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**Where teens matter**

**Ex-Redskins' program: Stay in school, off D.C. streets**

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SPECIAL REPORT

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Article Text:

It's a steamy summer afternoon at the Public Idea Charter School in Northeast, just down 45th Street from the storefront New Beginnings church.

Nineteen teenagers, most of them wearing T-shirts and jeans, are gathered around the guest speaker. He is a young man who grew up in a similarly tough neighborhood and already has written a book, even though he still is a student in college.

Trying to spur a discussion, he boldly says, "If you want to hide something from black people, put it in a book."

No one objects - until, that is, Aloris Wilkins speaks up in a tone that verges on anger. The 17-year-old reels off a list of her favorite books and authors to show that she isn't buying it.

"Some people see African-American kids from Southeast and think we don't matter," Aloris said. "They're wrong. Then there are people who want to work with younger kids because they think they can change them, and they forget about us older kids."

That moment was one of the payoffs of more than a decade of work by Charles Mann and Art Monk, former Washington Redskins stars who with teammates Earnest Byner and Tim Johnson co-founded the Good Samaritan Foundation in 1993.

The foundation is an after-school program that works with students from high schools in impoverished neighborhoods in the District. It ensures that students do their homework each day, gets them summer internships, makes sure they get paid work experience and helps place them in colleges.

After four years of helping with food and clothing drives in the District's poverty-stricken and crime-ridden neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River, Johnson discovered the S.T.O.P. (Student Training Opportunity Program) in Florida and brought it back to Washington.

Johnson soon left the District to become a minister in Tennessee, and Byner went to work for the Baltimore Ravens.

That left Mann and Monk, two of the central figures on the Redskins during the most glorious years in franchise history. The Redskins won three Super Bowls in 10 seasons during coach Joe Gibbs' first stint with the club. Mann played on two of those championship-winning teams; Monk on all three.

Monk left the Redskins after the 1993 season as the leading wide receiver in National Football League history, and Mann left the club at the same time as one of the greatest defensive ends ever to play for Washington. Both players were named to the Redskins' all-time team in 2002, the 70th anniversary of the franchise.

Mann and Monk remained to implement the focus of Good Samaritan on high school students.

#### 'Lasting results'

"We would help out with this project or that one and we would feel good, but we wanted to do something that would produce lasting results," Monk said. "We knew that working with kids would have the most impact. Everyone wants to work with younger kids because they're cute, and you can mold them easier, but we decided to work with high school kids because they're forgotten by so many other programs.

"People told us that these kids' minds were set, that their attitudes couldn't be changed. But we chose the tougher road."

Indeed, as is true with so many well-intentioned programs to help the underprivileged, the Good Samaritan Foundation endured difficult times, particularly when it expanded from a pilot program of 10 students in 1997 to 50 in 1999.

"I'm most proud of the fact that Art and I have stayed with it. We haven't given up," said Mann, who like Monk devotes most of his foundation-related efforts these days to raising the \$1.5 million needed to finish the makeover of the building on Martin Luther King Avenue in Southeast. When that work is completed, Good Samaritan finally will have a permanent home that puts its programs and office under one roof.

#### Opening doors

The fame of Monk and Mann and their success outside of football - they co-own a credit card business - haven't opened all doors. Some major grant-giving organizations have been reluctant to help Good Samaritan because of its size - the foundation worked with 35 students last year - its primary focus on just two schools and its spending of roughly \$3,000 per student.

"We're different," said Eugenia Mercer, Good Samaritan's executive director since 1999.

"We're not a drop-in program. We're very intensive. We're involved with their parents and their families. I've had phone calls to come take a student to my house because his cousin is trying to shoot him.

"These kids need the academic support, and they need somebody who is going to be there. A lot of them possess the ability, but they might not get their books until a month into the school year. Maybe they have to share books. They have parents who love them, but don't worry about them when they get to high school because they're worried about the younger siblings. They're the forgotten or the nonsupported group, even in their own households."

As it begins its seventh full year of running after-school programs, Good Samaritan has alumni studying at Stanford. Thirty-six children completed the program in the past three

years. Thirty of them went on to enroll in a four-year college.

#### Student commitment

The foundation requires a four-year commitment from its ninth-grade enrollees and expects them to study at Idea Charter for 2 1/2 hours each Monday, Tuesday and Thursday and 4 1/2 hours each Wednesday. They also get together each Friday at Good Samaritan's downtown office to talk.

Despite those requirements, 65 percent to 70 percent stay in the program until graduation.

And unlike most of their peers at Idea or Anacostia High - the program's base schools - the vast majority of Good Samaritan students go to four-year colleges.

"GSF gives young people a sense of hope and purpose," said Julienne Johnson, president and founder of Front of the Bus, a youth leadership development program that employs an intern from Good Samaritan every summer, as do Canon, Choice Hotels, the Salvation Army and the law firm of Latham & Watkins. "They provide life skills and the practical application through employment that other groups don't.

"I've seen huge changes in the GSF students from freshman to senior year. The maturity and poise these young people have is unusual for their age," Ms. Johnson said.

As with Aloris, that wasn't always so.

#### Attitude adjustment

"I'm not the perfect student," said Aloris, a senior at Math, Science and Technology Charter School.

"When I first entered the program in ninth grade, I was nonchalant. I came just to come, but that summer GSF got me a job as a counselor-in-training at the YMCA.

"I got excellent evaluations, and my attitude started to change. I understood what the program could do for me with its one-on-one mentoring.

"GSF is like having another family. Mrs. Mercer is like my second mother."

GSF hasn't succeeded with every student. Two former members are in the juvenile system. Others are on probation. One was slain two months after dropping out of the program.

"The first year in the program is the hardest for the kids," said Monk, who was on hand when Aloris spoke up this summer and, like Mann, knows all the students by name.

"You're building relationships with them. They've had so many promises to them broken that their walls are up, but as the year goes on, you build that trust and the walls come down."

They did for Ashley Coleman, who only joined because a friend told him that Good Samaritan was taking students to a Washington Wizards game.

"I used to hang out on the streets," said the 16-year-old Anacostia junior.

"I would get into fights. But after I started coming to GSF, I liked being able to get on the Internet and do research. You can't do most of your homework without access to a computer, and the ones at school or the library are too crowded.

"Here, I have one to myself. The tutoring has helped me with my study skills and reading comprehension.

"I recommend GSF to everyone in Anacostia. I'm going to go to college with their help. I'm lucky that GSF accepted me."

Ashley said that other Anacostia students are particularly jealous that foundation

members go on camping trips and on college visits.

#### Family supplement

Lt. Col. William Dexter, Idea's deputy director, said that although his students receive twice as much English and mathematics class time as they would in a typical D.C. public school, many of them suffer from a lack of follow-up at home. He recommends Good Samaritan as a supplement.

"We encourage all of our students and parents to look at GSF," he said. "It's one of the best after-school programs in the city. Aside from homework support, there's also the leadership aspect. Most kids gain that kind of insight from such groups as the Boy Scouts, but not many of those organizations operate in our part of the city. The kids in GSF elect officers, manage a budget and hold events. GSF has made a big difference for a lot of our students."

#### Success story

Take Antjuan Wilson. More focused on junior ROTC as a ninth grader, Mr. Wilson became so involved with Good Samaritan that after his family moved from Anacostia to Oxon Hill, he would take two buses and a Metro ride to attend the program.

"If it wasn't for GSF, I probably wouldn't be in school," said Mr. Wilson, 19, a junior at Fayetteville State in North Carolina. "I just wanted to make video games. Sometimes I lost my way, but [program director Tracy Brower] would stay on me. It's hard love. They make you do things you don't want to do.

"Many African-American males shy away from programs like this. I would get rides home in the GSF van, and they thought it was the welfare van."

Mr. Wilson was elected president of the student body at Good Samaritan as a senior, and he says he would like to start a similar program in Prince George's County after he graduates from college.

Those are the kind of transformations that gladden the hearts of Monk, Mann and their staff.

"Our numbers are limited now by the space and the staff we have, but when we finish our building, we're going to have 100 kids," Monk said. "Eventually, we would like to take the program citywide. This is our home. We felt an obligation to give back to the community that embraced us.

"That obligation didn't stop when we were finished playing.

"We purposely didn't put our names on the foundation because it's not about us. This foundation is going to be here making a difference in the community when we're all gone."

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