

**MARGARET
“PAT”
RICH
1942-**



**HEALING
POWER
OF
LOVE**

Her youngest son was struggling most of 1983 so Pat Rich decided to send him to a basketball camp at Southeastern Oklahoma State University in Durant, about fifteen miles from their rural home. What followed was a study in racial and cultural attitudes and how sports can cause an unexpected shift in a rural town.

Bokchito, population 600, has rolling farmland where boys learn early how to shoot. On Halloween 1982, Byrne Rich and three friends went hunting into the woods behind his farm. While loading his shotgun, it misfired striking his best friend Brad in the stomach. He died three days later.

Pat thought the camp would be an opportunity for him to move on with his life. At the basketball camp, he started playing one-on-one with a tall, skinny black guy. A close relationship between a 6-8, 22-year-old black college player and a 13-year-old white kid in rural Oklahoma seemed unlikely but Byrne came home bubbling about his new friend – Dennis Rodman.

Dennis grew up in Dallas with his mother and two sisters. He was 5-11 in high school and extremely shy. His sister Debra was 6-2 and a star basketball player. After graduation, his body erupted. In a year, he grew to 6-8 but sometimes refused to leave home because he was ashamed of his body.

His sister got him a tryout at Cooke County (TX) Junior College but he only played ten games and left due to academic problems. An assistant coach at Southeastern Oklahoma had seen Dennis play and told coach Jack Hedden about him, who went to Dallas and convinced him to come to the NAIA school in Durant. Rodman was helping at the camp when he met Byrne.

Byrne asked his mother if he could invite ‘Worm’ for dinner. She was shocked when she learned Dennis was black but happiness radiated in her son’s face. Pat thought dinner would be the end of the relationship – until Byrne had other ideas. Soon Dennis was living with the Riches. During the next three years, the Riches had to endure the narrow-mindedness of neighbors and family. But it was obvious that something special was happening. Dennis found a place to call home and his friendship was meeting Byrne’s needs.

Considering he hadn’t played one minute of organized basketball until after his 21st birthday, Rodman’s accomplishments were phenomenal. He led the NAIA in scoring his last two years and was the leading rebounder his senior year. In 1986, he was drafted by the Detroit Pistons.

Off court, Rodman spent summers there learning how to drive a tractor and help on the farm. Pat worried about everything when Dennis was around. One day he noticed she hid her face with a newspaper while riding with him. He waited until he got to the edge of town to say, “You can put the newspaper down now, Mrs. Rich. We’re out of town.” It wasn’t easy for Rodman either. If he forgot who he was or what he was, there was always someone who reminded him.

By the 1990s Rodman had quit visiting the Riches. Pat reflected on having a black man in the house. “Before, I never thought about them or how they felt. Or how hard things were for them.” Eventually she learned to be a bit more sensitive to black people. Byrne and Dennis met at a time in their lives when they needed each other.