

# University of Arkansas Tight End D.J. Williams Named Disney Spirit Award Recipient

## **Senior tight end recognized for courageous journey from harrowing childhood to leading football prospect and outspoken advocate**

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. (Nov. 15, 2010) – University of Arkansas tight end D.J. Williams, who overcame a chaotic upbringing to become a star student-athlete and advocate for domestic abuse awareness, has been selected as this year's recipient of the Disney Spirit Award given annually by Disney Sports to college football's most inspirational figure.

Williams suffered through a childhood fractured by an alcoholic, drug-addicted and abusive father and eventually broke free along with his mother, Vicky, and sister, Vanessa, who together fled their Dallas home. Another older sister, Valerie, had already moved away by that time.

Advised by officials that a local shelter was too dangerous, Vicky opened a map and turned to D.J., only 11 at the time, to pick a city outside of Texas. His finger landed on Little Rock, Ark. His father, who D.J. hasn't spoken to since the day his family left, later received concurrent sentences for separate convictions unrelated to D.J. and his family.

"I will accept this award on behalf of my mother, my sisters and the entire Razorback family," Williams said. "Watching my mother, who never quit, is the inspiration for me each day and a lesson for us all. My hope is the story of my family will show those who are experiencing a similar ordeal that they are not alone and there is help and a way out. To be recognized by Disney Sports and to join the list of recipients of this award is humbling and a blessing I'll share with my family."

From participation in the Big Brothers and Big Sisters program, to the local Boys & Girls Clubs and Children's hospital, Williams has demonstrated he has a big heart and a passion for giving back to his community. He has used his stature as a prominent college football player to raise awareness and inspire others to abandon troubled relationships and seek help.

Last year, Williams received the inaugural Razorback Spirit Award, given annually by the Arkansas athletic department to the Razorback whose performance throughout their career serves to uplift their sport to new heights and whose character exemplifies the ideals of the athletic department.

"Disney Sports is proud to present this honor to a young man whose character and inner strength propelled him to incredible heights, on the field and off" said Faron Kelley, Disney Sports executive, who will co-present the award on Dec. 9. "D.J., with the help of his mother and sisters, has shown incredible fortitude while providing unwavering hope for those who find themselves in challenging situations."

An All-SEC pick the past two seasons, Williams was a John Mackey Award semi-finalist (given to the country's best tight end) as a sophomore in 2008 and named to the award's watch list in 2009. He was named to the Mackey Award watch list and numerous preseason All-America teams prior to 2010.

Mark Herzlich, the 2009 Disney Spirit Award winner, will serve as the award's presenter, along with Kelley, during The Home Depot College Football Awards at Walt Disney World Resort on Thursday, Dec. 9. The 20th annual awards show is scheduled for 7-9 p.m. ET and will be televised live on ESPN.

Williams, the NCAA's active leader in catches (140) and yards (1,719) by a tight end, has played in 48 career games with 29 starts for the Razorbacks. His 140 receptions are third all-time in school annals and the most by a non-wide receiver. This season, he has started all 10 games, with 42 receptions for 491 yards and three touchdowns.

A senior on track to graduate in December, Williams is majoring in communications and interested in pursuing a career in broadcast journalism following his football career.

Williams becomes the 15th recipient of the award, joining past honorees Daniel Huffman (1996), Dwight Collins (1997), Matt Hartl (1998), East Carolina University (1999), Hameen Ali (2000), the United States Service Academy football teams (2001), Dewayne White (2002), Neil Parry (2003), Tim Frisby (2004), the Tulane University football team (2005), University of Louisville band member Patrick Henry Hughes (2006), Zerbin Singleton (2007), Tim Tebow (2008) and Herzlich (2009).

In 2009, Herzlich was selected after overcoming a rare form of bone cancer and helping inspire more than \$120,000 in donations for cancer-related causes. Herzlich emerged as one of the top linebackers in the country prior to his illness, earning All-America honors and being named the 2008 ACC Defensive Player of the Year. After he passed up a chance to go to the NFL as a junior, his football career was in jeopardy when he was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma, a malignant tumor most often found in bone or soft tissue. A week later, Herzlich began treatment to ward off the cancer in his leg, and this season he returned to the football field for Boston College.

Tebow was selected as the 2008 recipient on the merits of his remarkable humanitarian efforts, including juggling the extraordinary demands of being one of the marquee players in college football, with countless hours spent preaching and providing support to less fortunate people.

The 2007 recipient, U.S. Naval Academy's Singleton, overcame several obstacles growing up, including leaving Alaska after his mother's incarceration to follow his dream of becoming a part of the U.S. space program. Initially accepted into the Naval Academy, Singleton's aviation dreams were derailed by injuries from a car accident one week before graduating as class valedictorian that left him unable to participate in the Navy's plebe summer. Singleton enrolled his freshman year at Georgia Tech until he was healthy enough to transfer to the Naval Academy.

#### **Disney Spirit Award Recipients:**

Date Recipient School (Hometown)

1996 Daniel Huffman Rossville High School (Rossville, Ill.) 1

1997 Dwight Collins Central Florida University (Lake Charles, La.)

1998 Matt Hartl Northwestern University (Denver, Colo.)

1999 East Carolina University \* East Carolina University (Greenville, N.C.)

2000 Hameen Ali College of William & Mary (Dover, Del.)

2001 U.S. Air Force Academy \*\* U.S. Air Force Academy (Colorado Springs, Colo.)

U.S. Military Academy \*\* U.S. Military Academy (West Point, N.Y.)

U.S. Naval Academy \*\* U.S. Naval Academy (Annapolis, Md.)

2002 Dewayne White University of Louisville (Marbury, Ala.)

2003 Neil Parry San Jose State University (Sonoma, Calif.)

2004 Tim Frisby University of South Carolina (Allentown, Pa.)

2005 Tulane University\* Tulane University (New Orleans, La.)

2006 Patrick Henry Hughes University of Louisville (Louisville, Ky.)

2007 Zerbin Singleton United States Naval Academy (Annapolis, Md.)

2008 Tim Tebow University of Florida (Jacksonville, Fla.)

2009 Mark Herzlich Boston College (Wayne, Pa.)

2010 D.J. Williams University of Arkansas (Little Rock, Ark.)

\* presented to entire football team

\*\* presented to football teams at all three service academies

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