

The Philadelphia Inquirer

SATURDAY, APRIL 9, 2011

Sports

WWW.PHILLY.COM

Avant finds peace amid a tragedy

Eagle meets, greets on eve of father's funeral.

By Jonathan Tamari
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Jason Avant smiled Friday night, pulled another fan into his arms and beamed for the camera.

No one looking on would guess that the Eagles wide receiver was preparing to lay his father to rest. In less than an hour, Avant was to board a flight to Chicago. Saturday morning was Jerry Avant's funeral.

Yet on the eve of that sad duty, just eight days since Jerry Avant lost control of his SUV and crashed into a group of trees in Pemberton Township, Jason Avant was the smiling, friendly center of attention at a nonprofit's annual gala. He posed for pictures. He joked. He said he had found peace, even days after his father's death.

"The first couple of days were really, really hard for me, because my dad was 51 years-old. But this is what I love about God, is that he gave me peace after that day," Avant said. "It was a supernatural peace. I don't understand why I still can come in here and shake hands and smile, but my dad loved life."

Avant was the honoree Friday at a gala benefitting Turning Points for Children, a nonprofit that aids children and parents in need, and one that aims to help kids facing some of the same circumstances Avant once did. Avant, raised on the South Side of Chicago by his aunt and grandmother, ran with gangs and sold drugs before turning to sports and church. He said the group's mission matched his life so well that he booked a late flight out of Philadelphia, just so he could spend an hour at the event Friday.

"Turning Points for Children in Philadelphia is helping kids like me. That's why it means so much for me to be here. I was a kid that needed assistance growing up," said Avant, wearing a gray suit and light blue tie at the Tendenza in Northern Liberties.

"Given his experience growing up, he recognized that the families we work with in many ways are similar to his family, so there was a natural connection," said Michael Vogel, Turning Points for Children's chief executive.

When Jason was younger, his father was in and out of jail and in and out of his

son's life. But Jason spoke lovingly about his father, who died March 31.

"He came to my games. He cheered me on. He did everything hard, and he always made people laugh and smile, and I can have comfort in knowing that he would want me to continue to make people laugh and smile and be an influence on someone else," Avant said.

The deeply religious player said Jesus Christ helped him cope with his father's sudden death.

"He doesn't make a mistake. That's peace for me," Avant said. He said the experience has made him feel a closer connection to God.

Turning Points for Children provides after-school programs for parents and children and helps children at risk for abuse and neglect, among other services. One program aims to keep children in the care of relatives when their parents are absent — much in the way Avant was raised by his grandmother and aunt.

Eagles linebacker Omar Gaither was scheduled to formally accept the honor on Avant's behalf.

