

Former Aztec Trimaine Davis is proof: Life on streets needn't end on streets

by Mick McGrane

Trimaine Davis knows they're out there, lurking like sharks in the shallows, the masters of madness and mayhem.

HEAD OF THE CLASS - Teaching always came naturally to Trimaine Davis, who now does it as a charter school volunteer. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. TRIMAINE DAVIS - As a college basketball player, Trimaine Davis came off the bench to bring energy to the Aztecs. As a graduate, he challenges young pupils to get off the sidelines. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. Alone, he has little chance of inhibiting their insidious advances, of curbing their quest to steal another soul or take another life.

Yet armed with the teachings of Martin Luther King Jr., the passion of Malcolm X and the inspiration of Marcus Garvey, Davis wages a war with wisdom rather than weaponry.

"There are people waiting outside who would like nothing more than to recruit these kids into gangs," Davis said. "They are right in the cross hairs. I want the kids we teach to be able to look at those people and say, 'You think you've got a gang? Marcus Garvey had a gang of about a million people. What do you think about that?'"

If the streets of southeast San Diego too often serve as the backdrop for rage and the inevitable retaliation, Room 211 at Nubia Leadership Academy serves as a haven of hope, an oasis in a world where impressionable youth easily drown in the rip currents generated by broken homes, desperation and despair.

It is here that Davis, the former San Diego State basketball player, has come every Thursday to teach an after-school class known as the African-American Male Program, staring into the faces of boys whose eyes offer a window to his past. Mother dead of a brain tumor in 1998. Father dead of AIDS in 2000. Both drug addicts, they were forced to surrender their son, born addicted to crack cocaine, when Trimaine was but a year old.

"When people hear the story about my mother and father, they always tell me how sorry they feel for me, how tough it must have been not having them around," Davis said. "My parents were around. They showed me exactly what not to do in life."

A ward of the state, Davis was adopted by his grandmother, Vearis Calomee, who had raised six sons of her own. Even as a preschooler, Calomee said, her grandson seemed wise beyond his years, assisting in the classroom and comforting children convinced they had been forever abandoned after being dropped off in the morning.

"Trimaine kind of ended up helping to look after them, telling them not to cry, that everything would be OK," said Calomee, now 76. "As he got older, and his class would go on a field trip or something, he was always trying to be a parent to another child. I always thought that maybe it was because he was the only child I had around the house after I'd raised six sons, but that was just who Trimaine was. He didn't want to see another kid sad. He would always be there for them."

Davis, who earned his degree in Afro-American Studies last year, became involved in the program at Nubia after being approached by Dr. John Browne. A retired San Diego City Schools administrator who is a professor in the Afro-American Studies department at SDSU, Browne had overseen the start-up of the African-American Male Program at Nubia during the 2005-06 school year. Davis had been a student of Browne's at SDSU and long had designs on becoming a teacher.

"I could tell that he was a very dedicated young man, and I had become very impressed with the leadership role he had taken with the basketball team," Browne said of Davis, who played for the Aztecs from 2003-06 after being recruited out of Pittsburg High in Northern California by coach Steve Fisher.

"I had been a consultant at the Nubia Leadership Academy for a few years and had started the African-American Male Program at the request of the principal. But I decided after the first year of directly facilitating the program that it would be better served by young men who were closer to the ages of the students at the school. Obviously, boys at that age are really going to look up to a college basketball star."

While Davis is humbled by anyone assigning him "star" status, he was more of a cheerleader than a game-changer for the Aztecs, a sixth man whose ardor was infectious and whose zeal was unsurpassed. Davis knew that his skills did not translate to the professional level. He also knew he had considerably more to offer than a rim-rattling dunk or a key rebound in crunch time.

"I just saw how important it was for somebody like me, coming from my background, to have a chance to make a difference with these kids," said Davis, who is pursuing his teaching credential while working at a department store. "I could have ended up doing all kinds of crazy things, but I wound up with a college education.

"I've been where these kids are. There's a big difference between a father or a mother or a grandparent telling you to stay away from gangs and stay in school compared with somebody who is 23 years old telling them the same thing. They can relate to you, the clothes you wear, the music you listen to. And you're telling them to stay in school, because these are all the good things that can happen to you. I'm living proof. And they can be even better. The worst they can be is college-educated. And if that's the worst, imagine what the best can be."

Along with friend John Sanders, who is finishing his degree at SDSU, Davis oversees a class comprised of 24 male students in grades four through six. Both are unpaid volunteers. The program focuses on the themes of leadership, citizenship and scholarship, and because Nubia is a charter school, Davis and Sanders' lesson plans are routinely infused with references to African-American cultural heritage.

Nubia Principal Myrion Doakes has plans of offering the class twice weekly next year while also including the school's younger male children.

"Now that we know a little about the direction we want to go, we want to add on and do more," Doakes said. "The parents of the young men involved are delighted we have this program, and we want to make it as inviting as possible. It's needed in our community, it's needed in our culture and it's needed in our schools.

"And Trimaine is just such a wonderful person. He's very old-school to be such a young person. He was raised the right way. He's just a good person who is willing to share his strong upbringing with others. He has the makings of an excellent teacher."

Not that Davis necessarily need limit his career options.

"He has the ability to make any organization better," Fisher said. "Trimaine is a unique person from the standpoint that so many people are talkers, but he is a doer. He very much feels the need to give back, and he appreciates those who did the same thing for him. He went through a lot of mine fields, and he has that unique perspective of someone who has been there, done that.

"He has always been fearless in his willingness to admit his own flaws, to stand up and say, 'I'm far from perfect, but these are the things that I believe in and have convictions about and I'm going to stand up for them.' He was never afraid to tell a teammate that they were wrong and he wasn't afraid to tell a coach that he disagreed. His ability to take a stand rather than going with the flow makes him a unique person, and he's always done it in a positive way."

Davis, who is not married but has a 5-year-old son whom he sees frequently and helps support, plans on writing a book about the struggles of African-American male children in the nation's inner cities. He is incredulous that roughly 55 percent drop out of high school and that one in three will either go to jail, join a gang, become involved with drugs or die before the age of 21.

"It's almost impossible to believe," he said. "One of the biggest problems is that culture is in conflict with mainstream education. I ask kids all the time why they didn't finish their homework. They'll tell me they were too busy or they had baseball practice or something else and I'll say, 'Really? Well, when I was playing basketball and had to wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning to start lifting weights, then went to school, then went to study hall, I still managed to do my homework. Why can't you do yours?' I won't let them use that as an excuse. The problem is that no one is challenging these kids. All they really want to know is that somebody out there cares about them. You have to be a motivator and live by example. If you don't, you're going to lose them.

"I'm not doing this for fame; I've never done anything for fame. I was just another one of those people who wasn't supposed to make it. When I played basketball at San Diego State, I played because I loved the game. I knew I wasn't going to the NBA. What difference does it make how many points you score? There are so many bigger things going on in life. I hope I'm a role model. If I can be seen, I can be touched."

While deeply touching the lives of others.

"At his dad's funeral, I just sat there wondering, 'Oh, Lord, what's going to happen now? Is he going to take the wrong direction, take a step back?'" Vearis Calomee said. "Then he gets up in the front of the church and makes a speech about his parents. I was absolutely shocked. I had no idea he was going to do it. He talked about how much he loved them, how appreciative he was of having had them, and suddenly it was like he was all grown up. I think he had obviously learned that he didn't want to go down the same path they did."

"So many of my other grandkids never graduated from high school. I never thought I'd live to see this day. I'm just so thankful that I was able to be there for Trimaine and see the things he's doing now. I don't have the words to tell you how proud I am."

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