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Former NFL player says he will fulfill deceased brother's vision for Albany's South End

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Jeremy Horne's trauma growing up in Albany started the day he was born.

"My mom tried to sell me for drugs my first day of life," Horne said. "This is what they wrote on the [court] reports. They said I was a chronically homeless crack baby. This is what they wrote about me in the 80s."

That terrible beginning 36 years ago presaged a youth spent as a ward of the state, shuffling from group homes, foster care, an adoptive family and then as a teenage runaway living on the streets. He would sometimes catch sight of his drugged-out mother and purposely walk the other way to avoid her.

He rose above the awfulness, eventually getting out of Albany, attending college on a football scholarship, playing two seasons in



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Jeremy Horne on Liebel Street in Albany's South End neighborhood.

the NFL for the Kansas City Chiefs and then in the Canadian Football League before retiring at age 29 due to spinal injuries.

Fifteen years after leaving Albany for a better life — he now lives on a 160-acre ranch in the White Mountains of Arizona where he raises sheep, goats and chickens — he returned last week to bury his younger brother, Corey Jones.

He vows he will complete his brother's vision to build affordable, environmentally-friendly housing in one of Albany's poorest neighborhoods.

"I'm here because God called me to do this," Horne said. "I should have been dead from birth. I should have been dead before I even took a breath."

Tragically, Jones, who had diabetes, suffered a medical event and drowned while fishing from a kayak on another one of Horne's properties in northwestern Florida on Dec. 5, his brother said.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission responded to the scene but hasn't released the incident report yet.

The brothers have different last names because Jones was raised in Troy from age 7 by an adoptive family and took their last name. Jeremy Horne was adopted at age 11 by a different family whose last name is Murdock, but he left their home three years later.

Jones's death came shortly after he had secured the financing commitments for a large, mixed-use project in the South End called The Seventy-Six.

The \$115 million development would replace blocks of vacant homes with more than 240 apartments, a communal greenhouse, job training center and other amenities.

It would be the first "triple net-zero" mixed-use development in the nation, according to Garrison Architects of New York City, meaning it would generate all of its energy through renewable sources; treat and reuse all of the wastewater; and recycle or compost all of the generated waste.

Calling it ambitious is an understatement.

Jones was just 34 years old when he died. He had experience in construction and small redevelopment projects, but nothing on the scale or cost for what he dreamed up in the South End.

Carl Stewart, vice president and general manager of Turner Construction Co. in Albany, first met Jones in 2006 when he participated in the company's internship program at the middle school in Troy.

Jones kept in touch with Stewart and others at Turner Construction as he grew older and gained more experience in the field.

"He was very ambitious," Stewart said. "Very humble, very respectful and appreciative of the opportunities that he was given. I was able to keep that relationship with him, and others as well at Turner who served as mentors for him."

About three years ago, Jones contacted Stewart to tell him what he wanted to do at his own company, South End Development.

Even though Jones was raised in Troy, he came to know the Albany neighborhood and understood its plight from years of disinvestment.

"When he first approached us, he had a solid team of designers and consultants and were all passionate about the type of project that he was trying to do," Stewart said. "It was transformational. From the zero-energy to where it was located, he kept saying he wanted to do this for the community. It was never about his development company or Corey."

The last time they talked, on Oct. 24, Jones was excited because the myriad pieces of the financing puzzle were finally coming together. They were planning to schedule a meeting with the rest of the consulting team to update them on the progress.

Stewart had no idea Jones suffered from Type 1 diabetes.

His death earlier this month came as a shock, as it did for many beyond his older brother.

Horne cared for Jones and had repeatedly taken him to the hospital over the past three years. Jones had developed gastroparesis, a debilitating stomach condition, after being injured in a car crash.

"When I got the news of his passing, I was just as surprised as anybody else," Stewart said.

Asked whether the development could be built without Jones at the helm, Stewart said: "I believe the pro-forma was always something that was difficult for Corey to work within. It really comes back to the confidence. If they've got the pro-forma that works, they've got equity partners behind them and the financing then it could be built. Without seeing the details, it's tough for me to give you a confidence level."

Horne has no doubts. In the immediate aftermath of his brother's death, it was his mission to finish what Jones started.

He's even more encouraged given the response he received from people after they heard the news, including financial backers and some affiliated with the NFL.

"We're trying to stabilize everything," Horne said. "I've had conversations with them. We're doing the transition. Let's get the paperwork done. After the first [of January] we'll sit and have a conversation."

He sees The Seventy-Six as a critical step toward relieving the chronic lack of healthy food options in the neighborhood. He wants residents to learn how to plant vegetables and grow fruit trees. The architectural design includes urban farming techniques such as vertical gardens and aquaculture.

"You can read and write but nobody knows how to grow anything," said Horne, who learned to live off the grid and slaughter animals for food at his ranch in Arizona. "Nobody knows how to do any of that stuff. I starved in the South End and there wasn't an apple tree around. Nobody should be starving in any city."

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