

Denard Span, Tampa Bay Rays Center Fielder

The Tampa native was 14 or so and the team was brand new to Major League Baseball. In true 1990s style, the Devil Rays' original home duds featured the team name in a spectrum of teal, green, yellow and purple on the front, underlined by the tail of a manta ray. The backs featured blocky names and numbers in all purple.

Now 34, Span finds himself wearing that same jersey March 31, the anniversary of Tampa Bay's inaugural game. The Rays, having dropped the demonic half of their moniker years ago in favor of sunshine, have grand plans to celebrate two decades of existence this season. That means they will break out the throwbacks a few more times.

Life wasn't always easy for him and his brother, Ray, growing up. Their father, Donald, wasn't in the picture. While he now has a relationship with Span, and though Wilson re-married in 1998, all the parenting was left to her prior to that. In addition to being an insurance claims adjuster, she had to arrange car rides,

help with homework, wash clothes, cook dinner and more.

"Her impact was monumental to who I am today as a man, as a baseball player, my work ethic," Span said. "I watched her every morning go to work and just grind. No matter what the circumstances were, she put her head down and kept moving forward. I get a lot of that attribute from her.

Founded in 2014, The Denard Span Foundation, based in Tampa, seeks to "empower single-parent homes." The inspiration for the organization, Wilson serves as its executive director in addition to operating her own daycare center. She's "quite involved," paying bills, handling paperwork, scouting locations for events and more.

Being back in the Tampa area has afforded Span even more time to focus on his foundation. It's also shined a brighter light on his work. He said that playing in other cities over the years meant he wasn't visible in his hometown.

Span's alma mater, which his cousins attend, has also benefited from his return. Ty Griffin never coached Span, but the Tampa Catholic baseball coach is among the many who are excited to see Span on the Rays.

"It's been like a dream come true. It's been awesome to play in front of my home city and drive across the bridge, 30 minutes away from my house to work every day," Span said. "Just awesome, man. Never thought it would be a reality."