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Helping Haiti

The Jonathan Vilma Foundation Fights to Fund a Good Cause

BY MATT BOUDREAUX

The plan is to be back at full strength when offseason workouts come around in April of 2014. Until then, Jonathan Vilma wants to do what he can to help the Saints in the 2013 season. The Saints placed the 10-year veteran on season-ending injured reserved just days after making his season debut in week nine. It was a tough pill to swallow for the veteran who has started 68 of the 70 games he's played in since joining the Saints in early 2008. "I'll help in anyway I can. Naturally, I can help the guys on the field during a game, but if Sean (Payton) and (Saints owner) Mr. Benson need me in any other capacity I'm available," the 31-year-old linebacker said.

At the time of Vilma's return, the Saints defense didn't need much help especially with the way David Hawthorne filled in for the veteran. The 2013 Saints defense is much different than the version one year earlier. And it's led by a different face, Rob Ryan. "Rob is great at putting players in position to make plays. He's brought a tougher mentality and has changed the culture for the better," Vilma said. "We have a coach who likes to cater to the player's strengths. Guys have focused in on the details this season and made it a point to improve as individuals each week." They needed a change. The unit finished as the worst defense in NFL history in 2012 by allowing 7,042 yards in 16 games. Vilma also credits head coach Sean Payton's return as a reason the group is better. He says Payton being there provides a consistency that the 2012 team missed. The linebacker who played a key role on the Saints 2009 Super Bowl Championship team admits he doesn't know what the future holds. His focus, he says, remains on this year even though he won't play another snap. Regardless of what happens Sean Payton considers Vilma an "all-timer." "Give me as many Jon Vilmas as you can," said Payton. The three-time Pro Bowler has played in 125 games racking up 871 tackles (612 solo), 10.5 sacks, 12 interceptions and 11 forced fumbles.

Jonathan Vilma realizes there are other things outside of his football life. In fact, when he's not on the field, he spends a lot of time submerged in work that has absolutely nothing to do with sports. Vilma and the Saints were preparing for their playoff game against the Arizona Cardinals in 2010 when he received news of the earthquake in Haiti that affected millions of people. Shortly after, the Florida native started The Jonathan Vilma Foundation. The earthquake crippled Haiti's capital city Port Au Prince. Vilma's parents were both born in Haiti and moved to the United States as teenagers. He still has family in Haiti and uses his personal connection with the country to

help rebuild. The foundation is geared towards helping build schools for children. "The old saying 'the children are our future' hit home after the earthquake because the only way to properly rebuild is to empower the next generation with the knowledge and skills to better their community," Vilma said.

The 7.0 magnitude earthquake killed an estimated 230,000 people. The country lost thousands of students and teachers. More than 50 schools were demolished. In May 2011, The Jonathan Vilma Foundation made a \$50,000 grant to Artist for Peace and Justice to help expand the school they built following the deadly earthquake. In 2012 and 2013, the foundation made grants of \$100,000 and \$50,000, respectively to expand the academy in Haiti. Students now receive free education, uniforms, food, clean water, transportation and medical care through the school. "As they struggled to find the basic necessities that we take for granted here in America, my foundation has provided an outlet allowing the children to learn and understand there is more to the world than just what they see. My foundation helps educate the children to give them the confidence needed to help themselves and their families as well," he said.

The people of Louisiana have been a big help in giving their time to help the cause. "I feel that the people of New Orleans have empathy for Haiti and their everyday struggles, there is almost a sense of responsibility to provide and donate whatever they can to help the foundation," Vilma said. Those people, or at

least most of them, have experienced tragedy first hand. They've seen what natural disasters can do. They, like the people of Haiti, still have a long road to recovery. For the past four years Vilma has hosted a celebrity waiter event at Morton's the Steakhouse in New Orleans. The event has helped raise around \$100,000 each year. Along with Vilma, Owner/Vice Chairman of the Board Rita Benson LeBlanc, Saints Head Coach Sean Payton, tight end Jimmy Graham, running back Pierre Thomas and several other players attended the event. Guests who go to the event can chat with the players and coaches during an hour-long reception. Afterwards, they are served steak dinners by the black and gold contingent on hand. "We have such a great turnout every time we do this and it's been humbling," said Vilma. "You start to see a lot of familiar faces and I am really grateful for that." "My biggest contributors have been from Louisiana especially with their time. I've been blessed to receive so much help during my time in Louisiana. They've truly

made it easy for me to further my cause."

Vilma has fallen in love with the people here in south Louisiana. He also hasn't had a problem getting to know the food. His favorites include chargrilled oysters and red fish. "I've never had oysters until coming to New Orleans," he said. "For steaks, I'm a Morton's or Mr. John's type of guy. G.W. Fins is great for seafood. And for a New Orleans flavor I go with any



Jonathan Vilma and Thomas Morstead at The Jonathan Vilma Foundation fundraiser at Morton's Steakhouse in November.

Emeril's restaurant and Mr. B's in the French Quarter.

In addition to charity, Vilma hosts a financial conference for NFL players called "Jonathan Vilma's Financial 51" to help players manage their money. In 2011, he was named Celebrity Ambassador for Operation HOPE's Five Million Kids Initiative where he will promote the importance of education for inner-city youth. Vilma was also named a Board Member of the National Football Foundation's "Play It Smart" program. It's an educational program that uses football as the driving force to foster the academic, personal and career development of at-risk student-athletes. In 2010, he received the Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year award for the New Orleans Saints. It's an award that's given out annually to honor players for their volunteer and charity work as well as their accomplishments on the field.

As you can see, Vilma's legacy off the gridiron will live on much longer than his playing days on it. Right now, he's working on his third school in Haiti with the help of Artist for Peace and Justice. The NFL veteran says it's a "slow process" to watch the country rebuild. He's only able to make it to the island once a year to check on the reconstruction. But he hopes to make it there "two or three" times a year when he's done with football. That time hasn't come yet. "I will be spending more time [in Haiti] in the offseason before workouts and minicamp starts. I'm looking forward to it," he said.

For additional information on The Jonathan Vilma Foundation visit jonathanvilmafoundation.org, or call 310.649.5222. 🐦

Vilma photo (left) courtesy of Michael C. Hebert