me—from the nuns doling out discipline in the office of student affairs; to DuLac, the student handbook; to parietals; to priests in residence checking you at the door of your dorm after dark; to white kids drinking with their parents and leaving cases of beer at my door as gifts. I was constantly surrounded by people I didn't understand and who, I felt, didn't understand me. But my dad let me know that night that I had to own what had been my first adult decision: to follow my big brother Tony (Class of 1992) to Notre Dame.

I had been recruited heavily by "the U" (the University of Miami), Oklahoma State, UCLA, Arizona State, and Princeton, and in the end made the choice to attend Notre Dame. Now I had to make the best of it. And eventually I did.

Most people have no idea what it's like to be a student-athlete for a Division I football program, especially one that has the kind of storied history that Notre Dame does. Under Coach Lou Holtz, Notre Dame had amassed a bevy of blue-chip players at every position. In my case, I was an underclassman at running back behind my brother Tony, Ricky Watters, Rodney Culver, Raghib Ismail, and Anthony Johnson—each an all-American who would later be drafted into the NFL, making an indelible mark.

Essentially I had to operate at a high level at the busy intersection of academics and football, while navigating the cultural and religious divide my own life experiences brought to the table. It came to a head for the first time the summer after my freshman year. My schedule was grueling by any standard. Every day during summer school I ate an early breakfast, had a full morning of classes side by side with some of the brightest young people in the country, and then went straight to the kind of workouts that would leave you vomiting until the dry heaves took over—all before the unofficial afternoon practice without coaches, a kind of voluntary seven-on-seven.

On one particular day, instead of eating I used my break between workouts and afternoon practice to head back to Grace Hall for a quick nap. But I forgot my key. I was hungry and exhausted and beginning to question the worth of the "ND" experience. The rector let me into the dorm and I walked toward the elevators, explaining my predicament and being only halfway conscious of his disapproving glare. He followed, lecturing me on responsibility and how I had disturbed him. The disgust in his voice seemed to escalate with my silence.

The elevator doors opened and I stepped in, but he was not finished telling me about my entitled football player mentality and so he grabbed my arm. "Don't walk away from me when I'm talking to you!" he hissed.

With one clean jerk, I broke free of his grasp and the elevator doors closed. My tired muscles—the same muscles I had worked incessantly to earn a spot on the field to represent Notre Dame, to rep-

resent him—had responded by reflex. When I got to my room, I fell into my bed and immediately fell asleep.

A week later, I received a notification in my mailbox concerning a meeting with Sister Jean Lenz of student affairs. When I arrived she told me I had been "charged" with assaulting a rector. The student affairs version of the story said I had pushed the rector to the ground. I told her that version was false. I told her that I did not like white people grabbing me in an aggressive manner and, if I had hit him, there would have been a mark. I had been taught to defend myself, but I did not hit, shove, or push him. I had simply jerked away from him. With no witnesses, it was my word against his and his word carried more weight. I was put on disciplinary probation with the university and sent to Coach Holtz for athletic discipline.

At the time, I don't think Sr. Jean understood the depth and breadth of the racial experience I had walked onto campus with. I had grown up in a very segregated city—Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the late 1970s and 1980s. Tulsa was a city known for a few things—big oil, Oral Roberts University, singer Charlie Wilson and the GAP Band, and, infamously, the 1921 Race Riots, a two-day orgy of violence by the white community during which untold numbers of black citizens were massacred and "Black Wall Street," at the time the wealthiest black community in the country, was destroyed.

That episode had been fueled by a false story. The contrived tale of a black man attacking a white woman on a downtown elevator still haunted the people and the dilapidated structures on the north side of Tulsa where I grew up. Their story was never told in the history books, and survived only through the whispered stories around the dinner tables of black families that had survived or knew people who had. It wasn't until a few years ago, when a documentary film and several books about the riots were published, that the world recognized and recounted the tragedy.

Although roughly seventy years had passed since the riots in my hometown when I came to Notre Dame, that day—the day I was placed on disciplinary probation without evidence—I felt I was again experiencing the painful residuum of racism. My voice, my word, *my being* lacked the credibility to garner a fair review of the situation before I was sentenced. And where could I go from there?

My Dad knew what I had already been through in my short time at Notre Dame when I called him. He had been born in Texas and moved to Tulsa a few years after the race riots. He had experienced the harsh realities of racism growing up in segregated Tulsa as the first four-sport letterman student-athlete at Booker T. Washington High School. He hadn't just heard the stories; he had survived them. He raised me to persevere in the beautiful face of challenge. I could not quit, but I had to ask and answer some serious questions. I had to be willing to work harder than the average Notre Dame student to succeed.

I questioned how the Notre Dame community could know and understand the historical baggage I carried without taking the time to talk to me and find out what experiences culminated in what I considered a normal, reflexive reaction. I wondered if my new Notre Dame family was willing to know me beyond a one-dimensional image of a black student-athlete. And I pondered whether I was willing to stick around long enough to get to know Notre Dame and help the university discover the necessity of valuing the voice of every student-athlete or not.

Almost twenty years after leaving Notre Dame as an undergraduate, I came back to work for the university as an administrator in the athletic department. I was still trying to answer those questions I asked as a kid, but was determined not to quit.

After all, my signature will always be on that letter of intent.