



Rahn and Stephen Franklin pose in Stephen's coaching office. Rahn is the Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; Stephen is an assistant football coach and the Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee. Together, the Franklin brothers are on a mission to make positive change in the community. | Photo by Addie Stern

# My brother's keeper

Two winding paths bring the Franklin brothers back together at Bethel.

By Kaden Lamb | Design by Spencer Vang

Stephen Franklin ground his teeth into the rubber mouthguard his Pop Warner coach had given him. Standing on the balls of his feet, knees bent, just like he had been taught. Anticipating the offense's next play.

He looked across the line of scrimmage into the eyes of his older brother, Rahn, who played running back. Sometimes opposing running backs tipped off Stephen to the play before it even began just by looking at the path they would run. Rahn was three years older than Stephen, though, and he knew better. His eyes were locked straight forward. Still, Stephen had a feeling.

Outside toss, to his side. Again.

The same play that had resulted in Rahn's open palm meeting his helmet and introducing Stephen's butt to the turf at Satchel Paige Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri, just 30 seconds before.

The ball snapped between the center's legs. The quarterback pivoted and tossed the ball laterally. Rahn tucked the ball high and tight to his body as his eyes turned downfield. A clear lane toward Stephen, who looked to re-

deem himself by delivering a world-shaking hit. They collided, and once again the younger Stephen was humbled by Rahn's stiff-arm.

"The more I think about it, the more I think the coaches set it up," Stephen said with a laugh.

Rahn and Stephen Franklin both joined the Bethel community in 2021, Rahn as Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Stephen as an assistant coach for the Royals football team, along with the position of Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee.

Their journeys to Arden Hills were two twisting paths, leading them every which way, even wrenching them painfully away from the things that they loved. Through it all, they say they have grown closer, learning what is most important in life: family. Their bond has been strengthened by the things they have endured and the love and support they show each other. Now they've landed here and are living side-by-side once again.

"We grew up in a room about the size of [Stephen's office], sleeping just about on top of each other, playing together. When one of us gets some disciplining and gotta be stuck in the room, the other one is on the other side

of the door," Rahn said. "This is like coming full circle. It's a gift to have a home away from home."

Rahn graduated from North Kansas City High School in 2004 when Stephen was in ninth grade, then moved to Storm Lake, Iowa, where he attended Buena Vista University to study sports and fitness management and coaching. Though his education was important, the main reason he went to BVU was to play basketball. While Rahn was away, Stephen began to realize how much he missed his big brother's presence in their Kansas City house.

During the next few years, their family went through a period of homelessness. Stephen and Rahn's parents separated and Stephen was forced to adjust to this new home life away from Rahn. The two talked on the phone often, mostly because Rahn felt sympathetic for his brother and family. He wanted the scoop on everything that was going on back home in Kansas City, and because he couldn't come home from Iowa, Stephen became his outlet to the family happenings.

"Stephen was like my first plug back into family life while I was gone," Rahn said.

Stephen began to get some attention from

college football scouts in his junior and senior years of high school. He graduated in 2007 and decided to go to Southern Illinois University to play linebacker.

That same year, Rahn's love for the gridiron was rekindled as he joined BVU's football team for his senior year after making an impact on the basketball court for three years. His one-year stint as a college football player was successful; he led the Beavers in interceptions and had the fifth most tackles on the team. As soon as football season was over, Rahn was back in the gym, leading the basketball team to its first-ever conference title and third appearance in the NCAA Tournament. After college, Rahn debated trying to play basketball professionally overseas but ultimately chose football. He ended up joining the Sioux City Bandits, an arena football team in Iowa, and also worked as a hall director while pursuing his graduate degree.

Stephen spent the first two years of his collegiate football career as a backup for the Southern Illinois Salukis, which ignited some doubts within him. When he felt discouraged, he turned to his older – but no longer bigger – brother. They kept in touch through phone calls, just as they had when he was in

high school. Rahn had spent some time as a backup during his freshman and sophomore basketball seasons, so he had experience sitting on the bench.

"Rahn was letting me know, like, 'Hey man, you can learn from these dudes. Watch what they're doing and add it to your game,'" Stephen said.

Rahn's advice and Stephen's hard work paid off, and in 2010 Stephen was named an All-Conference linebacker after his senior season. He led the Salukis in tackles and was selected to play in the inaugural Eastham Energy College Football All-Star Game. His performance earned the attention of professional scouts, which resulted in calls from agents from around the country.

On the night of the 2011 NFL Draft, Stephen was nervous. He watched the rounds pass by on the TV in his mom's house back in Kansas City. As the night got later and his phone stayed silent, Stephen's anxiety grew.

The seventh round concluded and Stephen had not been selected by any of the 32 NFL teams.

For weeks he stayed with his mother, unsure of where his life would go next. Finally, he got a call from his agent, letting him know



Rahn (left) and Stephen (right) smiling together a decade ago. | Photo submitted by Stephen Franklin



Stephen (left) and Rahn (right) before a round of golf. | Photo submitted by Stephen Franklin

that he had been signed by the Cincinnati Bengals as an undrafted free agent. Stephen screamed with joy at the news that his dreams were coming true, celebrating the occasion with his mother before calling Rahn to tell him the good news.

Rahn had finished his graduate degree in professional school counseling and been hired by Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa as Multicultural Student Counselor, later promoted to Director of Multicultural Student Development. He still played arena football for the Bandits on the weekends, but his dreams of playing beyond that level had fizzled out. He was settling down with his wife, Rachel, ready to plant his roots in the Orange City community.

Stephen was excited to begin his NFL career, but job uncertainty plagued his mind. He was bounced from Cincinnati's practice squad to the Seattle Seahawks in the fall of 2011. Finally, he landed a spot on the Jack-

sonville Jaguars roster halfway through the season. Rahn and his mother drove down to Jacksonville for the last game of the season. It was the only game they would see Stephen play on the highest stage of football.

Stephen tore his achilles tendon while training in 2012. Recovery was long, and by the time he was healthy again, the Jacksonville coaching staff had been replaced and the new coaches didn't believe Stephen could play at the NFL level anymore. His contract was voided after just five games with the Jaguars.

As quickly as the opportunity to play in the NFL had been given to Stephen, it had been taken away.

He was left in a state of frustration, living in Kansas City with his mom again. No degree and no career path. Stephen talked to Rahn all the time, keeping him updated on how he was feeling and what he was doing. Rahn invited Stephen to visit him in Iowa

for a weekend, and they started talking about playing arena football together. Stephen had recovered and was ready to step onto the turf

**"God, out of all the places in this country that we could've been, you found a way to bring us here to this campus. Now we're open and ready and able to be used by you."**

Stephen Franklin, Bethel University Assistant Football Coach and Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee

once again, and the Sioux City Bandits gave him an opportunity to do just that.

"When life was super busy and a lot of stuff

was unknown, it was nice to be solid and settled. And to be with family, it was a nice reset," Stephen said.

Stephen moved in with Rahn, and before the arena football season started, they coached football together at Unity Christian High School in Orange City.

"These dudes were not accustomed to a lot of things," Rahn said, "but the best part was that they had never seen two brothers, in both senses of the word, coaching on the same team."

The two played together on the same side of the ball for the first time in their lives in 2014. The brothers led the Bandits' defense, helping the team to a 9-3 record in the regular season. Their season ended with a 46-41 loss to the Wichita Wild in the league championship.

"That's the biggest gift... life took us in different directions, then we came back together and got to play one season," Rahn said.

Despite the success and joy they experienced from playing together, that spring season of 2014 was the only season that Stephen would play with Rahn. The time spent with his brother had helped Stephen realize that he needed to have more to his identity than football.

"I think that was really key in my life," Stephen said, "to get to enjoy playing ball, but also think about my life after football."

Stephen returned to SIU in the fall of 2014 to finish his bachelor's degree in exercise science. He went on to work various jobs, including substitute teaching, selling and renting cars, selling life insurance and personal training. He worked as a trainer for three different gyms and even had his own business for a short time. One more season of indoor football with the Colorado Ice left him searching for more, still coming up empty-handed.

"I was just reaching and grabbing for everything, man... I feel like God challenged me

to give all that stuff up and to really start to pursue Him," Stephen said.

Rahn stayed with his wife in Orange City, working at Northwestern, playing arena football, raising two little boys and pursuing his Ph.D. He sat out the 2017 arena football season after tearing his ACL, but was then able to focus even more energy on his studies. He was promoted eventually to Director of Student Diversity Initiatives at Northwestern after earning his doctorate in Organizational Leadership.

In 2018, Mike McElroy, assistant football coach at Bethel University, reached out to Stephen about coaching at Bethel. Stephen and McElroy had been best friends at SIU, but Stephen was settling into life in Kansas City with Lauren, his fiancée at the time, now his wife. He declined the offer then, but when another job opened up in 2021, he couldn't say no.

"There have been two times in my life I feel

**“You can only get invited or slapped by God a certain number of times before you need to listen.”**

Rahn Franklin  
Bethel University  
Vice President of Diversity,  
Equity, and Inclusion

like God’s really asked me to give up my pursuit of football,” Stephen said. “And it seems like both times, when I finally was able to do that, football is the thing that’s been brought back to the table at a different priority level.”

The coaching job came with an additional position for Stephen: Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee—an NCAA-required position to ensure that students of color are being well taken care of on campuses around the country. In the interview, when he heard the words “diversity and inclusion,” Stephen instantly thought of his brother. He mentioned that Rahn did inclusion work at NWC, but he was really only saying it to build his own ethos for the position. He never imagined Bethel would reach out to Rahn as well.

A month later, Bethel’s search committee did exactly that. At first, Rahn was uninterested in leaving his comfortable home life in Orange City, but pressure from numerous colleagues kept the position in his mind.

“You can only get invited or slapped by God a certain number of times before you need to listen,” Rahn said.

Inspired by his younger brother’s step of faith, Rahn agreed to come to Arden Hills and take over as Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. They work together about once a month, spending time talking about recruitment, financial aid and general community outreach.

Stephen enjoys when he gets to work with his brother, but really thrives in his coaching role. He made an impact right away on the Royals, whose 2021 record was 8-3, earning a spot in the NCAA playoffs.

“I get to grow and develop young men in this awesome Christian environment through the game of football,” Stephen said, “as opposed to coaching football and then as a result I get to affect change in these same young men.”

Outside of Bethel, the two now get to bring their families together on Sundays for “cousin time” after church. Their kids get to run around and play while Stephen and Rahn catch up with one another. Their wives get along well, too, bonding over the experience of moving to a new city.

Living side by side once again has been energizing for both of them. Stephen is always the first and loudest laugh in a conversation, lightening the mood of those around him. Rahn is a thoughtful listener who empathizes with those who tell him their stories. Together, they are ready to bring a positive energy to the Bethel community and leave their mark on it.

“God, out of all the places in this country that we could’ve been, you found a way to bring us here to this campus,” Stephen said. “Now we’re open and ready and able to be used by you.” **C**

**1986**  
Rahn is born

**1988**  
Stephen is born

**1990**  
Grow up in Kansas City, Missouri,  
attending North Kansas City High School

**Rahn**

**Stephen**

**2004**  
Graduates high school and goes to college at Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, Iowa

**2007**  
Joins the BVU football team his senior year and leads the team in interceptions

**2009**  
Joins the Sioux City Bandits arena football team and leads the team in interceptions

**2011**  
Completes Master's Degree

**2007**  
Graduates high school and goes to college at Southern Illinois University to play football

**2011**  
Signs NFL contract with Jacksonville after a short time with Seattle and Cincinnati

**2012**  
Tears achilles tendon, NFL career is ended

**2013**  
Stephen moves in with Rahn and joins him coaching football at Unity Christian High School in Iowa

**2014**  
The brothers play their only football season together for the Sioux City Bandits

**2021**  
Both start working at Bethel University,  
Rahn as Vice President of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion  
and Stephen as the Athletics Diversity and Inclusion Designee

One word to describe each other...

**EFFERVESCENT**

Rahn said Stephen is EFFERVESCENT because his energy is felt throughout the community.

**DILIGENT**

Stephen said Rahn is DILIGENT because he worked so hard to get his doctorate while playing football and raising “two beautiful boys.”