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Winning Against Hopelessness

By RYAN GOLDBERG

HOUSTON — For several months in 1989, in neighborhoods that had been devastated by gang violence and drugs, the sight of a red Toyota Land Cruiser would scatter teenagers loitering on street corners and in public housing projects.

The driver would shout at them, hoping to convince them that he was not an undercover police officer. They might have stayed and listened had they known this man was there to help. Or if they had known about his past.

“The kids would whisper 5-0 under their breath,” the man, Roynell Young, recently recalled with a laugh. “The red truck became a giveaway.”

At the time, Young was one year removed from an [N.F.L.](#) career that had spanned nine years and included an All-Pro season and a [Super Bowl](#) appearance. A tough 6-foot-1 defensive back for the Eagles, he had been a fan favorite at Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia.

But when he retired, he ducked from the spotlight and resurfaced here, where he said his real calling resided. He had passed through this city in college and figured that few here would know much about his football life. He said he did not want his fame to interfere with his message.

“My job is to interrupt the pipeline that is causing young men to go from the cradle to prison,” Young, 50, said recently.

His modest idea was to create an after-school program. It has blossomed into something far more comprehensive.

Through the years, he said, more than 1,000 at-risk young people have arrived at his doors. And early next month, his programs, known collectively as Pro-Vision, a nonprofit organization, will move from a tiny schoolhouse to a 16-acre campus financed by private contributions. Young says he hopes his new campus — with its nature trail, garden, tree farm, amphitheater and N.F.L.-sponsored football field — will help revitalize the city’s Sunnyside community.

Young, the chief executive of Pro-Vision, said he expected the move to occur by the end of this month, but [Hurricane Ike](#) foiled that plan last week.

“At the new site, we don’t have power, trees were ripped out of the ground, fences knocked down,” he said by telephone Tuesday, adding that his staff and students were safe.

For Young, who lives in Houston with his wife, Kathleen, and has a son, Roynell Jr., the motivation for all this was personal.

“In a nutshell,” he said, “I’m one of those kids. The only difference is, I had a community to support me.”

He started his after-school program in 1990. Five years later, he introduced an all-male charter middle school. Then he created a job-training program.

Many of the young people who have entered his programs are black or Hispanic and from homes headed by single women. Young has encouraged them to find purpose and meaning through faith and community. Young became their last chance. His school, he said, became their refuge.

Those who work for the Houston Independent School District see his work as essential to building a healthier city.

“Roy is trying to make Houston a better place to live,” said Debbie Singleton, the school district’s director of alternative education. “He’s the whole package to offer kids, and that does not happen in schools.”

Young uses his own background to relate to troubled youths. He grew up in the Uptown section of New Orleans, the third of six children in a solid household. But in his senior year of high school, he said, he began hanging out in a rough crowd and abusing marijuana. This continued after he enrolled at Alcorn State. Football was his anchor, yet he nearly quit the team his sophomore year.

“It is one black hole; I can’t remember that life,” he said. “I was a good person. I had a quiet desperation, and I needed someone to come along and help me out.”

Help came from a friend who urged him to stay on the team and introduced him to a deacon during his winter break in New Orleans.

“Based on my encounter with him that night, I had a spiritual conversion,” he said. “This spiritual part of me exploded.”

Young, who majored in physical education and health, had been on the brink of flunking out of college. Instead, he earned his way onto the dean’s list and became a first-round draft pick by the Eagles in 1980. He considered himself a reluctant star in Philadelphia, and by the middle of his career, he was considering life after football.

“I went outside of the parameters of what, quote, a celebrity athlete is supposed to be and how he’s supposed to live,” he said. “So I explored different areas, which ultimately took me down to north Philadelphia, which ultimately led to me seeing some things that wasn’t so pretty about life.”

He started his after-school program, known today as the Manhood Development Program, during his first year in Houston. It began with a pickup basketball game at a middle school. Young and a friend challenged a few students. If the adults were to win, the youngsters would have to stay and talk about their lives. If the youngsters were to win, the adults would buy them pizza. Young’s side won.

“I had never seen men of such character in my life,” said one of those boys, Jartis Watts, now 32. “I had never been around men I could trust fully. They were educated. I had never seen that.”

Watts and his friends were hooked, and they told others. The game swelled each week, and ultimately, 50 students decided to join an official program. The first office was the back of that red Land Cruiser.

In the summer, Young and the youths ventured around the country for manual service projects — building a playground, painting a school — in cities like New Orleans; Camden, N.J.; and Philadelphia. Young became a surrogate father to many in that earliest group, especially for Watts, who said he grew up fatherless in a violent household.

“Pro-Vision was an escape for me,” Watts said. “My family wouldn’t come see me play sports. They did. When I made all A’s, they would take me out to restaurants.”

When Watts was recruited for football in high school, Young met with the coaches. At Sam Houston State, where Watts captained the team and earned a scholar-athlete award, he and Young spoke on the phone often. Today, the engineering company Watts set up because of Young’s advice is wiring Pro-Vision’s campus.

After about five years of running the Manhood Program, Young decided to create an all-boys middle school.

[Rod Paige](#), the federal secretary of education from 2001 through 2005, was the head of the school district at the time and granted Young’s charter. He said he remembers what Young told him in their first meeting.

“Before these kids can get engaged enough to learn in math and reading and writing and stuff like that, they got to find some meaning in their lives,” Paige said in an interview at his Houston office. He paused. “Meaning in their lives.”

For the past eight years, Pro-Vision has occupied a one-story brick building at the corner of Balkin Street and Cullen Boulevard in an area known as the Third Ward. Deserted buildings, auto shops and ramshackle houses line Cullen, a main artery through the south side.

The school’s walls are thin. Young’s students return home to encounter drug deals, domestic and gang violence, and neglect. More than 90 percent of the 120 middle school students in fifth through eighth grade live at or below the poverty line.

But a study conducted by the school found that 81 percent of its students ultimately graduate from high school. Citywide, the figure is about 60 percent.

“I paint the picture of what could be if only you would invest in yourself,” Young said. “And then I explain to them that no one here makes anyone do anything. The commitment has to come from deep down within you.”

That commitment starts with discipline and structure. On a recent morning, boys patiently filed in the rear entrance after being searched. Throughout the day, students asked for permission to speak and used “sir” or “ma’am” when answering questions. Young and his administrators paced the hallways, narrow and low. Students did pushups for any infraction. At the sight of a problem, teachers flocked around the student in question to offer encouragement and support.

It was obvious that staff and students were restless with the new campus only weeks away from opening. But the chatter had already turned to a plan that would extend Young’s considerable reach.

“In our master design, we have a high school wing that can be added,” he said. “And I think at the end of the day, that’s where we’ll end up. That’s exactly where we’ll end up.”

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