

Don't ever give up

I've always believed that people cross our paths for a reason. And sometimes the most random of occurrences can introduce you to someone who, quite literally, will change your life.

Such was the case for me last winter. I had never heard of Jay Dobyns, although I later learned that he's quite a legend.



But last January, a ironic series of events led to our introduction, and for me to hear him speak at a conference.

Images can be deceiving

Just looking at Jay, people who don't know him might conclude that he was either a biker or a UFC fighter. He's a mountain of a man with a shaved head, covered in tattoos, biceps bigger than my thighs, a scraggly goatee, and huge silver rings in the shapes of dragons, swords and serpents on every finger. But his bright eyes and mega-watt smile are hints that there is much more to his story.

As I learned more about him, I discovered that he's the furthest thing from a gangster; actually Jay is one of our nation's most highly decorated federal agents! During a 25+ year career as a undercover special agent for the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, Jay conducted over 500 undercover operations, specializing in extremely violent crimes. He was recognized with 12 ATF "Special Act" awards for investigative excellence, two ATF Gold Stars for critical injuries suffered during an investigation, and an ATF Distinguished Service Medal for outstanding investigative

accomplishment. He also received the Attorney General's Medal of Valor, and was honored as the "Top Cop" by the National Association of Police Officers.

Much of his undercover work has been affiliated with our nation's most high-profile criminal and terrorism events, such as the Los Angeles riots that followed the acquittal in the Rodney King beating trial; the Branch Davidian standoff in Waco, Texas, the Columbine High School massacre in Littleton, Colo., and Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. He and one of his partners, Vince Cefalu, were also highly instrumental in preventing the bombing of several Las Vegas casinos — which could have killed thousands

— following the Oklahoma City bombing.

But he is best known as one of the only people who has ever successfully infiltrated the Hell's Angels. As "Jaybird Davis," he spent two years with them in an extraordinarily dangerous assignment as part of "Operation Black Biscuit." Jay later chronicled that experience in his memoir *No Angel: My Harrowing Undercover Journey to the Inner Circle of the Hells Angels* which became a *New York Times* best seller and has been translated into more than a dozen languages. A feature film based on the book is in process, and earlier this year, he and a partner completed work on a short film called "Big Red Friday," a very realistic and intense look at his final week as an undercover operative before

his retirement.

A defense attorney once described Jay as "A government-trained 'Predator' repeatedly sent on seek and destroy missions in search of drugs, guns and violence, with instructions to succeed at any cost and without regard for the agent himself or those he crosses paths with."

Let's pause this introduction for a moment and dig a bit deeper into what brought Jay to this point.

Always a playmaker

Jay grew up in a close-knit suburban home, spending his early years in Indiana, before the family

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moved to Tucson, Ariz. His dad was a contractor, and Jay learned the skills of the construction trade by helping his dad from an early age. He laughs — and groans — when he describes the hands-on, tough work his dad would assign him. But those lessons sunk in. He

has an extremely strong work ethic, and as a bonus, he enjoys — and is very capable of —



doing most home building, repair or remodeling projects on his own.

That work ethic also extended to the football field. His hard-nosed style earned him All-Pac 10 recognition in the mid-80s as a wide receiver for the Univer-



sity of Arizona (#BearDown, as they say!), and in recent years Jay was named to the Wildcats "All-Century Team" by the Arizona Daily Star and as the "#1 Badass in Arizona Football History" by the Tucson Citizen.

There are legendary stories of

him throwing his body all over the field to come up with a catch; and even one during pre-season practice in the Arizona desert when he landed in a cactus out of bounds and went right back into the huddle — still stuck with hundreds of spines.

"I loved being the every-day, blue-collar guy," he explained. "Most wide receivers would rather catch the ball over the shoulder, score a touchdown and get a date with the homecoming queen. I was the guy who went over the middle, got his head knocked off and then patted the other guy on the back when he was going out with the prettiest girl on campus."

Life lessons

One of the most important lessons that Jay credits his dad with teaching him was to never give up: "As a young boy playing football, my dad would always tell me, 'Get back up, and don't ever quit. No matter how hard you've been hit, don't let somebody stand over you and celebrate knocking you down. Get back on your feet and either get into the game or get yourself to the sideline. But don't just lay there and feel sorry for yourself.'

That mantra resonated with

Jay, and it not only served him well on the football field, but also in his extremely dangerous undercover work.

His first week on the job with AFT wasn't exactly what we'd consider typical. "I started in the field on a Monday," he recounted. "On Thursday, I was taken hostage during the arrest of a previously convicted felon. I was shot through the back, the bullet ripped through my lungs and exited my chest. I was laying in the dirt in a filthy, nasty South Tucson trailer park, listening to the blood gush-

strain became overwhelming on all of them, and once again he turned to the words of his dad. "I wasn't going to let them dictate how I lived my life," Jay described. "That would be letting the bad guys win. I hadn't done anything wrong. So we moved back to Tucson and dug our heels in. I still operate with caution regarding my surroundings, but I am not going to hide."

A rapt audience

As I listened to him speak at a conference, I couldn't help but notice how intently the audience

to ride a motorcycle," he said. "I wasn't the best guy for the job; but I was the right guy at the right time. I worked extremely hard to build a cover and persona that would be accepted.

"But despite how well-prepared you are, there are sometimes things that go wrong during the course of an operation and internal red flags will go off. Those are the days you have to call a time out and start again tomorrow."

He also candidly talked about fear — and how the lack of it can be even more dangerous.

"When red flags start going off, that's when your fear factor needs to set in. The cool answer for a lot of guys is 'Not me, man. I'm tough. I wasn't afraid.' The truth is I was afraid every day. But you learn to conceal that and not let the bad guys see that your heart is beating

"So make an honest assessment of yourself and your situation. Play the devil's advocate. Look at things from every angle. You get one chance to do it right. Whether you're on the football field, undercover, or in your businesses, the consequences can be huge when you make a mistake."

As Jay described, loyalty and trust are critical components of any successful relationship — whether it be undercover with the Hells Angels, or between a business and their clients.

"You have to convince them that you are worthy of their loyalty and trust," he said. "That comes by proving yourself over and over. They need to know you bring value to the table and can offer them something they need."

It's hard to replace the cheers of 60,000 adoring fans on game day. And even harder to been the adrenaline rush generated by his highly dangerous undercover work. There was a time when Jay had trouble differentiating between Jay Dobyns, the person he had grown up as, and Jaybird Davis, an outlaw motorcycle gang enforcer and gun runner. One had literally morphed into the other, and it was a struggle coming home for short breaks during his assignments and trying to fit back into his family life again.

"It's very easy to lose yourself in your job," he said. "But don't let it become your whole world. My biggest regret is that I abandoned my family in pursuit of my undercover work. My job was to handle America's business, and in doing so I became a person who was hard for them to recognize at times. It was an extraordinarily difficult time for my children. And although I couldn't see it then, I

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ing from my chest, and watching the pool of it surround me."

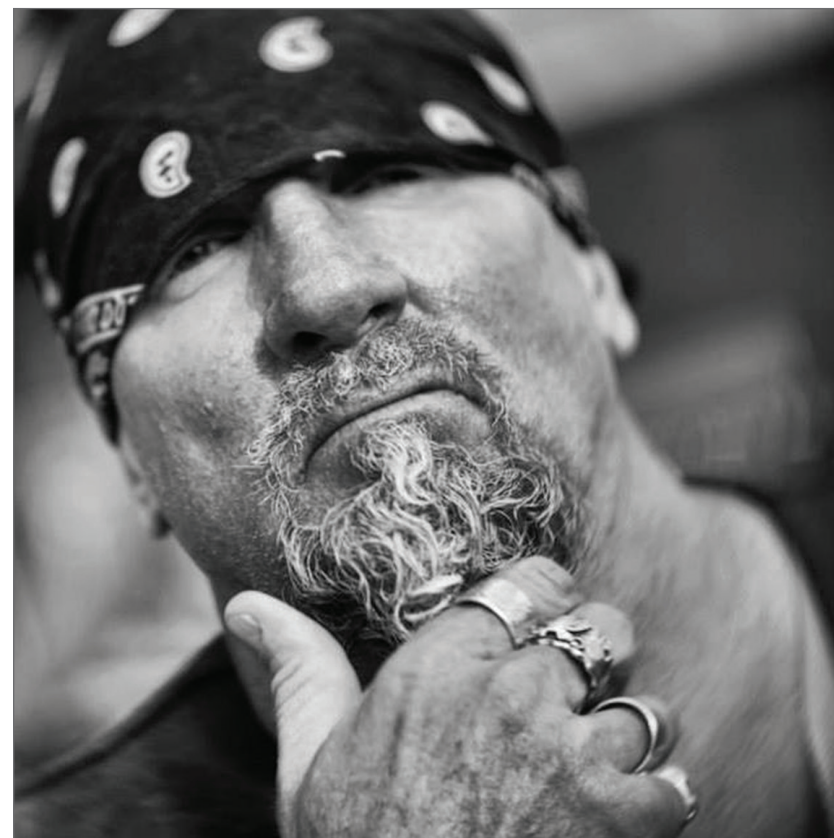
Nearly 30 years later, Jay tries to find the humor in describing the harrowing situation: "I hadn't even drawn my first paycheck, and here I was, basically bleeding to death when an empty Doritos bag someone had tossed away blew across my face."

It was in that moment — as he had so many times before and since — that Jay turned to those words his father had instilled in him as a young boy. "I heard my dad's voice telling me to 'Get up. Don't just lay there. Don't let them beat you.'"

In an ironic twist of fate, when the critically injured Jay was rushed to a Tucson hospital, it was Dr. Richard Carmona — who later became the U.S. Surgeon General — who performed the emergency trauma surgery that saved Jay's life.

He went through a grueling recovery, and was offered disability retirement due to the severity of his wounds. But that deeply ingrained work ethic pushed him to return to duty within months of the shooting.

In 2004, his identity was exposed during the "Black Biscuit" prosecutions. He and his family received numerous death, kidnapping and torture threats by the Hells Angels and other groups, and their home was burned to the ground in the middle of the night. For a while, he and his family lived a nomadic existence, trying to protect their location and identities. But the



was listening to his story. You could have heard a pin drop in that room. Attendees were on the edge of their seats at they heard him describe, very vividly, some of the operations he had been part of, including faking the murder of a rival gang member to gain the acceptance of the Hell's Angels, close calls when his cover was tested in the field, and the effect his undercover work and assignments away from home had on his family.

"Taking calculated risks are part of the job. When I first was approached about Operation Black Biscuit, I barely even knew how

out of your chest.

"The real dangers come when you let your swagger get out of control, which leads you to make stupid mistakes. If you think you have it all figured out, you're wrong. The worst threats are the ones you don't see coming, when everything looks perfect.

You have to convince them that you are worthy of their loyalty and trust. That comes by proving yourself over and over. They need to know you bring value to the table and can offer them something they need."

can tell you now that they are the true heroes of this story."

Despite all of it, any time he is asked whether he would accept those assignments again, Jay says without hesitation, "Absolutely." 🌐

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