

"I had to learn how to be different"

Vice chairman of Juvenile Justice committee speaks about life on the streets

By Sue Loughlin/Tribune-Star

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As Hasan Davis' brother leveled an Uzi across Hasan's face and pointed toward a disrespectful rival on the streets of Atlanta, Davis realized it could all end, right there. He thought about his poor mother, finding the three brothers in jail -- or in a morgue.

He grabbed the barrel of the Uzi and brought the tense, dangerous situation under control, but the next day -- two days into a two-week visit home from college -- he packed his bags, went back to college in Kentucky and walked away from his past.

"I had to learn how to be different," he told his spellbound audience at Booker T. Washington High School on Thursday morning. Davis, 37, is a motivational speaker with quite a story to tell about life on the "streets," and students listened.

Most impressive is where he is now, considering his past.

Davis found himself in trouble at an early age, struggling with learning disabilities, a juvenile crime record and expulsion from every school he ever attended, but he didn't give up.

He earned a GED (General Education Development diploma) in Georgia and then went on to Berea College in Berea, Ky. He was expelled from Berea twice, yet still earned a bachelor's degree in oral communications. He later earned a law degree from the University of Kentucky.

Today, he is chairman of Kentucky's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee, and he also is vice chairman of the newly chartered Federal Advisory Committee of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

Davis vividly described his early life -- getting stabbed, shot at and "run over a few times." Both of his brothers are serving long-term prison sentences, one for killing a man.

There came a point in his life when he decided life on the streets was not what he wanted. The path to success was not an easy one, but he didn't give up.

Falling down does not mean you've failed, he said.

"Being knocked down doesn't knock you out of the game," he said. "If you have the ability to stand back up, you can overcome any obstacle."

He encouraged students to dream big and work hard. They may not achieve everything they want, but their hard work will pay off.

Davis, who has a learning disability and attention deficit/hyperactive disorder, recalled how a vocational rehabilitation counselor tried to talk him out of law school. The counselor suggested to him, "Maybe you're reaching too high. I don't want to see you fail."

Davis was incensed, and undeterred. "I thought, how dare she do that and tell me I don't have a right to dream," he said. "I decided no one is going to limit me ... I can compete on any court, with anyone else, given the time and proper tools."

True to form, he was expelled from law school -- but he returned and obtained his degree after 3 1/2 years.

Davis also told the students that whether they want the responsibility or not, they are role models to younger siblings, neighborhood children or younger cousins.

He described how as a ninth-grader, some students dared him to jump out of a second-story window at school. While he recognized it was dumb, his ego got the better of him, and he did. He was a school hero, and fortunately, not seriously hurt.

Later, however, he noticed a third-grader hanging out a window hoping to imitate him -- a third-grader who viewed him as a role model. "I was his hero," he said.

He later apologized to the third-grade class and said he would try to make better choices in the future.

Davis spoke at all Vigo County School Corp. high schools and the Juvenile Center this week.

Washington students took Davis' message to heart. "I got goose bumps," said Robby Snyder, Washington High School senior. "He's come a long way." Davis is not just talk; he's had a tough life but decided to turn his life around.

Davis also made Snyder realize he is a role model for his younger brothers. "After I get out of school, I'm going to call them and tell them I love them," he said.

Senior Tiffany Endress said she could relate to Davis' troubles as a child and was inspired by his message: Failure is not falling down; failure is not getting back up. She plans to use that message in her senior speech when she graduates from Washington.

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CLAP ON "THREE": Motivational speaker Hasan Davis leads McLean High School students through a communication exercise Thursday at the school. (Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza)