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Hometown Hero: East Bay man looks to keep at-risk youths on right path

By Paul Bugarino
Contra Costa Times

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Vernon Williams was carefully peeling an orange during a break from work one afternoon at the North Richmond Young Adult Employment Center when Andrenae Powell walked into his office.

The student asked Williams for his signature to verify she had permission to leave school early during the day for a work program.

"Hey, girl, before I sign my life away, I've got to see that diploma," Williams said. Confidently, Powell told him she'll earn her GED certificate.

When it comes to vouching for a segment of the youth population many think is unreachable, Williams can talk the talk because he has walked the walk.

After serving multiple prison terms, Williams, 34, has committed himself to keeping at-risk teenagers from a similar path. He is the founder of The Williams Group, a nonprofit that works to curtail gang activity throughout West and East Contra Costa County.

Most people think the youths aren't reachable, "but they're reachable," the Pittsburg resident said.

Williams works primarily with Richmond-area youths, though he plans to start programs with East Contra Costa County grass-roots groups next year. Williams is also an integral part of a task force seeking to reverse a spike in gang-related crime in East County.

His training program in North Richmond aims to reach youths who are more attracted to the allure of the streets than learning in school.

Using a real-life example of selling "(crack) rocks on the street" teaches a lesson about return on investment, he said; disassembling computers and putting them back together is something tangible the youths can identify with.

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One of the those youths is Franko Day. The Richmond 18-year-old has been in the program for about three months and credits Williams and the program with helping him find a job and staying out of trouble.

"(Williams) has been through it on both the good side and the bad side," said Day, who hopes to one day own auto body and barber shops.

Like producing a diamond, Williams said, the programs put "grinding pressure" on the youths to build up their skill sets and eventually return to traditional learning methods.

Williams' single-parent upbringing in Fairfield was like that of many of the youths with whom he works. He was a gregarious child who did things with passion, said mother Julie Thomas. That trait has served him well in trying to help youths now, she said.

"He wants to use his life to help others," she said.

Williams grew up with dreams of playing Major League Baseball and was drafted by the New York Yankees at age 18. He went to New Mexico State to earn an accounting degree before turning pro.

While away from home, he "followed down the wrong path" and started using cocaine, which he continued after transferring to Napa Valley Community College to be closer to home.

Surprising news that he was no longer eligible to play before the season's last game — which cost him a scholarship to return to a four-year school and effectively dashed his baseball dreams — turned him to crime.

The next day, he robbed a home and was arrested on a half-dozen felony charges. Williams spent 16 months behind bars, first in Contra Costa County Jail in Martinez and then at San Quentin State Prison.

After his release, Williams earned a certificate in hospitality management and was eagerly anticipating having a son.

His hopes were crushed when his son was stillborn.

"My life went on a downward spiral. I had a beef with God; I didn't want to exist," Williams said. To dull the pain, Williams used such drugs as cocaine, LSD, Ecstasy and heroin.

He began dealing drugs and made "money by the piles" — enough to afford a condominium in downtown San Jose, expensive clothes and luxury cars.

Eventually, he returned to San Quentin two more times on cocaine-related charges. He also did time at Folsom State Prison before regaining his freedom in 2004.

The "eye-opening" experience of wars inside the prison made Williams vow never to return.

He moved to Pittsburg and began teaching youths to repair computers and their lives. The change was "miraculous," Thomas said.

Williams has tried to get troubled youths back into the community where they can make a positive contribution, said Sal Garcia of the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety. Garcia works with Williams on the parole community activity team.

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"He knows the road they are traveling, and is trying to show them they can strive for bigger and better things," Garcia said.

Williams works closely with county Supervisors John Gioia and Federal Glover and law enforcement officials.

Along with members of Brentwood-based One Day at a Time and Walnut Creek's John Muir Medical Center, he also tries to connect victims of street crimes with resources while in the hospital and reduce retaliation through intensive case management.

Gang activity has grown rapidly in the Antioch area as homes in the suburbs became affordable to those moving from urban areas, Williams said. The activity has started to trickle farther east into Brentwood and Oakley, he added.

In 2007, half of Antioch's homicides were gang-related, according to statistics from Antioch nonprofit Youth Intervention Network that were confirmed by police.

"The dynamic in that region is just changing," Williams said. "You have these various mentalities and cultures put into one social pot without an understanding of each other."

In the wake of a September shooting just outside Antioch's Deer Valley High School, Williams was part of what he called a street engagement team that works during conflicts to assist or resolve disputes before they escalate.

"I can tell these kids, 'I've been where you're going, I can tell you about it,'" Williams said. "There are other options."

Reach Paul Bugarino at 925-779-7164.

Vernon Williams AGE: 34 HOMETOWN: Pittsburg
Claim to fame: Founder of The Williams Group. More information is available at www.twgempowerment.org. Family: Twin daughters Akayla and Amara; mother Julie Thomas; sister Alesha Williams; niece Abrea Williams. Favorite saying: "Your setbacks set you up for your comebacks; so when you come back, you come back stronger."

Hometown Heroes, a partnership between Bay Area News Group-East Bay and Comcast, celebrates people in the Bay Area who make a difference in their communities. In addition to highlighting remarkable individuals, the Hometown Heroes feature aims to encourage volunteerism, raise visibility of nonprofits and key causes in the area and create a spirit of giving.

Read about a new Hometown Hero every other Monday and watch the program on Comcast On Demand at Channel One-Get Local-Hometown Heroes.

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