



known on the reservation, stretching back generations. Nolan's grandfather Leo Desjarlait was a Navy man who served in World War II. He died in 2014 two weeks shy of his 99th birthday. Nolan was his personal barber in the final years of his life.

Nolan's dad, Leo Desjarlait Jr., was Red Lake's fire chief throughout his son's childhood. He now works for the reservation's Transit Department, and Ramona, Nolan's mom, is program director for the department.

Located 250 miles northwest of Minneapolis, the reservation is home to the Red Lake Band of Chippewa Indians and the largest lake contained entirely within the state's borders. More than 5,500 members make up the Red Lake Nation, which is governed by a democratically elected chair and Tribal Council that upholds and protects its sovereignty. The high school has an enrollment of 327 students.

Across these nearly 900 square miles, Nolan Desjarlait's athletic feats in the 1990s were legendary. A game-saving double play he turned by himself in his sophomore year helped send Red Lake to its first and only baseball state tournament appearance. He was all-conference in three sports as a senior.

Desjarlait played two years of college baseball and was back home working as an electrician when the school district invited him to coach middle-school sports. He became the high school's athletic director in 2007, and also serves as head boys basketball coach, assistant baseball coach and football coach. He also ran the school's mail operation for years.

Football is a tough sell at Red Lake High. The boys basketball team has advanced to the state tournament nine times since 1997, and many student-athletes here skip football to save their bodies for hoops. By the time Desjarlait took over in 2008, the team had been dismissed from its conference over frequent forfeits and cancellations. The Warriors found a new conference home a decade ago, but challenges remain.

Four players showed up to Des-

jarlait's first football practice in 2008. Undeterred, he stressed the importance of being physically active and urged his players to tell friends to join them. He'd stop kids in the hallway between classes and recruit them, using one of his favorite lines: *You might like it, and you might love it.*

Without a robust feeder program at the youth level, many kids come to football tryouts having never played the sport. Desjarlait's coaching often includes rudimentary tasks such as teaching players how to properly put on helmets and pads.

Red Lake averages fewer than 20 players. Opponents often have twice as many, and Desjarlait makes a point of instructing his team not to count players on the opposite sideline. Too intimidating.

Once, Desjarlait wanted to forfeit a game because he had only 13 players available that night. The opposing school begged him to play because it was their Parents Night. Desjarlait agreed to play, but the game ended at halftime with too many Warriors suffering cramps.

At home after some games, Desjarlait wonders how he keeps doing it. The answer always comes. "I refuse to give up on them," he says.

Desjarlait's patience is as deep and wide as the big lake by the school. He does not kick players off the team for skipping practice or games. He pours himself into the kids who are there that day, and then welcomes those who show up tomorrow with encouragement to keep coming back. He answers to "Uncle Nolan" from players who know him well and need him often.

His voice is usually soft and calming. He finds positives in every situation, even in a lopsided loss — in fact, especially in those moments, because life's scoreboard matters far more to Desjarlait than the one in the end zone. Do his players graduate? Do they become productive adults? Are they being accountable to their families and employers? He counts those as victories.

"I'm teaching them how to be a young man in a football helmet," he says.

At age 48, Desjarlait has been at



it long enough to be coaching a second generation of Red Lake families, sons of fathers who played for him.

He wants players to enjoy football while embracing the physical nature of it. As an incentive, he once told the team that the player with the cleanest uniform at the end of road games would have to clean the inside of the bus after the ride

home. One night, the kid who lost the contest realized it and immediately dropped and started rolling around in mud as the team huddled postgame. Desjarlait enjoyed his ingenuity so much that he cleaned the bus himself that night.

"Coaching is having fun with kids and making them feel welcomed and wanting to be here," he says. "My job is to keep them moving."

Coaching keeps him moving, too. The reminder to stay in motion is always resting on his chest, a pendant attached to a necklace he never takes off.

It holds a picture of Nolan Jr.

#### A natural athlete

The tiny ballhandling wizard was a dazzling halftime show, sinking three-pointer after three-pointer.

"M-V-P! M-V-P!" the Crookston student section chanted. They loved the kid. Everyone did.

Nicole and Nolan's only son seemed destined to be a star athlete. He always had a basketball in his hands, and he was always begging his dad to take him to the gym to shoot baskets. His parents made YouTube videos of his ball-handling routines, and he stole the show with those halftime performances at varsity games.

Kids his age looked up to him and followed him around. As a 9-year-old, Nolan Jr. put together a basketball team that entered tournaments across northern Minnesota. The Little Warriors won most of their games.

"He was way beyond our skill level for our age," says senior quarterback Cade Beaulieu.

Nolan Jr. was sure to be Red Lake's starting quarterback, starting-point guard and starting shortstop, then a college athlete. Everybody just knew it.

He picked jersey No. 12 because that's the number his dad wore in high school. In his first youth league baseball game in 2015, Nolan Jr. made a sweet diving play at second base. It's a slow-motion replay in Desjarlait's memory.

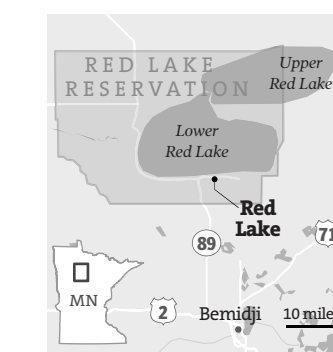
"He caught the ball, laid on his back and he threw the guy out," he says.

That was his son's final baseball game.

Days later, the family gathered at home to celebrate youngest child Skylar's second birthday. Nolan Jr. received permission to use an ATV to drive a bag of trash to a dumpster down the road. He lost control on the road and the ATV crashed, killing him. He was 10 years old.

The grief that enveloped his father and mother included moments of anger and regret for allowing their son to leave the yard that day. But they vowed to stick together and support each other by living a positive life for the sake of their marriage and their daughters.

After seeking guidance from reservation elders and spiritual advisers, they buried their son in their backyard. Desjarlait comes



Source: OpenStreetMap contributors

here often, to feel his son's presence.

A black bear cuts through their backyard occasionally, walking close by the grave site. This comforts Desjarlait, a member of the Ojibwe Bear Clan.

"He's with us," he says. Desjarlait wasn't sure he wanted to continue coaching after his son's death. He wasn't sure of much of anything. But he returned to work a few months later, and everything changed in a moment he can scarcely explain.

He arrived at school at his usual time to start sorting mail. He was alone in the office. The mail machine started running, which can only happen by pressing a button. No one had pressed the button.

"Son, is that you? Are you telling me something?" Desjarlait called out.

The machine stopped. An overhead light flickered. A moment later, the machine start running again.

"It was a golden moment," he says.

Right then, Desjarlait promised himself and his son that he would keep moving, stay focused on what's in front of him.

"What's in front of me is my kids, my family," he says. "What's around me is other people's kids who look up to me to coach them."

Desjarlait takes comfort knowing his son's final resting place is steps away from the family's home. He points to a section of his property near the grave where he hopes to build a home for his daughters. Maybe two houses,

so that the entire family can live together forever.

Their oldest child, Lexi, a Division III college basketball player who topped 2,000 points scoring in high school, is the only sibling who has memories of their brother. Skylar is now 9. Two daughters, Emerald, 6, and Aishja, 5, were born after Nolan Jr.'s death.

The girls all want to wear No. 12 in sports.

#### Perseverance a Red Lake hallmark

The first practice of the season starts at 3 p.m. Two carloads of players roll up a few minutes late, hustling over from a basketball camp.

Desjarlait fits players for their helmets. One needs help buckling his chin strap.

Sixteen players are here, 12 high-schoolers and four in middle school. The coaches expect attendance to increase as the season continues.

The sinewy Beaulieu, who has been the starting quarterback since eighth grade, is nursing a minor injury so he can only watch. He's a standout basketball player who hopes to play in college.

Kingbird Jr. is 6-1 and one of the school's best athletes. He plays receiver and cornerback and is a skilled basketball player too.

And there's Brown, a towering presence with long black hair. He plays multiple positions, occasionally even running back, and never fails to make teammates laugh.

Brown introduces himself as "Slug," but with a twist.

"Dollar sign-L-U-G," he says, laughing. He got the nickname in middle school. The dollar sign is his touch.

The first workout of the season is hard. Optimism abounds, though, as Desjarlait gathers his players for a huddle after the 45-minute session. Each kid gets an opportunity to say a few words. Everyone repeats the same message: great work today, bring a friend tomorrow.

Training camp flies by, never enough time to feel comfortable for the season opener. Desjarlait