

Baseball's Darryl Strawberry buries his past in new career as a pastor

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ST. PETERS, Mo. — The four-bedroom, two-story modest house sits on a corner in this planned bedroom community, and when this 6-6 muscular-toned man welcomes you inside his home, there is no evidence Darryl Strawberry the player ever existed.

There are no pictures of Strawberry in a Mets uniform. No trophies. No plaques. None of his four World Series rings. Nothing from his eight All-Star Games. None of his 335 home run balls.

"I got rid of it all. I was never attached to none of that stuff," says Strawberry, 51. "I don't want it. It's not part of my life anymore."

Darryl Strawberry, the former outfield great, is no longer. But Darryl Strawberry, the ordained minister in this town 30 miles west of St. Louis, is very much alive.

"I'm over 'Strawberry,'" he said. "I'm over Mets. I'm over Yankees. I don't want to exist as Darryl Strawberry, the baseball player. ... That person is dead."

Strawberry, in his first media interview since becoming a preacher and opening his own ministry three years ago, will talk for two hours about his drug and alcohol addiction. He'll tell chilling details about prison life and crack houses. He'll tear up telling the pain and shame he caused his family, six children and two ex-wives before marrying Tracy, also an ordained minister, six years ago.

He plans to spend the rest of his life talking about his passion that he says is more rewarding than anything he felt on the baseball field.

"I never wanted to exist as Darryl Strawberry, the baseball player," he says. "I wanted to let go that identity. It's not who I am."

This is a man uncomfortable reliving the past, knowing he can change the future.

"I used to be a big shot, let's put it that way," Strawberry says. "But I want nothing to do with baseball now. I have no desire to be working in baseball. No desire at all."

"I love the game, don't get me wrong, but I love the Bible more. I want to help people save their lives, and have the responsibility of leading people into following Christ. It's so hard to describe what that feels like, but I've never been happier in my life. It's so much fun being a pastor."

Pastor Darryl. Who would have thought? Certainly, not the former teammates, many who partied right alongside Strawberry, and now see a changed man.

"I saw the highs and the lows as a friend, but I quite frankly did not know how bad things were for him," said former Mets pitcher Bobby Ojeda. "Damaging yourself is one thing, but damaging other people, and seeing what you left behind, is another. I think he got it before he completely flushed away his life."

Strawberry and his wife, each twice-divorced, met 13 years ago at a narcotics center convention in Tampa. Tracy, hooked on cocaine, crack and crystal meth, had been clean for a year and turned her life to Jesus a week earlier.

She saw Strawberry from across the room, and to be honest, she says now, was sickened by the sight. "When I saw Darryl that day, it was kind of disturbing," she said. "I was real aggravated with him because of the buzz all over the convention, 'Darryl Strawberry is in the house.' There was a flock of people around him."

She told her friends she wanted to go, not wanting to be part of the "freak show" surrounding Strawberry. She was on her way out the door when a mutual friend introduced her to Strawberry, and they wound up talking most of the night.

They became a couple within two months, but the relationship teetered every day.

"I wanted to drink and drug. I told her, 'You don't want to get involved with me. I'm very dangerous. My life is a mess, I'm a wreck,'" Strawberry says. "I was so honest. I

just didn't want to hurt nobody no more."

Tracy stayed clean, going to real estate school in south Florida, but Strawberry's addiction continued to rage. He would disappear for days. One day, he even stole her car. Tracy refused to give up on him.

"I wanted to save Darryl. I saw the greatness in him. I saw the potential," Tracy said.

They broke up, again and again, until finally, Tracy told him she was going home to Missouri. If he really loved her, if he was really committed to giving up his addiction and turning to Christ, he could follow, living in her parents' basement.

"I didn't have anything," Strawberry said. "She didn't have anything. I was in debt for \$3 million, but I felt free inside. We never wavered about how this is going to work out, but how we were going to let God lead us."

They turned their lives over to Jesus, attending the Church On The Rock in St. Peters and becoming actively involved in worship. Tracy worked in real estate; Strawberry worked as a part-time Mets' instructor and TV commentator. They slowly eased out of debt, were married in 2006, at the Little White Wedding Chapel in Las Vegas, and moved into their own apartment in St. Peters.

Today, they have their ministry — strawberryministries.org, where the website leads with, "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think" from Romans 12:2.

They opened The Darryl and Tracy Strawberry Christian Recovery Program in Longview, Texas, and hope to launch two others soon in Orlando, Fla., and St. Louis. They also have a Coffee House prayer meeting every Friday night at the Darryl Strawberry Adult Day Program for Autism building.

"They have meant everything to this community, particularly me," says Marcia Funderburk, 58, who said two of her adult children are heroin addicts. "You want to just throw in the towel, and give up. It's been such a nightmare. You're so beaten down.

"But they have given me such inspiration. It's awesome to see a guy that went so high, and crashed so low, and now he's pouring his heart and soul back into people."

It's their horrifying life experiences, the Strawberrys say, that enable them to relate. They have had the highest of highs. They've seen the lowest of lows. They believe they can reach the troubled souls and, if nothing else, instill hope.

"Here I am, a baseball superstar, falling into the pits, having everybody write you off, and then having God say, 'I'm going to use your mess for a message.' How beautiful is that?"