

**Have you known someone who seems to consistently make lemonade out of lemons?**

They lose their job and find a better one the following week. They are jilted by a girlfriend and then end up with a much prettier sweetheart.

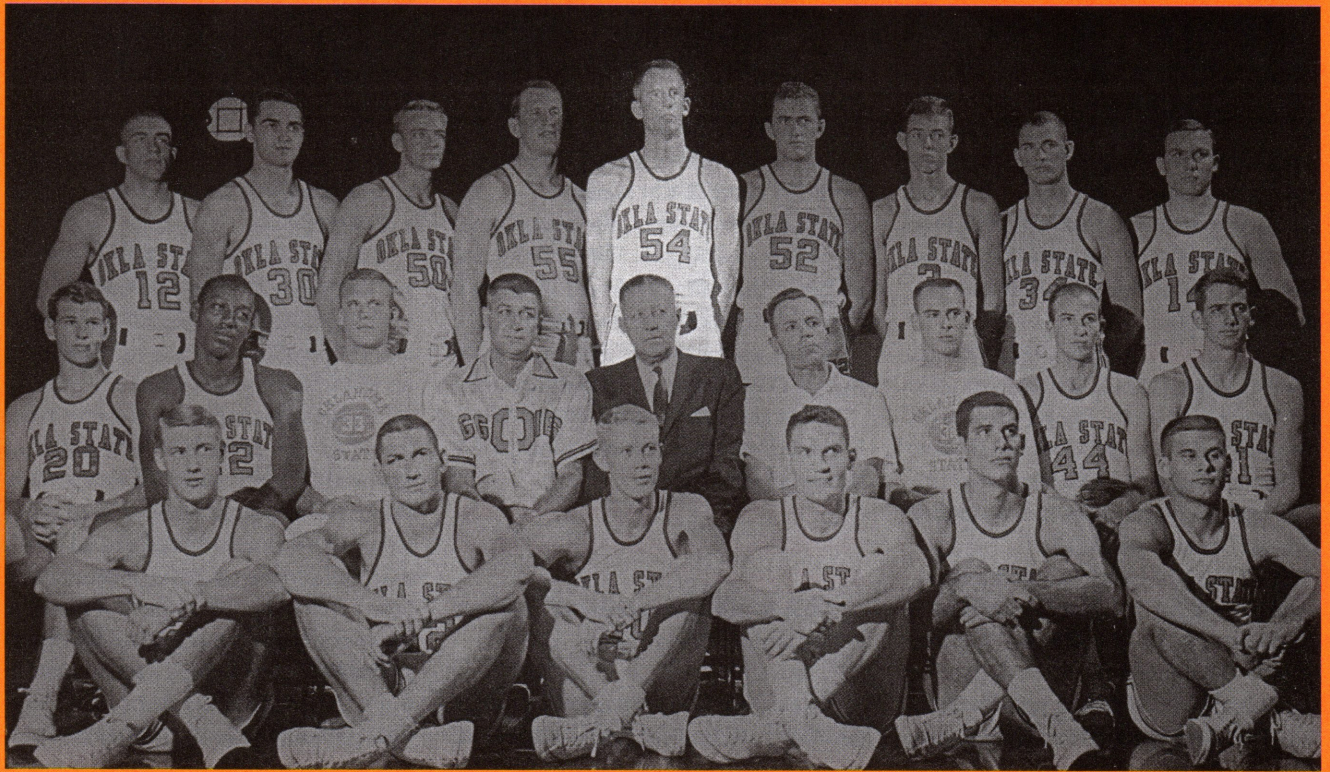
**But how about turning tragedy into triumph?** Tragedy is defined as a dreadful event, calamity or disaster. That's a far more challenging endeavor.

Some 50 years ago, in 1964, the United States launched military attacks against South Vietnam in response to an attack against American naval vessels. Henry Bellmon was serving as governor of Oklahoma.


# Turning Tragedy into

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STORY BY **GENE JOHNSON**



# Triumph

That same year, Oklahoma State junior **Bob Swaffar** (6-foot-9 and 200 pounds) was expected to be a key player on coach Henry Iba's Cowboy basketball squad. 

**POSSE**

**A**s a senior at Tulsa's Will Rogers High School, Swaffar had been recruited by **Princeton, Tulsa, Navy, Kansas and Oklahoma State.** **PRINCETON ALL-AMERICAN BILL BRADLEY** paid him a visit and was so impressive that Swaffar decided he wanted to go there. However, Swaffar's father thought it was too expensive, and he didn't want his son to "turn Ivy League" and become a snob. Princeton charged \$3,000 per semester for tuition and only offered Bob a \$300 per semester scholarship.

**Eddie Sutton**, then a coach at Tulsa Central High School, had seen Swaffar play numerous times and recommended him to Mr. Iba. So the Cowboys became his second choice. It was a place where his dad had graduated with honors. **Mom wanted him to go to KU.**

With straight blond hair and a handsome yet rugged face, Swaffar excelled in academics and had a quick, albeit a little ornery, wit. Joining him that upcoming season were six returning seniors, three who had been three-year starters, plus an outstanding sophomore prospect and a cast of other quality teammates.

Mr. Iba had exceedingly high hopes for the squad, according to local media. He told Volney Meece of *The Daily Oklahoman* that "I think we have the makings of a real fine ball club."

Lavish optimism was unusual for Mr. Iba.

However, on a dreary cool October evening, tragedy struck.

Swaffar and this writer were teammates, daily battling against one another trying to earn the starting center position.

Following a late afternoon practice, I ate supper at the athletic dining hall in the basement of Bennett Hall and then walked over to my room in Gallagher Hall, picked up my books and proceeded to walk to the library. After studying for several hours, I returned to my room. I noticed my roommate wasn't there, and I assumed he was studying with some of his fraternity brothers at the Lambda Chi house.

After a few minutes, the phone rang. My watch said 10 p.m. We used the pay phone in the hall outside our room so I hurried to answer it on the fourth ring.

"What are you doing?" my sister Linda Kay, an OSU sophomore, asked nervously.

"I just got back from the library. Why? Is everything Okay?" It was unusual for her to call me that late.

**"I just heard on the radio that Bob Swaffar had an accident, something about his arm."**

**"What? Are you serious?"** I asked, letting her words soak in.

"I'm not kidding."

"Wow!" was all I managed to say. "I'll see what I can find out," and hung up the phone. I walked the short distance to the rooms underneath the north portion of the football stadium where six basketball players, including Swaffar, lived in three different rooms. As I opened the hallway door, I saw 10 or 12 guys, mostly basketball players, along with two wrestlers and a baseball player. They talked in quiet, almost hushed tones. When they saw me, several nodded.

**"What happened?"** I asked.

**THERE WAS SILENCE.** No one wanted to explain the tragedy that had just occurred. Finally, teammate **Jimmy Tom Watson** answered.

"Bob lost his balance, fell forward and got his arm caught in the extractor, and the @&\*\*\*\* machine snapped it off midway between the shoulder and the elbow. Blood is splattered everywhere in there, **looks like a war zone,**" as he nodded toward the laundry room. **"Doc (Dr. Donald) Cooper** and Hass (teammate **Gary Hassmann**) went with him in an ambulance to the Stillwater hospital a little while ago."

I didn't respond. No way did I want to see that room. Swaffar had been doing a load of clothes while he and Hass studied. The laundry room was equipped with an industrial washer, dryer and extractor to launder practice and game attire for all sports. After the clean gear was removed from the washer, it was put into the extractor, a large barrel-shaped apparatus with a smaller barrel placed inside that had numerous 50-cent piece sized holes on its sides. With a push of a button, the inside barrel spun up to **2,500 rounds per minute.** It was enough force to squeeze water from the washed items before they were put into the dryer. To stop the spinning, the same button was pushed to disengage the power, and there was a footbrake to quickly slow it down.

I learned that Swaffar's roommates, **Les Berryhill**, Watson, and **Skip Iba**, plus teammate **Jack Herron**, were first on the scene. Berryhill and Watson wrapped the severed limb tightly in white towels in an attempt to slow the bleeding. Hass, who had been in the room studying with Swaffar when the accident occurred, shouted for someone to get ice. Teammates **Bill Beierschmitt** and Herron located a medium-sized washtub and filled it with cold water since there was



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**"I think we have the makings of a real fine ball club."**

**MR. IBA**

no ice available. For a few minutes longer I listened to the quiet, almost reverent, discussions. Figuring there wasn't anything else to be learned, I walked slowly back to my room. **A nightmare!** I thought. That evening Swaffar was rushed to the OU Medical Center in Oklahoma City. I walked back to the field house and phoned my sister. I didn't sleep that night.

Swaffar's arm was successfully reattached by a team of surgeons, one of the first surgeries of that type in the U.S.

**Following the accident, he was resilient.**

He never appeared to let it get him down. How he felt on the inside, none of us will ever know. His basketball career, tragically, was over.

**I**n the years that followed I'd see Swaffar occasionally, usually at a basketball reunion. In 2005, he attended the **40th reunion of our 1965 Big Eight championship team.** He was still the same smiling, slender guy I knew, except that now he had a full white beard and looked like a trim Santa Claus. He had limited use of his reattached right arm and hand and would shake hands with his left.

Fast forward eight years to 2013. I decided to drive to his home in Austin, Texas, to catch up and maybe write a story.

It was a perfect May morning, warm but not hot, birds were chirping, blue sky with large fleecy white clouds and a slight breeze. With the help of my GPS, I drove to his home, which is located in the historic neighborhood just a short walk from the University of Texas campus.

Swaffar greeted me with a hearty left-handed handshake and a hug. He dwarfed his slender wife, Janet, by well over a foot.

From Swaffar's very comfortable front porch, he began his story with his arrival at Oklahoma State.

"Sam (assistant basketball coach **Sam Aubrey**) notified me that I'd be living in room 105. I thought that was in the field house," he said. "Mom drove me over, and we arrived at noon so the business offices were closed. I couldn't find a room 105, but finally located it on the second floor,

down a long hallway, underneath the football stadium. The room was flooded and half of the windows were knocked out. It was a mess.

**"MOM WASN'T SURE ABOUT IT. SHE THOUGHT MAYBE SHE'D BETTER TAKE ME HOME, BUT I CONVINCED HER TO LET ME STAY.** Les Berryhill, who was scheduled to be one of my roommates, showed up the next day or so. Our freshman year we didn't have heat, and the roof always had a slight leak, so I attached a wire to the ceiling with a plastic cup to catch the drops," he added.


Soon Paul (teammate **Paul Labrue**), another roommate, moved in. The room was huge; it previously had been an equipment storage area. We had a lot of great times there. The three of us furnished our home-away-from-home with found rugs, a refrigerator, a couch, lamps, all kinds of stuff."

Guys who lived beneath the stadium were aptly referred to as stadium rats.

Before Swaffar's senior year at OSU, assistant athletic director **Moose Johnson**, Mr. Iba's right-hand man, came over to inspect his room. "We'd hung an old parachute from the ceiling and a few old *Playboy* pictures in the back — made it into a real party room. Moose reported back to Mr. Iba that the **'damned place looked like a brothel!'**"

The night after the spring semester was over, when Swaffar was a senior, he and several guys decided it would be fun to drop water balloons from the top of the stadium on the press box side.

"You remember the year before there was somewhat of a riot the night school was out. So we knew the university was on alert, and we weren't trying to hit anyone, just have some fun and let off steam. Also, there were some old fluorescent bulbs lying around and they made fun noises when they hit the ground."

Before the group knew what was happening, five police cars raced in. "Looked like Miami Vice," remembers Swaffar. "We tried to run away, but they caught us and took us to jail. Sam had to bail us out. I'll never forget it!" 



On playing for Mr. Iba, Bob recalls, “I didn’t have much interaction with him when I was playing — he was somewhat remote. He didn’t always approve of everything I did, but I’m glad I got to play for him. I got to know him better after I quit playing. **ONE PRACTICE I JUMPED AND STUFFED A REBOUND, ALL IN ONE MOTION, AND I REMEMBER MR. IBA SHAKING HIS HEAD AND SAYING, ‘WOW!’ I KNEW HE LIKED THAT.”**

Asked about the accident that severed his arm, Swaffar said, “I was in a state of naïveté, never a person to plan very far ahead, so I rolled with the flow. **I wasn’t particularly interested in a basketball career,** didn’t even know if that was a possibility for me or not. NBA players only made about \$50,000 or so back then.”

During his senior year Swaffar took an interest in politics and became president of the student senate and vice president of the student body.

“I didn’t mind being in a leadership role but didn’t like all the behind the scenes strategy that takes place to get a person elected,” he said. “People tend to get corrupted in a leadership role. Those folks behind the scenes have no ethics.”

**Who was his biggest influence?**

“I’ve been fortunate to have good coaches, sincere friends and parents who cared. I needed discipline because I tended to get in trouble a lot. Lots of people influenced me.”

Swaffar graduated from OSU with a degree in mathematics. He decided to

serve a year with the Peace Corps. About eight months before his training began he took a job with Conoco in Ponca City, in the computer department. It was a position that would influence him later.

The couple treated me to a tasty lunch of broiled sea bass, asparagus and gluten free cake topped with fresh whipped cream. The Swaffars, who married in 1977, dined off the same plate.

“This is a habit I picked up in Ethiopia when I was in the Peace Corps,” Bob said. “It’s kind of cozy and saves on washing dishes.”

He taught math for a year to Ethiopian seventh graders. “It was a rewarding experience except I got a tapeworm and my weight dropped to 175 pounds before I finally got rid of it — not an enjoyable experience.”

Returning from Ethiopia, Swaffar taught computer science one year at OSU, then worked two years for Sun Oil in Dallas as an associate computer analyst. He then moved to Austin where he worked for the University Texas from 1972 to 1988 as a system analyst and programmer while earning two master’s degrees: computer science and architecture. In 1988, he was appointed senior systems analyst, adjunct professor and director of computer laboratories for the school of architecture at Texas. He held that position until his retirement in 2003.

**H**ey,” Swaffar said as he stood up, “let me show you my pottery studio.”

I knew he made ceramic pottery or, as I learned, was a potter. Last year my wife had purchased for me a large swirled turquoise vase Swaffar had made. It was an absolutely stunning piece.

We exited through a side door and walked toward the back. The studio itself was an architectural masterpiece, designed, of course, by the owner. It is a rammed-earth structure with a loft with both areas totaling 1,200 square feet.

The structure has large glass windows that invite abundant sunshine and, when opened, a breeze. The studio’s design complemented that of the main house. Once inside I immediately saw, on both levels, hundreds of pieces of ceramic work: jars, pots, cups, mugs, bowls and creamers. His pottery wheel was on the lower level, and his craftwork came in an assortment of styles and colors.

“You notice none of my pieces come with a handle,” he said. “You need two good hands to successfully attach a handle, and I only have one. **I used to say I was the only one-handed potter in Texas.** Now I understand there are many potters with temporary injuries or some sort of disability so **I’m now the tallest one-handed potter in Texas,**” Swaffar said with a slight smirk.

“The reason I retired early is to use some of the physical strength I have left to develop a ceramics business. It can be strenuous, but I like the physical challenge. I’ve dabbled around with it for a long time and got a minor in ceramics at OSU but have only been serious the past 10 years or so. Knowing one day my daughter would go to college, I felt I couldn’t make a living as a potter so I became a computer guy. But I’ve always enjoyed taking a lump of clay, actually a ball of mud, and through a very lengthy process, producing something that is long lasting and combining the elements of art and 3D work, putting things in a kiln, firing it and getting out one or two things that you really like. It

“I’ve always enjoyed taking a lump of clay, and producing something that is long lasting.”



**BOB SWAFFAR**



takes a long time to become a good potter, and I've got a long way to go."

Following my compliments on his work, he became very generous.

"Go ahead and pick out a couple of things for yourself," he said.

"Really?"

I picked three items: two coffee cups and a drinking tumbler. I looked at Swaffar for approval. He acquiesced.


**"Sure. I knew you couldn't count."**

A pristine 1982 Chevrolet El Camino (half car and half pickup) is parked in his driveway, which he uses to haul his ceramics to arts and crafts shows. "It's getting more difficult for me to carry all those boxes of pottery. It seems like they get heavier each time."

Swaffar's daughter, Jennifer, recently moved from Norman and is a nurse anesthetist. **He has a 6-foot-4 granddaughter, Acacia, who attends Colorado State University on a volleyball scholarship.** CSU, an NCAA Division I program, was ranked seventh in the country at this writing and is consistently ranked in the top 10. Between Bob and Janet, they have 10 grandchildren.

Besides nearby Barton Springs and some occasional travel, Swaffar enjoys solitude in his studio (five days each week), staying in touch with friends and neighborhood politics. He has served as president of the neighborhood association.

Driving north out of Austin, I thought about Swaffar. Certainly his accident had been a shocking event, but, in the greater scheme of things, did it slow him down? Yes, as far as his basketball career was concerned, but no, on what he had accomplished with his life: **family, Peace Corps, studying computers and architecture, rising to the top of a department at a major university, becoming a darn good potter and enjoying those things important to him.**

I think we would all agree that he definitely triumphed over tragedy. 

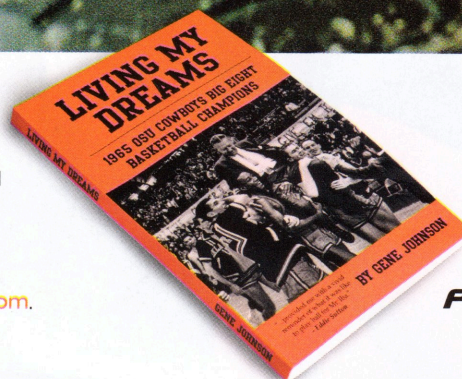
#### EDITOR'S NOTE

Visit Bob Swaffar's website, [LOSTINAUSTIN.COM](http://LOSTINAUSTIN.COM), and buy someone you love a piece of Bob's art. Be sure and ask for the Cowboy discount.



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The author, **GENE JOHNSON**, has recently published a book entitled **"LIVING MY DREAMS"** about the **1965 OSU men's basketball team** that was crowned Big 8 champions. Copies are \$15 and can be purchased by contacting Gene Johnson at [osu52johnson@yahoo.com](mailto:osu52johnson@yahoo.com).



**POSSE**