

## SJ Houston, Lafayette Jefferson girls' assistant



To say that SJ Houston is committed to serve the youth of his community would be a large understatement.

A girls' basketball assistant coach at Lafayette Jefferson, Houston has been a part of Bronchos' athletics for 22 of the past 24 years as a player, coach or youth program director. More recently, Houston also has served the community as a teacher, foster parent and adoptive parent.

In recognition of all those efforts, Houston has been selected as a winner of the 2024 IBCA/PGC Transformational Coach Award.

"SJ is an assistant varsity basketball coach, a Family and Consumer Science teacher and the face of our boys' and girls' youth basketball programs," Jeff girls' varsity coach Jenna Sullivan said in nominating Houston. "He picks up players for practice on the weekends when they don't have rides, and he takes them home from games when their parents cannot attend.

"SJ also provides our high school players a safe space to go during the school day, a trustworthy ear to confide in and a rational voice when they struggle in practice. SJ was an integral part in creating a school-based basketball team and schedule for our fifth- and sixth-grade teams. He runs tryouts for boys and girls in Grades 3-8 and selects coaches for every team. There is never an out-of-season weekend that he is not in the gym cheering on our young teams or filling in for a coach for a few games."

Houston also had a pivotal role in forming an arrangement with a local basketball facility that provided Jeff youth teams the privilege of playing in its spring, summer, fall and winter leagues at no cost. A significant number of players in the Jeff community come from low-income and/or single-parent households. The agreement with the facility is what allows 90 percent of the youth players, boys and girls, to be able to play organized basketball.

Houston started coaching as a Lafayette Jeff girls' assistant to Jan Conner in 2006-07. He began coaching in the Jeff boys' youth program starting in 2014-15 and became the youth program's director in 2019. In 2020-21, Houston was the girls' interim varsity coach after former coach Andy Baker departed early that season, also expanding the youth program that year to include boys and girls in a single comprehensive entity.

After Sullivan was hired as the girls' permanent varsity coach for 2021-22, Houston stayed with the high school girls' program to help make for a smooth transition.

"SJ interviewed for the open position in the spring of 2022 and despite the letdown of not getting the job, he was as enthusiastic and helpful as possible when I started my time with the team," Sullivan said. "A number of the girls wanted to see him get the (varsity) position and were disappointed when I was brought in.

"He advised them to give 'us' a chance as a staff to be the type of coaches they needed. At a time where he could have chosen to be angry and bitter, he chose to unite our team. We would have been in a terrible place without him."

Beyond his contributions in basketball and the classroom, Houston's biggest impact in the community may be through the foster care that he and his wife, Christine, provide. They have fostered 19 children over the years and the couple ultimately has adopted four of those children – Avery, 14; Cooper, 13; Ellis, 9; and Beckett 8.

"In the past two years, they have brought two more incredibly lucky (foster) babies into their home, both of whom have since been reunited with their biological parents," Sullivan said. "You will often still see baby Poppy with SJ or Christine. They have crafted a beautiful friendship with Poppy's biological mother and participate in her birthday parties, provide child care when she needs it, references for housing or anything in general that they can do to help the biological mom and Poppy live a comfortable and safe life."

A 2004 graduate and four-year varsity basketball player at Jeff, Houston went on to play two seasons at Parkland College in Illinois while earning an associate's degree in education. He then returned to Lafayette, earned a bachelor's degree in management from Purdue in 2009 and added a master's degree in education from Purdue in 2020.

