

TOUGH LOVE

The former Eagles cornerback runs Pro-Vision, a boys-only charter school where decorum is strictly enforced. He seeks out students who are most at risk.



MAKING MIEN

When it comes to survival, the boys in Houston's dire Third Ward don't have many factors in their favor. But what they do have is a fiery ex-NFL star by the name of Roynell Young. And that just may be enough.

by PAUL SOLARTOFF photographs by BRADY FONTENOT

The kids in this room have seen the bleakest things and learned to look away. Stone-faced and sullen at 12, they are the survivors of the rag-and-bone hurricane that is life in Houston's Third Ward. A father dead or gone to who knows where, lost to the weed-grown shadows; a mother in and out of county lockup; the 'bangers at the Quik-Mart, pants on sag, the .40 autos at their waists. By the time boys find their way to this middle school, they have mastered the pose of false nonchalance, eyeing the walls or floor. But there's one thing they can't pretend to ignore, and that's Roynell Young fighting mad.

"I want eyes on me," snaps the founder of Pro-Vision, the first all-male charter school in the city of Houston, and certainly the only such academy for at-risk boys being run by a retired Pro-Bowler. "Every eye in here. I catch one head down and, straight-out simple, you're suspended."

Row by row in the spit-and-polish classroom at the rear of Pro-Vision's shiny new building, heads tilt up and hands fold. Twenty-five black or brown boys in white shirts fix their gaze on the strapping ex-cornerback of the Philadelphia Eagles. He was once a hitter so ferocious he used to shatter his own helmet punishing tight ends going over the middle, and as a boy, his temper marked him for jail till he lucked into football's sanctioned war. He rarely blows his stack now, but when he does, look out. Young has spent two decades and nearly every NFL dollar he saved turning a storefront hangout into a powerhouse prep, a citadel on the hill for bottom-rung boys who've been kicked out of Houston's worst schools. Emotionally disturbed kids who can't read or sit still; sixth-graders who can't do second-grade math — he wants the ones abandoned or deemed a menace by others. He's made a second life of saving the lost, sanding grief and rage into rough-hewn poise and sending class after class of caught-up kids to success in high school, then college. But Young draws a line when it comes to tugging, and the boys in this room crossed it by trying to start a half-assed gang.

"You came to this school," he says, "begging for help, saying, 'Choose me over the 10 boys behind me.' Hell, some of you so-called thugs bawled your eyes out then. But here you are now, claiming your little set. You all broke your contract with me."

He is staring at a kid in the last row over, a small light-skinned boy named Jacorey Miller. His hips are so narrow he can barely keep his pants up when he gets to his feet to answer. "Sir, it wasn't me, sir. That was my grandma did the crying."

Young ramps his glare up, perhaps to keep from laughing. Jacorey is a scrappy child who can't shut his mouth. Smarting off to teachers, baiting the other boys, almost of all them bigger and harder than him — he's a teacup Yorkie barking at pit bulls. If he weren't so bright, he'd probably have been kicked out months ago, sent back to the dreaded CEP, Houston's dump-site school for lawless kids. "Son, you got the nerve to try something this stupid, bringing that foolishness into this temple I've built, and you think I'm up here playing?"

Jacorey, eyes burning: "No. Not really."

Young, who at 51 is still built for impact, a hulking 6-2 and 215, stares a hole through the kid. "You say you rep your block? Man, you rep nothing but ignorance. You live with your grandma, son."

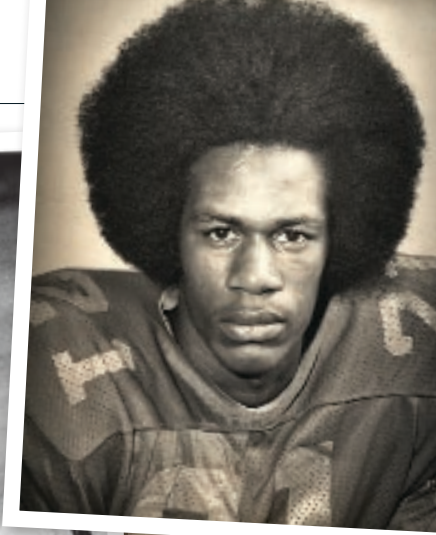
A whooshing sound: the collective intake of breath. "Now, I'm not here to single you out, young man; I'm an equal opportunity hard-ass, as you know. I just want you to own the wrong you did. So do the right thing and come clean about it, or dig the hole deeper for yourself."

The boy dithers a bit, then lets it all out, biting back tears as he confesses taking part in a crew called H-Town Sluggaz. Young walks over and gives him a hug; the room falls funeral-home silent. "That's the first step," he announces to the others. "Saying 'I'm accountable for my acts.' And before y'all leave today, you will stand and claim. Because either you're with me or you're with your little homies. You don't get to choose 'all the above.'"

THE NUMBERS ARE CATASTROPHIC, A SCANDAL so vast as to implicate us all. Nineteen percent in Cleveland and Cincinnati; 24 percent in Milwaukee and Rochester; 26 in New York and St. Louis. Those are the rates of high school graduation for African-American males, and the blight is scarcely particular to cities. Black boys of all ages make the worst grades of any group of students on the scale, are up to five times more likely to be expelled as other kids, and have by far the highest dropout rate, which seems fated, given where they begin. "We start losing them early in grade school," says Susan Scalfani of the National Center for Education and the Economy, a nonprofit school-reform research group. "By the time they've reached middle school, the gap is so big that they act out to hide that they can't read. It's less shameful to say you've got a behavioral problem than have other boys calling you 'dummy.'"

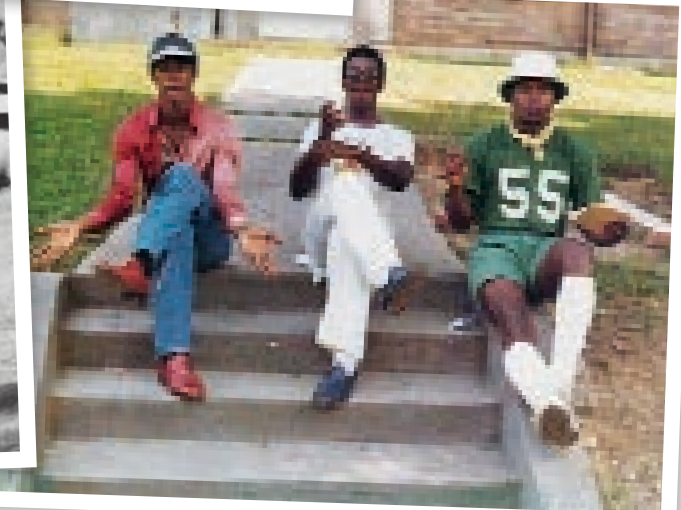
There are endless explanations for our failure to teach black boys, but Roy Young hasn't the time to give them a hearing. He is too busy fighting the rot where it lives, in the nihilism and apathy of 12-year-old kids. With no formal training or advanced degree, he has figured out something the pedagogues miss when they pontificate about black youth: that boys who've had their hearts crushed need to feel cared for before they'll do the work. "Everything we do here starts with the connection between a teacher and a kid," says Young. "This is so much more than school. This is about making men from the ground up."

If your general sense of middle schools is sag-jeaned boys and tween girls dressed like Lady Gaga, Pro-Vision will spin your gauges. For one thing, there are no girls here — they're a drain on boys, says Young. "I'd quote you the studies about bringing down scores, but



HARD-KNOCK LIFE

Clockwise from top: In full 'fro his first year at Alcorn State, 1976; with two college teammates also from New Orleans (Young's on the left), just a few months before he found religion and gave up drugs; leveling a Falcons receiver in 1981, living up to his reputation as a ferocious hitter.



that wasn't why I made the call. It's more about giving kids the chance to be kids and not deal with all that pressure." Next, you'll be struck by the boys' department. A conduct chart that each kid signs is long and strictly enforced. Before talking, a student must raise his hand and ask for permission to speak. When lining up for lunch, he must fold his hands and keep a foot's distance from the kid before him. Cell phones are confiscated at the front door, and a boy carrying more than \$5 cash will get an immediate call home. And anyone crazy enough to sag his pants or sport anything remotely connected to thugging — a blue or red bandanna, a freshly tattooed teardrop — will have a withering sit-down with Young in his sparsely furnished bunker of an office. "They have to understand, this is do-or-die, and those are the trappings of death," he says.

Houston's other notable charter schools, Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) and YES Prep, tend to cherry-pick kids who have achieved in public school and have two parents at home (or a supportive single mom). Not so at Pro-Vision, where nine out of 10 kids come in sorely behind in most subjects and drag along with them the kinds of chaos that KIPP and YES committees screen out. To reach those boys, Young has built and trained a staff that works absurdly hard to forge connections. His teachers, mostly young black men from the same neighborhoods who were the first in their families to attend college, pull 60-hour weeks 10 months a year and volunteer their time on weekends and during summers to lead community outings with the kids. Twelve-hour days and one-on-ones with tutors are mandatory for students who lag, and for kids doing well, there are after-school programs in music, art, and theater. "If you're not in shape, best teach somewhere else," says Kenneth Patrick, director of Pro-Vision's manhood-development program and a former street kid and student here who came back after college with a hot sense of mission. "This ain't private school."

YOUNG WAS ONCE MIRED IN TROUBLE HIMSELF. "HE WAS A STONE GANGSTER," RECALLS A COLLEGE TEAMMATE.

No, it most certainly isn't. In 1995, when Young applied for a charter, his schoolhouse was a strip-mall video store that was vacant because someone got shot there. "We had moved four times those first five years, and our operating budget was whatever I happened to have in my checking and savings accounts." Last November, after 19 knockaround years, Pro-Vision moved to its permanent home, a \$4.5 million glass-and-chrome fortress on 16 acres in Sunnyside, Houston. Many of its 150 middle-school boys helped clear the site of trash and tires, dug the land for a garden, and plowed sweat equity into the football field that the Houston Texans paid for last fall. Next year, work will start on an adjacent building that will house both a gym and a high school, so that kids made whole in their fifth through eighth grades here won't have to return to the gangs and gloom of public education in the 'hood. And then, Young plans to move back down, opening an elementary school. "It's gonna take money I haven't started to raise yet, but I want to close the loopholes for failure," he says. "Give me a kid and let me keep him through childhood, and I'll deliver him straight to college, no exceptions."

COURTESY ROYNELL YOUNG (3)



SAVING JACOREY Clockwise from top: Miller, 12, came to Young after being suspended from his prior school for scuffling with a cop; shooting hoops near his home; with his grandma, who calls Pro-Vision his "last chance."

FOR ALL THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF HIS WORK, THERE is a touch of menace in Young — rage and impatience bundled up with robust decency. You hear it in his voice as he drives the streets of Sunnyside, where a spate of new murders brought church groups together to plead with the mayor for help. "Look at these fools," he sneers at three teen boys on the corner at 10 AM, holding foam cups and leaning the lean of kids on "sizzurp." (That's codeine, Sprite, and a dissolved Jolly Rancher.) "Ass-out drunk on a school-day morning, and don't care who-all sees 'em. I got half a mind to get out of this truck and—"

In New Orleans in the '60s, he was one of those kids. The third of six children in a fractured home — his parents split up when he was 12 — Young was in "the life" by the age of 10, smoking Kools, drinking wine, and stealing bikes. At 11, he was five feet away when a friend was gunned down at a party.

"He was really two kids: just wild in the street, but very respectful at home," says Young's oldest brother Wallace, who works security for the Federal Reserve. "What I mostly recall, though, is he was never there, just out chasing trouble with his boys." On through high school, where Young made All-District as a tall, strong corner with 4.4 speed, he rolled with thugs and drugs. "Weed, pills, coke, whatever you had," he says, "and if I could sell some for my pocket, more's the better."

In college at Alcorn State, he rarely went to class or saw the inside of the library. "He was a stone gangster," chortles Elbert Fowles, Young's roommate first in college and later with the Eagles, where he, Wes Hopkins, Andre Waters, and Young formed a brutally effective second-

ary. "Once, after practice, this lineman stepped to him, and Roy smashed him over the head with a brick that he'd hid up under his shirt."

"He was not the one you wanted to take to meet mama. He and his boys were all playas," says Kathleen Crawford, the campus beauty who kept her distance. "But then, our sophomore year, he went home for break and came back a different guy. People were like, 'Please: Roynell Young's a Christian?' But by and by, I saw the change was real."

About his conversion experience, Young is terse, saying little more than a friend, an ex-hustler, pulled him into Bible study. "I was free-falling and he knew it, too — high all the time, on academic probation — and he told me things that really dug in deep. He said you only live once and then you get judged on how you served others with your gift. I thought, What is my gift, and how do I find it if all I'm ever doing is getting buzzed?"

Crawford wasn't the only one suspicious of the change in Young. "We thought it was some type of game to make it to the NFL," says Leslie Frazier, the defensive coordinator of the Minnesota Vikings, who was a year behind Young at Alcorn. "But he shaved his 'fro off, quit dressing in black, and said, 'For real, Les, my heart has changed.'"

Young became a dean's list fixture, wooed Crawford (they married in 1980), and was the first player ever from a small black college to be taken with a first-round pick. He started in the Super Bowl his rookie season and made the Pro Bowl team his second. But even in his prime, he felt nagged by a sense of mission unmet. With Herb Lusk, a preacher and ex-Eagle in North Philly, he founded the team's food drive for the poor, handing out thousands of holiday meals. He

roamed the streets to connect with kids, doing football clinics in the backs of projects and walking in, unbidden, to speak at schools. "What I saw in those kids was basically me at 12: mad as hell and don't know why," he says. "I could talk to 'em all I wanted, but nothing was going to change till someone stepped up and made a way."

And so, barely 30 and playing on one knee after an injury in '86, he walked away from football and returned to his adopted Houston. He took a job selling insurance and volunteered at church, leading youth rallies with a friend named Mike Anderson. One day, the men came across three teens shooting hoops at a middle-school playground. Young challenged them to a game, promising them all the pizza they could eat if they beat "two broke-down geezers." If the men won, though, the boys would have to sit and talk about their lives for an hour. Young and Anderson won, but, says Pro-Vision's Patrick, who was one of the boys that day, "they bought us the pizza and soda anyway — and chewed our ears off about finding purpose."

Patrick told the kids on his block, and the following Saturday, 10 showed up to play ball for pizza and Coke. By the fall of that year, when Young's hang-out Saturdays were drawing a couple of hundred boys to a nearby gym, he dropped a bomb on the hordes. "I walked in one day and said, 'The fun and games are over; now we're going to work on your reading skills. Those of you ready to invest in yourself, come walk across the street with me. The rest who came here just to play, good luck and we'll still be there if you change your mind.'"

Maybe a quarter of the kids followed him to the former food mart he'd rented around the corner. There, he and Anderson opened the door on a bare-bones study center — four long tables, a fridge to hold the soda, and, in the lot out back, a portable hoop. The pitch they gave the kids was equally Spartan: two hours of homework help each week-day after school, in return for a snack and an hour of ball. "What I saw with my own eyes was a quiet miracle — these wild, angry boys buying in," says Deborah Singleton, the then-principal of Welch Middle School and now the manager of alternative and charter schools in Houston. "That relationship Roy built with them, it was everything to kids with no structure or love in their life." Singleton sent desks and chairs to Young and found money in her budget for new computers.

Young got his charter in 1997, but the money the city paid him, about \$2,000 a kid, barely kept the lights on. Young, a proud man, declined at first to court backers by pimping his Pro Bowl past. But after running the school on fumes for another decade, he bent to the reality of public funding and began making the rounds of Houston's

WALK THE LINE While waiting in the hallway, students must stand quietly with hands clasped at waist level.



"WHAT I SAW IN THOSE KIDS WAS BASICALLY ME AT 12: MAD AS HELL AND DON'T KNOW WHY," YOUNG SAYS.

wealthy. "This is the Bible Belt of football, but I had to beg him to talk sports," says Alvin Major, the school's director of development.

The real hook for donors, though, was the astonishing work Young was pulling from at-risk students. For roughly half what the city spent, per child, on public school pupils, Young's kids were posting better scores than many of their middle-class peers. Promotion rates, attendance, gains in core skills: Pro-Vision was at the top of its class in alternative education. Donations started flowing (roughly \$6 million to date): enough to get the school built and bring in budget planners to work with the parents. What was clear to Young was that you couldn't get a kid turned around for good if you didn't get his family on board. "So much of what we do here is put out fires, get the home life calmer so kids can learn," Young says. "I can't give them back the things they lost out on, but if I can just hold 'em together these three, four years, they'll get to where that pain doesn't hurt so bad."

THE BUSES BEGIN PULLING UP AT 8 AM, AND Kenneth Patrick is there to meet them, game face on. Coach KP, as the kids call him, is being groomed by Young to be his eventual successor, and he wears the same look of don't-try-it sternness. As the kids get off the bus, though, he takes one aside and talks to him softly in the hall. I recognize the boy: It's Jacorey Miller, who drew Young's ire earlier. Jacorey scans his shoe tops blankly, but after a minute or two with KP seems to rally. "His mom's tearing him up," Patrick tells me later. "Keeps choosing her smoked-out boyfriend over him."

He told you that in the hall?
"Man, I knew it when he came down off of the bus. I can read that boy at 20 yards."

Jacorey applied in the fall of '07 as a fork-in-the-road sixth-grader. His marks were less the problem than his temper: In his last school, the disciplinary CEP (Community Education Partnership), where kids who've been expelled from other schools are sent, he was suspended after a hallway scuffle with a cop and taken away in cuffs. "I'd heard about Pro-Vision from a woman in church and thought, That's our last chance," says Frances Miller, Jacorey's grandma, with whom he's lived since age two.

But at Pro-Vision, Jacorey was a chaos machine, disrupting class daily to pick fights or act out. "I saw him one day when I was driving in, standing on the corner with his iPod on and flipping the bird to passing cars," says Young. "I'm like, How bad's this boy's death wish? and blow my horn at him, and he proceeds to give me the finger."

Over months, the cause of that heat-seeking rage surfaced in talks with staff. Jacorey hadn't seen his dad in a decade, when the father got high and punched him so hard that he almost lost an eye. His mother had scarcely been more engaged. In 2008, she was busted for theft to "support her man's habit," says Frances, and allowed the guy to stay even after he stole her purse and Jacorey went at him with a pair of scissors. "She's my only child, so I've learned to accept it," says Frances, "but I don't let him be there now without me."

Something else became clear those first months at school: Jacorey craved approval like no one else. "I'd give him little perks for behaving, and he'd trail me like a puppy," says Patrick. (continued on page 124)

MAKING MEN *continued from page 16*

“Helping me hand out snacks or cleaning after school — to him, that was like me saying, ‘You’re my guy.’ I knew I had him then.”

By the spring of seventh grade, Jacorey responded, raising his grades to A’s and B’s. But as we sit down to dinner at a seafood place, Jacorey is fresh off a new batch of trouble. Teen Court, the student tribunal at Pro-Vision, heard evidence that he’d disrespected a teacher,

and the judge, a former student, gave him a warning that more of the same would get him suspended. Sitting at the restaurant, picking at his fried shrimp, Jacorey admits that he’d misbehaved, but in the next breath says that if someone wrongs him, he is going “to jump till it was right.” Then he reverses field and says he’s learned the lesson that the instructors are trying to teach. “When I got to Pro-Vision, I touched the stove and found out it was hot,” he says, echoing one of KP’s favorite lines. “I

kept trying and trying and it got extremely hot, so now I don’t touch that stove.”

As dessert arrives, I ask about his plans for high school. There’s a seat waiting for him in the new school going up, but Jacorey is deeply divided. He knows that Pro-Vision is free of gangs and if he stays, he “can go to college and all that.” But he wants to try “the real thing,” i.e. a high school with girls and his afternoons open and no Coach Roy keeping vigil. His grandma listens with a doleful frown. “I keep

telling him that they care for him here, but the decision’s up to him, not me.”

When I mention this to Young at lunch the next day, he almost drops his fork on the floor. “That boy has no shot if he walks away. Those real-deal thugs’ll eat him whole.” Incensed, he makes a note to call the grandma. “How can she even think to throw that out?”

A month later, on the phone, Young is more reflective. He’s conferred with KP and been assured the boy will stay, at least for the ninth

grade. After that, though, all bets are off. The recession has plugged the money tap; donations have slowed to a trickle. Construction of the combination high school-gym has been pushed back. Young has had to leave teaching positions unfilled and been forced to wonder where he’ll turn for help in retiring construction debt. There is a bit of hope: The federal government is doling out \$44 billion in stimulus money for schools, and with any justice, some nib of that fortune will find its way to his door.

For two full decades, mostly on his own nickel, Young has been a turnaround artist when it comes to kids, wresting successes, big and little, from the scrap yard of the third ward. He stands ready to do more, train a corps of teachers to take what they’ve learned to their own cities or towns and save its Jacorey Millers. “If we’re really spending billions fixing bridges and roads, then how about the infrastructure of kids?” says Young. “I’ve got hearts and minds here just dying for investment. How long’re we gonna neglect that fix?”