

New Trust Lets Coles Share Secret

By Karen Crouse

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HEMPSTEAD, N.Y., Sept. 16 - If you want to plug into Laveranues Coles's inner life, borrow his iPod.

Coles's reserve around most people borders on reclusion, yet his emotional fingerprints are everywhere in his music collection. The iPod selections range from the rapper Lil' Wayne's line about being "a lot more rich and a whole lot smarter" in "This Is the Carter" to the gospel artist Fred Hammond: "Throughout my struggles You kept me strong. Throughout my troubles You helped me to hold on even when I felt like letting go."

Coles, 27, is immensely popular with his Jets teammates, and intensely private. There is a reason, he said, he has stiff-armed the world at large, an explanation unknown to even his closest friends.

From the ages of 10 to 13, Coles was molested by a man his mother later married.

To endure something like that "is devastating," Coles said after practice one day last week as the Jets prepared for their home opener on Sunday against the Miami Dolphins. "My trust level for people just left," he said. "It just kind of destroyed my relationships, with allowing new people into my life."

Unable to communicate his pain, Coles found expression in football, becoming a top receiver in the National Football League. When the Jets, who drafted Coles in the third round in 2000, reacquired him in March after he spent two seasons with the Washington Redskins, gratitude stormed the walls of his heart.

"It's a blessing for me to be in this position," Coles said.

Twice the Jets had stuck their necks out for Coles. It was time, he decided, to start doing the same for others. Coles, in his first interview about the molestation, explained his decision to come forward.

"Some kids do look up to us," he said. "Maybe if I say something, they'll feel strong enough to say, 'I can say something now because it's happened to him.' Even if it's one kid who I can touch, who my story gives him the strength to come out and say something, I feel like it's worth it."

Coles's iPod has 343 songs and one anthem. "Motivation" by T.I., the self-proclaimed King of the South, is Coles's clarion call.

"That's my favorite," said Coles, who warbled part of a verse: "You can look me in my eyes, see I'm ready for whatever. Anythang that don't kill me make me better."

Coles said: "Basically, it's about people bringing you down. A lot of the songs that I do listen to kind of have those themes."

His mother, Sirretta, was 12 days shy of 17 when she gave birth to him on Dec. 29, 1977, in Jacksonville, Fla. She never married his father, Laveranues Sr., and Coles said he and his father have never been close.

His maternal grandmother, Barbara Wakefield, was the beacon in his life. Wakefield's house was a sanctuary, a few miles removed and a world away from the Cleveland Arms projects, where Coles lived with his mother.

Coles was a bright child who attracted animals the way he would later draw defensive double teams. He kept a menagerie -- scorpions, birds, fish, dogs -- and dreamed of becoming a zoologist. He started playing football to impress Wakefield.

"I always wanted the attention that my uncles got from my grandmother," Coles said. "She went to their games, and she'd come home saying how well they played. I think I craved that same attention that they were getting. I think that's what drove me to want to be a special player."

Coles said he was in sixth grade in 1988 when the man who would become his stepfather started molesting him. Coles asked The New York Times not to identify his stepfather by name because he said he was fearful of retribution, but his account of the molestation was corroborated by court records.

The abuse continued for three years, although Coles told no one.

"You don't want to talk about it," he said. "You want to keep it on the down-low. You don't want to tell everything that has happened because it doesn't feel right. At the same time, you do kind of blame yourself for what's happening. You feel like it's your fault."

When Coles was an eighth grader, he said, he found out that his stepfather "was telling my friends that I was gay, but they were not supposed to let people know that I was."

When a friend confronted Coles about this at school one day, Coles said he started throwing punches. "I was furious," he said. He remembered the police being summoned, taking him to a room on the school grounds and telling him, "Look, there has to be something else behind this for you to have reacted the way you did."

Coles, sitting in an office at the Jets' practice facility, drew in a deep breath and exhaled before continuing.

"So that's how they got it out of me," he said.

His mother, Coles said, found out a few hours afterward. He said his mother left his stepfather and later divorced him.

His stepfather was sentenced to nine years in a Florida prison in 1992 after pleading guilty to lewd and lascivious behavior with a minor. He served three and a half years; he was later convicted of an unrelated felony and has been in prison since 2001.

Coles said that he received counseling, but it clashed with his athlete's mentality of treating the molestation no differently than he would a dropped pass: he tried to shrug it off.

"You just want to put it behind you," he said. "I think, you know, as a man, when you're violated in that way, you don't know how other people are going to take it, how other people are going to view you. There's so much that comes with revealing that part of your life and story."

Coles kept to himself at Ribault High School in Jacksonville, where he was a star running back. He retreated deeper into his shell at Florida State, where he switched positions. Coles became a star receiver before being dismissed from the team in October 1999, his senior year, after joining his fellow receiver Peter Warrick in a shoplifting scam.

The close friends Coles made after the Jets chose him in the third round of the 2000 draft recognized that they were receiving a rare gift.

"He's real," said quarterback Chad Pennington, who was one of the Jets' four first-round picks that year. "He's a good person. He's a blue-collar guy like myself. We just know each other real well."

Coles is very close to Pennington, Coach Herman Edwards, defensive end John Abraham and receiver Wayne Chrebet.

"These are my greatest friends," Coles said, "and they don't even know."

His family members, however, have had to live with the knowledge of Coles's abuse for more than a decade.

"I don't think it's something that anybody in my family wants to talk about," Coles said, adding that his mother "kind of feels like it's her fault."

He recognizes that by coming forward, he is opening deep wounds that may cause him and his loved ones more pain. It will be like going through it "all over again for my mom," Coles conceded.

Every time Coles slips between two defensive backs to catch a pass, he leaves himself vulnerable. After weighing the risks and rewards of revealing the molestation, Coles decided, "it's more of a good thing" for his story to be told.

There is a rhythm-and-blues song on Coles's iPod by the Philadelphia artist Musiq called "Thereason" with the lyrics, "You turned an empty heart into a work of art."

The way Musiq sings about finding his soul mate is the way Coles speaks about playing for Edwards, who replaced Al Groh as the Jets' coach three weeks after Coles's rookie season.

Coles and Edwards made a high-speed connection. Edwards, who had never been a head coach, told Coles he was going to become one of the best receivers in the N.F.L.

He also promised that Coles would remain with the Jets as long as he was coach. It was a rookie mistake for Edwards to make such a declaration, and a rookie mistake for Coles to believe it.

In 2002, Coles set career highs in catches (89) and receiving yards (1,264). The next March, Coles left as a restricted free agent for the Washington Redskins, who offered a \$35 million deal that included a \$13 million signing bonus. The Jets declined to match the offer, and Coles was embittered by their failure, as he described it at the time, to "step up to the plate" to keep him.

When the Jets sent receiver Santana Moss to the Redskins for Coles six months ago, Coles felt like the prodigal son.

The warmth of the welcome that he received, especially from Edwards, began the melting of Coles's reserve.

"When you look at everything that was said when I left," Coles said, "Herm could have said: 'Look, I don't want him on my team. I don't want him here. Let him stay gone.'"

"But instead he basically put the past behind us and opened his arms and said, 'I want you back in the Jets family.' I think when you have experiences like that with people like Coach Edwards, it allows you to kind of open up and say, 'Everybody might not be that bad.'"

Could Edwards be the father figure that Coles has been searching for all his life?

"I think so," said Coles, a father himself to a 5-year-old, Trillion, whom he sees often although the boy lives in Orlando, Fla.

"I would be real skeptical about ever leaving again because I really just don't see myself playing for anybody else."

Coles can't wait for Sundays and the opportunities they present to affirm Edwards's faith in him in front of the entire N.F.L. congregation.

"When you have somebody like that at the helm that you trust with everything," Coles said, "you want to go out every day and show your gratitude."

There is a song on Coles's iPod titled "Be There," in which Silkk the Shocker sings, "I'm back from hell trying to take you to heaven."

Is Silkk the Shocker singing Coles's tune?

"Yeah," Coles said, smiling. "I think so."