



*Story by Michael Cohen | November 7, 2014*

WESTON, Mass. — On a summer night in 2011, Samuel Jean-Gilles sat in a Memphis barbershop unaware he was about to be banished with a one-way bus ticket to Boston.

About a year had passed since he emigrated from Haiti, a country pummeled by an earthquake that killed an estimated 300,000 people. And in a few minutes the man who plucked him from the rubble was about to send him away with little or no explanation.

At 6-foot-2 and 200-plus pounds, Jean-Gilles, then 17, found his way out of Port-au-Prince through basketball. Partnered with Skal Labissiere, an impossibly tall middle-schooler, he was brought to the United States by Gerald Hamilton, an American whose nonprofit organization has a program to import international prospects. Hamilton, who lives in Olive Branch, Mississippi, became the legal guardian for the boys and took them into his home. They attended Evangelical Christian School in Memphis.

What unfolded over the course of the next year, according to Jean-Gilles and six sources close to the situation, reveals a darker side of Reach Your Dream, Hamilton's nonprofit. In an interview conducted at Regis College in Massachusetts, where Jean-Gilles is a sophomore, he told *The Commercial Appeal* the Hamilton family ran him off when it became apparent he lacked the Division I potential of Labissiere, who has blossomed into the No. 3 recruit in the country. The Hamiltons, Jean-Gilles said, began looking for a reason to kick him out of their house, culminating with a summer evening in 2011 when Gerald Hamilton handed him a bus ticket. In the midst of a 29-hour ride, Jean-Gilles said, he put the pieces together that he was being sent to live with his aunt.

"They are guardians for me and they don't want me anymore," Jean-Gilles said. "So I guess he did what he had to do."

“If I was 6-feet-9, yes, it would have been different. I would have been D-1 and he most definitely wouldn’t send me to Boston. People know what he’s trying to do.”

Jean-Gilles said he has received no financial support from the Hamiltons since arriving in Boston. The 21-year-old has been forced to rely on donations and fundraisers to pursue his education.

During a 90-minute interview in their living room, the Hamilton family (more than eight members) denied abandoning Jean-Gilles, who spoke almost no English when he arrived in the United States. Instead, they painted a picture of Jean-Gilles as a “bad influence” on Labissiere and their other children, citing multiple instances of poor behavior but offering few specifics.

That’s why Hamilton said he prayed the night he dropped Jean-Gilles off at the barbershop, weighing a decision he had contemplated for several days. Then he did what he felt was best as legal guardian. He sent Jean-Gilles to Boston that night.

“I was praying and I said, man — because I just don’t want to throw a kid away,” Hamilton said. “And that ain’t what I was doing, but I’m just saying I didn’t want it to seem like I was.”

### **‘Dancing with the devil’**

The story of Jean-Gilles and Labissiere begins, in many ways, with another Haitian basketball player who broke David Robinson’s college record for blocked shots in a season. Robert Joseph, a 6-foot-7 forward from Port-au-Prince, was such a star for Union University that the man who recruited him, assistant coach David Niven, received instructions to unearth and sign more Haitians.

That led him to the 6-foot-8 Pierre Valmera, who, like Joseph, became an NAIA All-American. Valmera began searching for the next Haitian basketball stars after graduating from Union in 2007.

He discovered both Jean-Gilles and Labissiere in the summer of 2008 and late 2009, respectively, hoping to help the boys attend college when they got closer to graduating high school. The earthquake in January 2010 changed that plan.

Years earlier, Hamilton, a computer programmer and son of missionary parents from Olive Branch, came across the story of a boy in Africa who longed to play basketball in the United States. Hamilton wondered if he could help, founding his organization, Reach Your Dream, in 2005. Since then, Hamilton told The Commercial Appeal over the summer, he has brought four other students to the U.S. from Central Africa.

“I thought, ‘Well, having a 7-footer around wouldn’t be so bad,’” Hamilton said. “ ... From then on, I was just fascinated by it.”

A few days before the earthquake, Hamilton reached out to Valmera to see if he had any potential prospects for the Diamonds In The Rough program run through his nonprofit. With dire conditions in Haiti, Valmera was desperate to get Jean-Gilles and Labissiere out of the country. He worked as a middleman between Hamilton and the families in Haiti, translating Creole to English and back again as they worked through the logistics.

It is here their stories diverge, and also where the relationship between Hamilton and Valmera fractured. Hamilton calls Valmera a “crook” and a “scam artist” for a laundry list of reasons that include, most egregiously, an attempt to embezzle money the Labissiere family set aside for Hamilton’s flight to Haiti. Valmera, in response, says this would have been impossible because the Labissiere family purchased Hamilton’s flight directly. Both men verge on volatile when discussing the other.

Once Jean-Gilles and Labissiere were settled in Olive Branch, Hamilton, who became the guardian for both boys, cut all ties to Valmera.

But Hamilton’s distaste for Valmera was met with skepticism from Jean-Gilles, especially given Valmera’s reputation in Haiti. After his career at Union ended, Valmera devoted much of his time to helping young Haitian athletes. He founded an organization of his own, POWERForward International, which has secured college scholarships for 26 basketball players in the United States.

Valmera, who lives in Boston, also runs basketball camps in Haiti. This summer, Nerlens Noel of the Philadelphia 76ers attended as a volunteer. Labissiere’s younger brother was one of the campers.

To this day, Valmera says entrusting Jean-Gilles and Labissiere to Hamilton was the worst mistake of his life.

“He handled himself the right way talking about the Lord, he’s a Christian man, a man of faith,” Valmera said. “And guess what, man? I was dancing with the devil.”

### **‘Abrupt’ departure**

Jean-Gilles, a junior, and Labissiere, an eighth grader, nestled into their lives at Evangelical Christian School during the 2010-11 academic year. They picked up English at a remarkable pace — three or four months to feel comfortable in conversation — and formed friendships on the basketball court.

The boys made the varsity team their first year at ECS, playing reserve roles on a veteran-laden squad that went on to win a state championship. Though frail, Labissiere’s potential was obvious as he continued to grow into his 6-foot-9 frame, which was also still growing. He had a beautiful shooting stroke to accompany his height and length, tools that had college coaches drooling. Now, as a 6-foot-11 senior, Labissiere has narrowed his list of suitors to an elite group: Kentucky, North Carolina, Georgetown, Memphis, Baylor and Tennessee.

Jean-Gilles, on the other hand, was a 6-foot-2 junior whose potential had, for the most part, already been realized. He was an undersized forward with a relentless work ethic under the glass, a rebounding machine built like a linebacker. He played valuable minutes as a substitute.

“He had a really good nose for the ball,” said Kip Owens, a teammate at ECS. “He still had a lot of refining to do with his game, but he played harder than anyone on the court a lot of the time.”

Given his blend of size, strength and athleticism, Jean-Gilles was persuaded by friends and family to try out for the football team in the spring of 2011. Geoff Walters, the football coach and athletic director at ECS, lined him up at defensive end and explained a game that was totally foreign.

At some point between the spring of 2011 and Jean-Gilles’ departure just before the 2011-12 academic year, Hamilton had conversations with Walters and basketball coach Terry Tippett about whether Jean-Gilles could play either sport at a Division I level. Both coaches said no.

Walters remembered the conversation taking place during preseason football practice — just weeks before Jean-Gilles was sent to Boston.

“It was pretty abrupt,” Walters said.

The Hamilton family offers a different timeline. They claim the conversations with Tippett and Walters took place months before Jean-Gilles was sent away and had no bearing on his relocation.

“That doesn’t matter about him being Division I,” Hamilton said. “I know where this is going. That doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

He later added: “It wasn’t that big a deal if he wasn’t what we were hoping he was going to end up being.”

### **‘Bad influence’**

Hamilton agreed to be interviewed for this story as long as his family could be present to “back me up.” The group of them — Labissiere, Hamilton’s biological children, Hamilton’s parents, Hamilton’s wife and others — explained what they said went on behind the closed doors of their home.

They took turns accusing Jean-Gilles of being a “bad influence” on the younger members of the household. His presence, they said, forced Labissiere and their own children to act out of character.

“I have family folk that said, ‘Gerald, you need to really talk to Skal about his attitude,’” Hamilton said. “I started seeing similarities in the same thing that went on in our house. My daughter has never acted out, and she was, I don’t know, like somebody gave her something.”

Labissiere agreed with the family’s characterization and said that now, as a young adult, he realizes Jean-Gilles “wasn’t doing the right things.”

The family also accuses Jean-Gilles of stealing restaurant discount cards sold during an athletic department fundraiser at ECS. Hamilton said he found extra cards in Jean-Gilles’ backpack the night he was at the barbershop in 2011. The theft, he said, was the final straw.

Hamilton implored a reporter to discuss this topic with Walters, the football coach and athletic director at ECS. When reached by phone, Walters said the school was not short any discount cards that year and there was “never any concern” on his part. Jean-Gilles also denies the allegation.

But Hamilton was convinced the cards he found were stolen, so he put Jean-Gilles on a bus that night.

“It was like he went looking for a reason for me to leave,” Jean-Gilles said. “I know that’s what it is.”

The Hamiltons insisted there were other incidents that led to his departure but declined to offer specifics.

“We are trying to protect him,” Hamilton said.

### **‘Where I wanted him to be’**

The Hamilton’s portrayal of Jean-Gilles is drastically different from descriptions provided by former teammates, coaches and individuals close to him in both Memphis and Boston. The Commercial Appeal spoke to 10 people who had strong relationships with Jean-Gilles, and all of them offered praise.

They used phrases like “great kid,” “really good kid” and “fun to be around.” More than half said their families loved him.

The Kingma family was perhaps his strongest source of support. Doug and Janeen Kingma, whose son Caleb played sports with Jean-Gilles and became one of his best friends, were dumbfounded when they heard he had been “transported” to Boston, as Doug described it. Memphis, they believed, was the best spot for him to finish high school given the quality of education at ECS and the friendships he developed.

The Kingmas purchased a plane ticket to fly Jean-Gilles back to Memphis, taking him into their home temporarily while trying to find a permanent residence. Were it not for the eight children of their own, the Kingmas said they would have absorbed Jean-Gilles into their family for good.

A couple from their church expressed serious interest in taking in Jean-Gilles, but Hamilton intervened once more. Doug and Janeen Kingma said Hamilton was not interested in finding a way for Jean-Gilles to stay at ECS, even if that meant living with another family.

Hamilton refused to sign over guardianship. The interested couple backed off.

“Just because he’s not living at my house doesn’t mean I’m not responsible for him,” Hamilton said. “I sent him where he needed to be, where I wanted him to be at with his biological family. He needed to stay in Boston. I didn’t want him around Skal.”

The Kingmas bought another plane ticket. Hamilton succeeded in sending Jean-Gilles away for the second time.

“We really wanted to have a situation where Samuel could stay and continue what he had started,” Janeen Kingma said. “We were really sad that Mr. Hamilton didn’t feel the same way.”

### **‘I just feel bad for him’**

On a rainy, windswept day in Massachusetts, Samuel Jean-Gilles relives a part of his life he tried to forget. Here, some 15 miles west of Boston on the campus of Regis College, Jean-Gilles is enjoying life as a collegiate athlete after all.

He is a member of the basketball team at Regis, a Division III school competing in the New England Collegiate Conference. Last season, as a true freshman, he was named the league’s Rookie of the Year after averaging 14.4 points and 8.8 rebounds per game. He is studying sport management and wants to become a basketball coach.

That Jean-Gilles is here at all is something of a miracle. Hamilton said he took all the proper steps to ensure Jean-Gilles could enroll at Melrose High School in Melrose, Massachusetts, using the same student visa he had in Tennessee. But the government was never notified of the move to Massachusetts, and his visa was promptly voided. Jean-Gilles was allowed to stay only because the U.S. government granted Haiti temporary protective status, meaning the conditions there prevent the country from accepting nationals.

Jean-Gilles spent his first year at Melrose living with his aunt, whom he had never met, but they disagreed over his basketball future. Teammate Matt Sherlock’s family took him in and has hosted him ever since. (Jean-Gilles remains close with his relatives in the area. They attend some of his games.)

The Sherlocks met with the mayor of Melrose, immigration lawyers and countless admissions officers to find a way for Jean-Gilles to fund a college education. The temporary status makes him ineligible for both loans and federal aid.

So while Labissiere, who still lives with Hamilton, jetted across the country to meet with college coaches on recruiting trips, Jean-Gilles scraped together money for college through donations from the community and several generous trustees. A 3-on-3 basketball tournament organized by the Sherlocks raised a few thousand dollars as well.

“I didn’t really see it happening until they helped me,” Jean-Gilles said.

Quiet and unassuming, Jean-Gilles kept private the story of why he left Memphis. The Sherlocks and Mike Kasprzak, his coach at Melrose, first heard about the details from a reporter.

Jean-Gilles agreed to open up because, he says, he has nothing to hide. He was stunned to hear Labissiere, whose name elicits a smile, called him a bad influence. He uttered the word “wow” eight times and wondered aloud if Hamilton forced him to say that.

Though he feels his departure from Memphis was unjustified — he ignored attempts by the Hamilton family to check on him because “you put me on a bus in the middle of the night” — there is no anger toward Gerald Hamilton or Reach Your Dream.

Jean-Gilles is content at Regis. To him, this is all part of God’s plan.

“If this is really how he’s trying to make money by using people,” Jean-Gilles said, “if that’s really how he’s doing it I just feel bad for him.”