

Junior college player battles alcoholism to live out hoops dream at 36

Richard Obert, Arizona Republic Published 4:28 p.m. MT Dec. 23, 2019

Brandon Cox was attending Mesa Community College for three years, slowly whittling away at a degree, when one day last summer, he found himself wandering into T.J. Heap Gymnasium.

The smell of the gym, the sound of the ball bouncing had Cox thinking about a crazy notion on the long drive home to Queen Creek.

"Basketball has always been a love of mine," he said. "Unfortunately, I didn't always make the best choices when I was younger."

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Now four years sober, Cox, who regularly attends 12-step meetings as a recovering alcoholic, is living his dream, a mentor to kids out of high school, a vocal leader as a player on Mesa Community College's basketball team.

At age 36.

'I got the itch'

Basketball got derailed by alcohol when he was 16, going to Central High in Lacrosse, Wisconsin on the Mississippi River. He lost his way, stopped playing, found himself in a dark place, and didn't know how to get out.

"It's a scary thing, it's tough," Cox said. "I guess for me a lot of it was based on fear, fear of failure, fear of success, fear of everything."

"My solution was to drink and that got rid of all of those feelings. The problem with that is what it produced. When I sobered up, there was a lot of guilt and shame."

He managed to graduate from high school with his classmates in 2002, but alcohol caused him to end a basketball reboot one semester into his first year at Western Technical College.

"As a youngster, I kind of robbed myself of a lot of opportunities, relationships, goals," Cox said. "As far as aspirations, it took a back seat to alcoholism."

"Fast forward 17 years, here I am."

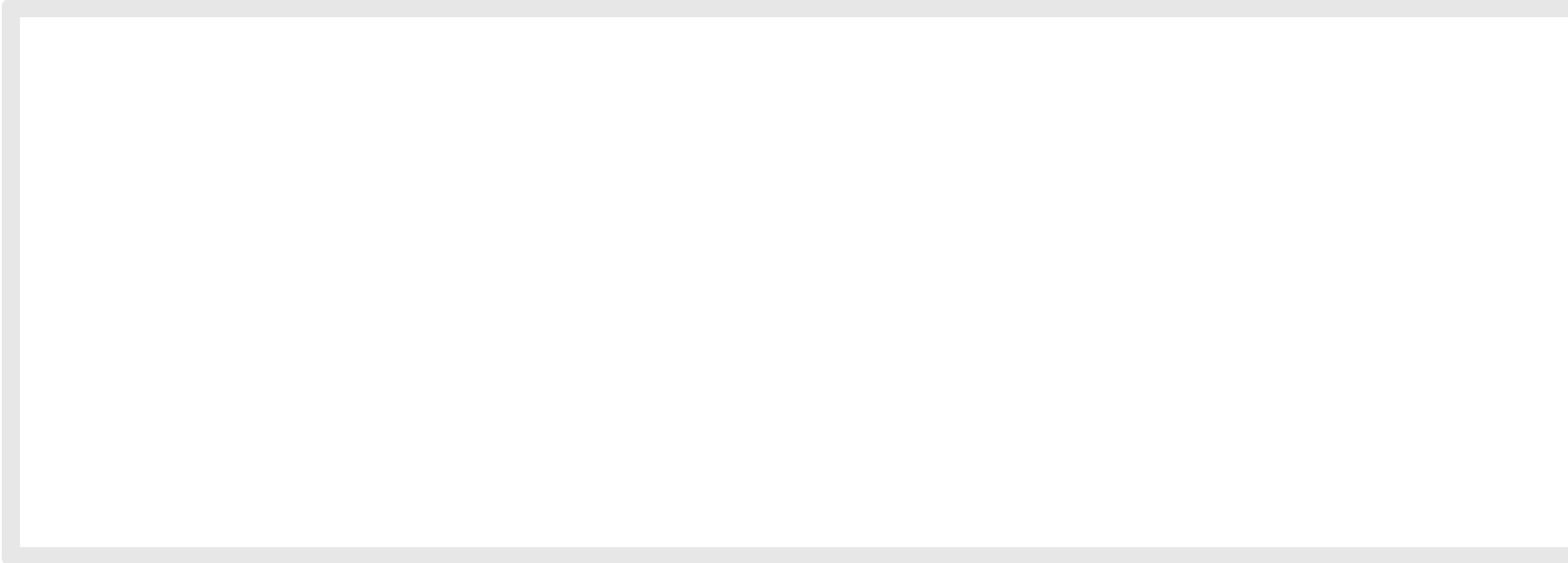


Brandon Cox during practice, December 19, 2019, in the gym at Mesa Community College. (Photo: Mark Henle, Mark Henle/The Republic)

He moved to Arizona in 2007 to join his wife Lara, who had gotten a job in the East Valley. But it wasn't until five years ago that he reached a crossroad and was basically given an ultimatum: Either clean up or get out.

"I was 31 years old," Cox said. "She essentially said, 'I had enough.' That was the little nudge that I needed to seek out the help that I needed and start this whole new journey, perception on life and experience things I wasn't able to because of this."

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He was in and out of rehab centers twice, trying to get himself on a consistent path to sobriety.

"It was very challenging at the time," Lara said. "Our relationship was up and down for many years. We loved him. But we needed him to find the help he needed. He realized he needed to get the help himself. That's what happened.

"We had two kids at the time when he got help. It was hard for him. He had to be away from the kids for a while. But he knew that is what he needed to be able to be there for the kids later on.

"It's amazing how far he's come."

Those moments when he was in a bad place mentally, picking up a basketball and heading to the park at 10 at night or 2 in the morning, would be a relief for Cox, but he didn't really see himself playing on a team again, for a school, until last summer, when he had this impulse one day.

"This summer I met with my advisor and I got the itch," Cox said. "I'd walk by the gym. I got the crazy idea in my head, 'What would it take to try out for the team?'

"I live about 45 minutes away. This whole drive home I was obsessing with his idea. So I got home and I talked to Lara, my wife. She was completely supportive of my decision."

He didn't just ask his wife, but he asked his 8-year-old daughter Breighlyn and 5-year-old son Briley, if it was OK for him to go out for the college team.

They were excited for their dad.



A portrait of Brandon Cox, December 19, 2019, in the gym at Mesa Community College. (Photo: Mark Henle, Mark Henle/The Republic)

'You're older than some of the coaches'

At the time, she had just given birth to their third child, Bratyon.

"He's always mentioned he wanted to play basketball but I never thought he would decide to do it," said Lara, a physical education teacher in a school for kindergartners through fifth grade. "I was kind of surprised by it. The timing was a little crazy. We just had a little boy."

The 6-foot-4 Cox looked up Ballard's MCC bio and emailed the coach with his intentions of trying out for the team.

"I did a little research on how do you sell yourself to try out for a college team," Cox said. "I put my old information in there, my grade-point average, and mentioned that I was a non-traditional student."

"He emailed me back and said, 'Why don't you come in tomorrow and check it out and we'll talk.' I saw a picture of him through the web site. I entered the gym and introduced myself. He was like, 'Jesus, Brandon, how old are you?' I said, 'Thirty-five.' He said, 'You're older than some of the coaches.'"

"He said get your physical done, and we'll work you out for a day and we'll see what happens. The initial goal was to get through that."

Ballard then extended Cox's stay for a week with the team, hang out with the players. He was invited back to the fall for tryouts. By then, he was 36.

Cox's 8-year-old daughter Breighlyn would write encouraging notes for her dad to see before he went to practice.

"They would always say, 'Did you make it?' " Lara said.

After final cuts, Cox was happy to be part of the team.

Ballard gave Cox's son a locker next to his dad.

"We had 22 guys," Ballard said. "It wasn't a given he was going to have a spot. But when you watch him work, you have to have a place for somebody that. Somebody is going to have to beat him out. Nobody did. It was mainly because of his work ethic.

"Every team should want somebody who works like that."

Through Mesa's first 11 games (8-3 record), Cox has played in six games, a total of 12 minutes, and scored eight points and grabbed four rebounds. he's ecstatic, even if it means handing out water bottles to guys during timeouts.

"I probably would get on him myself if I felt he was playing favorites (to me)," Cox said of Ballard. "I just want to do what is best for the team. I push myself to be the best I can be, whether that is sitting on the bench or bringing water bottles, whatever it entails."



Brandon Cox during practice, December 19, 2019, in the gym at Mesa Community College. (Photo: Mark Henle, Mark Henle/The Republic)

'A father to us'

B.J. Burries, who last season at Globe became Arizona's all-time leading high school scorer (<http://www.azcentral.com/story/sports/high-school/2018/12/21/arizona-leading-scorer-b-j-burries-san-carlos-apache-indian-reservation/2303358002/>), feels a kinship with his older teammate at MCC.

"It's amazing having an older guy on the team," said Burries, who averages 12.5 points in his first 11 college games. "He's kinda like a father to us. He's always pushing us. And always having snacks for us at the end of practice."

Cox works in food and beverage at a San Tan Valley resort, bartending, while taking a full load of classes.

"I accepted the fact that I am an alcoholic, and what that means, so it hasn't been hard at all," Cox said about being a bartender. "I live my life as an open book and because I am open about my condition with my job, it has actually afforded me the opportunity to be of service and help others who have a problem. They are struggling with alcohol and drug addiction, which is an extremely powerful experience."

Cox doesn't go around giving testimony to teammates, but Ballard said Cox is "glad to be a mentor."

"It was awkward at first, because he knows there is a generation gap," Ballard said. "He didn't want to be overbearing. But we tell these guys, 'If you have his attitude about everything, you would be ten times better as a player immediately.'

"He comes out, he works hard, he's vocal. He leads by example and they all know it. They all recognize that."

Cox, who is halfway through getting his bachelor's degree in electrical engineering, is inspired by his teammates.

"We have character words that we live by in our program, and within loyalty, we say we are a family away from home," he said. "I truly feel that way. There isn't another group of guys I'd rather call my teammates, amazing young men, and I know that we all have each other's back both on and off the court."

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