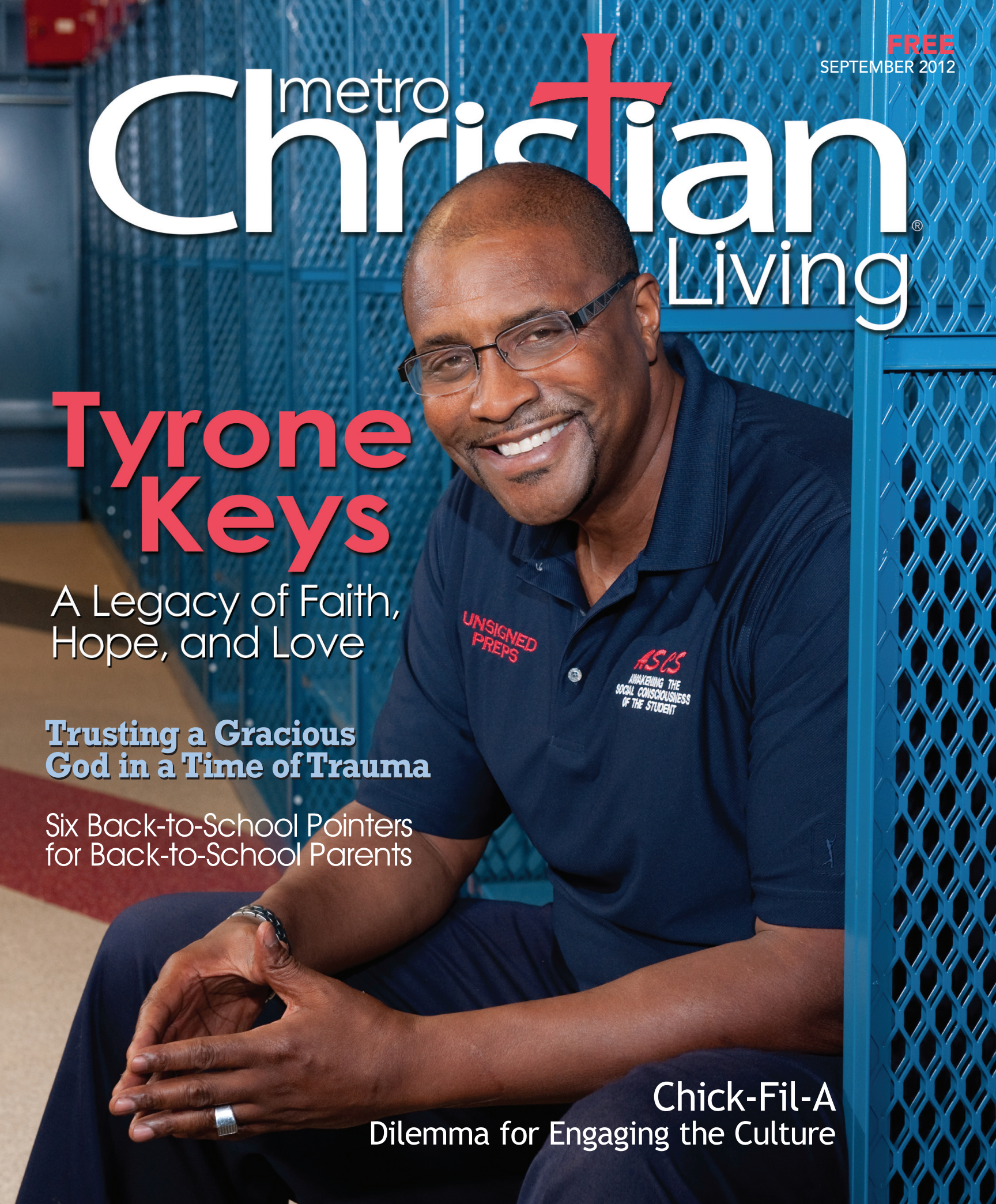
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## Tyrone Keys

A Legacy of Faith, Hope, and Love

**Trusting a Gracious God in a Time of Trauma**

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Chick-Fil-A Dilemma for Engaging the Culture


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# Tyrone Keys

## A Legacy of Faith, Hope, and Love

by PEGGY WALL AND BARBARA HAMILTON

Tyrone Keys is not average—not in his size, not in his character, and certainly not in his commitment. A poet once wrote, "The measure of a man is not in his living; the measure of a man can be found in his giving." And Tyrone has given much. After a career in the NFL, Tyrone founded All Sports Community Service (ASCS), a mentorship and scholarship program in Tampa, Florida. Through ASCS, he has bought into the hopes and dreams of other people and has left a giant handprint etched into the fabric of countless lives. "My ultimate goal in life all along," he says, "has been to help young people the way my teachers and coaches helped me."

Tyrone recalls how his call to service was first kindled in 1968. It was the evening of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, and the stories of Dr. King and his speeches ran on television all day long. The words from Dr. King that stuck in eight-year-old Tyrone's mind were these: "It's not the color of your skin, but the content of your character," and "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve." He wanted to serve.

Tyrone's first opportunity to serve came when, as a fourth grader, he was selected to be a patrol officer at Dawson Elementary School. He shared a post at the corner of Queens Road and Sunset with another young student named Artis Rouser and the two of them enjoyed the responsibility of helping their fellow students cross the street. To this pair, they were living out Dr. King's words that "Anyone can be great because everyone can serve."

Another defining moment for Tyrone occurred during his sixth grade year. The year was 1970, and Jackson schools were being integrated. Mary Hagan was the first white teacher at all-black Dawson. "She was the first white person I had ever spoken to," Tyrone remembers. On the first day of school their new teacher told them they were all going to be just fine. She told them it was good to have dreams, and they could accomplish those dreams, for they had talents and abilities and a special purpose in life.

"No teacher had ever told us that before," Tyrone says, "but we believed her." Mrs. Hagan planted possibilities in Tyrone's mind, and he never forgot them.

Mary Hagan displayed such courage as she entered the school each day in the face of adversity and jeers from those who wanted to impede progress. Her gracious resolve made a huge impact on young Tyrone.

He never forgot her scampering around the playground, trying to convince the boys she knew football. "She didn't know the game," Tyrone laughs, "but boy, did she know how to connect with her students. She was willing to invest love in her students, and that investment has made all the difference in the world to me," he says.

On the last day of school, Mrs. Hagan recited a poem entitled, "What is Love?" She mentioned in her poem that Love is when one of her students comes to visit. Nearly forty years later, Tyrone reconnected with Mrs. Hagan and shared their story with over 500 educators at the Teacher of the Year Dinner in her hometown of Baton Rouge.

### Awards/Achievements

- High School All American – Callaway High School, Jackson, Mississippi
- Keyboardist for "The Super Bowl Shuffle"
- Super Bowl XX Champions/Chicago Bears
- Founder, All Sports Community Service, Tampa, Florida
- Alumnus of the Year, College of Education – Mississippi State University
- Honoree at the White House for his mentoring program
- Feature in *People Magazine*
- SEC Story of Character Award
- Recognition by the White House again for mentoring
- Hall of Fame – Mississippi State University
- Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame
- Tampa's Man of the Year (twice)

### Other Mentors

Mary Hagan wasn't the only teacher to leave a lasting impression on Tyrone. His high school football coach at Callaway, Odell Jenkins, also saw something special in him. Not only did he make sure Tyrone played his best on the field, but he held him accountable for the way he conducted himself off the field as well. Tyrone credits Jenkins with developing in him a true appreciation of character and commitment. "He once told me, 'Sow a thought . . . reap a word. Sow a word . . . reap an action. Sow an action . . . reap a destiny. Sow a destiny . . . reap a character.' That advice has influenced the way I've tried to structure my life."

Coach Jenkins was instrumental in Tyrone's scholarship offer to Mississippi State, and he shared his belief in the importance of mentoring. He told Tyrone his success meant nothing if he didn't return to help someone else. "I knew what he meant," Tyrone says, "because he always wanted me to understand that I had a duty to help my fellow students who were struggling. But I had no idea that philosophy would be where I would ultimately find God's purpose for my life."




The Keys family: Daughter Chyla, wife Bessie Ruth, Son Tyrone, Jr., and Tyrone

Godly mentors like Mary Hagan and Odell Jenkins encouraged Tyrone to accomplish things that were before, only dreams in a kid's heart. They planted seeds of love and compassion. They helped him, pushed him, and inspired him. Most of all, they believed in him, and he will be the first to tell you that's something you can't put a price tag on.

At Mississippi State, Tyrone did his best to honor the faith and love his family, coaches, and teachers had placed in him, and he was determined to do his best for his team and the university. He was recognized and honored for his outstanding play as a defensive lineman and was selected All-SEC for three years. Later Tyrone would win his most treasured award, the SEC Story of Character Award. But those honors are not what he remembers most.

The greatest and most indelible memory Tyrone has of his college career is the Mississippi State-Alabama game of 1980 when the Crimson Tide, sporting a 22-game winning streak and a national number one ranking, pulled into Memorial Stadium in Jackson. With only twenty-two seconds left in the game, State led 6-3, but Alabama was on State's four-yard line. When the ball was snapped, Tyrone slammed into the quarterback and jarred the ball loose. State recovered the fumble and preserved one of the greatest upsets ever in collegiate football.

But to Tyrone, what happened after the game completely eclipsed anything that had occurred during it. "The door to our locker room opened, and in walked Bear Bryant. The room grew quiet, and what followed," Tyrone recalls, "was the greatest example of character and sportsmanship I had ever witnessed. With a thousand fans jeering at him, he walked all the way across the field to congratulate not just our coach, but our team. Now that was class."

Bear Bryant never knew the impact of his gesture of respect that day, but Tyrone savored the moment and safely tucked it away, determined his life would display the same qualities he had witnessed in that locker room.

## Translating the Life Lessons

In the spring of 1981 the New York Jets drafted Tyrone, but he opted instead to play in the Canadian Football League. Two years later he was signed by the Chicago Bears. "I felt like I was on top of the world with the Bears. We were treated like royalty by the people of Chicago and the Bear organization, and quite honestly, we thought we deserved it because we were good—really good." But on a Monday night the Miami Dolphins soundly defeated the undefeated Bears on national television, and suddenly they weren't so invincible any more.

After the game, Coach Ditka told the team they could let the defeat eat away at them, or they could use it as a springboard for a great comeback. The decision was theirs. They finished the season without another loss and defeated the New England Patriots 46-10 in the Super Bowl. They even found time to record the rap video, *The Super Bowl Shuffle*, which helped get their swagger back while entertaining America and raising over $300 thousand dollars for needy families in the Chicago area. (Incidentally, you can view the Shuffle on YouTube. Tyrone is a great keyboardist!)

Tyrone often shares that experience with kids because he believes they need to know that everyone has setbacks. The important thing is what happens next. They can resent them, become angry, blame someone else, or they can make up their minds to turn those negative setbacks into positive comebacks. He adds, "I like to tell them about Peter, who thought he was the most faithful follower of Jesus. Yet, in a moment of weakness, the Bible says Peter denied even knowing Jesus. *A setback of gigantic proportions*! But he worked at it, turned that mistake around, and became the rock Jesus used to build his church on. What a comeback!"

Tyrone knows that kids need to hear truths like that and understand Peter was not trapped in a black hole...and neither are they. There is a way out, but it's up to them. Like the Bears, they can completely reverse a devastating setback.

When most players and fans celebrated after the Super Bowl game, Tyrone found himself walking down a street in New Orleans thinking about being a champion at the pinnacle of his career and having done what thousands of players had only dreamed about. But something was missing. "I should have been dancing down that street," he says, "but there I was just walking...and thinking." At that moment a thought pierced his mind, *A Super Bowl is just a Super Bowl. There is more, much more to life!*

"I realized God had just spoken to me and had introduced me to His vision for my life, but I knew if He wanted us to be on the same page, He'd have to give me a clearer picture than that."

By the next year Tyrone was no longer a Chicago Bear but a Tampa Bay Buccaneer—from the best team in football to the worst—as in a record of 18-1 to a record of 2-14. "I felt a lot like Abraham. God called him to leave his home, his comfort, wealth and security and go to a place he'd never heard of, to people who could offer him nothing." The only thing Tyrone had to stand on was the seed of faith that had been planted in him years before. At that point, he hoped it was enough.

It was in Tampa that he began to follow in his mother's footsteps and began teaching in the off season.

His career in Tampa Bay lasted only two seasons before he was traded to San Diego. The scripture Proverbs 19:21 says, "There are many purposes in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord shall stand." The Lord's counsel and plan for Tyrone were just beginning to unfold. A career ending injury forced Tyrone's retirement in 1990. He headed back to Tampa with the feeling God was moving him toward teaching, counseling, and coaching.

"I remembered the coaches I had in high school, and I wanted to be just like them. I wanted to love kids the way they did and be a positive influence on them."



All Smiles Now

After officially signing Southeastern Conference letters-of-intent, four Jackson high school football players show happiness with their decisions. Callaway's Tyrone Keys, center of left photo, was one of four Jackson-area products to sign up with Mississippi State as his parents, sitting, watch along with Callaway head coach Charles Allman, standing left, and his assistant Odell Jenkins. Meanwhile in another part of town, right photo. Mur-

Front row: Johnnie Ruth Keys, Tyrone Keys (center). Shelton Keyes. Back row: MSU Coach Denny Aldridge and Callaway HS Coach Odell Jenkins.



Tyrone is honored by MSU School of Education as Alumnus of the Year. Left to Right: Coach Randall, Callaway HS Coach Jenkins, Trainer Strat Karratassos, English teacher Mrs. Minchew, mother Johnnie Ruth Keys, and daughter Chyla.

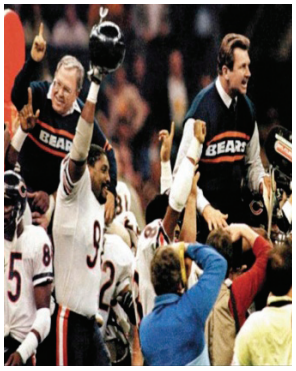


The 1985 Chicago Super Bowl Champs held a 25th reunion at The White House in 2011. Their first reception was cancelled following the Challenger disaster.

## The Call to Mentoring

He must have done something right, for soon kids from all over Tampa were seeking his help and advice on how to get to college by way of a scholarship—the only way disadvantaged kids with their background could even think about college. Most were from poor, broken homes, rough neighborhoods, and an environment where "success" was a strange, unfamiliar word. The parents were largely uneducated so the kids had been taught to "settle," and the cycle of despair was never broken but repeated over and over.

One such kid was Albert Perry, an outstanding high school football player in Tampa with the potential of playing big time on the college level. He desperately wanted to play ball and escape his hopeless environment. Tyrone helped the boy with his admissions application, made a highlight film of his games, and worked to get him a scholarship to Texas Southern University. What Tyrone didn't know was that the boy didn't have a way to get there so he never went.



The Bears celebrate their victory over New England in 1985.



Tyrone reunites with his sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Hagan (center) 40 years later.

On April 25, 1993 at a block party in a housing project, Albert playfully squirted someone with a water gun. That someone pulled a real gun and fired. Albert was struck in the back as he tried to get away. He died on the way to the hospital. "Nothing in my life had ever affected me so profoundly," Tyrone recalls. "What else could I have done? It was the defining moment in my life when I realized something had to be done. I knew the reclaiming of young lives had to start somewhere, so it might as well start with me."

But Tyrone didn't know how, and he didn't know where. God had all the answers, so Tyrone knew he had to place his trust in Him for wisdom and guidance. Jerry Ulm, Sr., owner of Jerry Ulm Dodge in Tampa, heard about Tyrone's commitment to youth and wanted to help some of the students with summer jobs. The only requirement was that they, too, would serve as mentors. Ulm hired three students that summer: T.J. Lewis, who later graduated from Queens College and became a Vice President of Bank of America; Eric Hayes, who graduated from the University of Baltimore and became head basketball coach in Pasco County, Florida; and Jerald Mack, who later received a degree from the University of Phoenix and has now provided a group home for disadvantaged adults in the Tampa area.

Ulm and Tyrone got to know each other. Tyrone saw Ulm's compassion and love, and Ulm saw Tyrone's. Ulm gave Tyrone a check which became seed money for the mentoring program. Summer ended and the three students made it safely to college. Tyrone stopped by the dealership to thank Ulm for his generosity and was told that Ulm was in the hospital. Tyrone sat in the showroom and wrote him a letter of gratitude for showing the three young men that people cared about them. Later that week Tyrone got a call from Jerry Ulm, Jr. He mentioned that his dad had read Tyrone's letter. He then said that his dad had passed away and that the family thought so much of what Tyrone was doing that in lieu of flowers they asked that all dealerships in the Southeast, family and friends, send their memorial gifts to Tyrone's organization. At that time Tyrone did not have a foundation, but this action on the part of the Ulm family sparked the interest of many people in the Tampa area.

Tyrone attended the funeral service, and his life has never been the same. As Jerry Ulm, Jr. gave the eulogy, he spoke about a man who had come into his dad's life that summer, and as he was speaking, Tyrone felt the atmosphere changing. Jerry began to read a letter, Tyrone's letter. Tyrone realized that the power of love—the love of God and the love of others—is what we all must have to fulfill our destiny.

## All Sports Community Service

Because of the generosity and encouragement of the Ulm family, All Sports Community Service, ASCS, was founded in 1993. What Tyrone has learned on his quest is that everyone is born with a dream and each of us has a distinct design. Tyrone blocked a lot of passes fulfilling a childhood dream of success in football, but God had a unique dream or vision to give purpose and meaning to his quest for real and true success. He learned that people have been assigned by God to help each other. Who could have known that at the same time Tyrone had a vision of mentoring at-risk students, Coach Kenneth Muldrow, a coach at Tampa's Blake High School whom Tyrone had met in 1987, had the

same vision? God brought them together, and ASCS became a hub of the Blake campus.

Longtime friend and college roommate, Mike McEnany, said, "Tyrone finds kids sleeping in cars, and the next thing you know they are graduating from college." Tyrone has a God-given gift of knowing who to help and how to help. For Tyrone, help began at Dawson Elementary in 1970, then Callaway in 1975, Mississippi State University in 1980 and the Chicago Bears in 1985. Through those years he realized that our dreams will be tested for authenticity to make sure we are up to the task. We must learn to let the opposition strengthen us, not stop us.

Students of today can reach out and grab hold of a life of great possibilities, but they have to be shown how. At ASCS they are encouraging students by helping them "thrive" not "strive." Failure should not be normal. Mediocrity should not be acceptable. ASCS wants the young people not only to succeed but also to return to their roots and mentor the next generation. That's the way it has played out in Tyrone's life. He has found that real greatness is a matter of integrity, work ethic, treatment of others, right motives, and a level of initiative. It also has to do with a person's character, contributions, talents, creativity, and discipline. Tyrone believes your character represents who you are every day—not just who you are when you earn a temporary achievement.

Tyrone started out helping three young men get summer jobs. All the while he talked with them about their goals, their dreams and how to reach them. He used the same words, the same methods that Mrs. Hagan and Coach Jenkins used with him. The words and methods worked. Why? Because the words of love, faith, and encouragement are timeless. Tyrone uses those words often when he comes back to the Jackson area in speaking to church and civic groups. He continues to reach out to needy students at Dawson Elementary by providing backpacks and school supplies. Beyond that, his future goal is to replicate the Tampa foundation in Jackson and across America.

From helping three young people, ASCS has now helped over 1,000 students go to college with scholarships totaling over $22 million. Many of the ASCS alumni have given back with scholarship money for the next round of student applicants. The blessing of this approach is that students who never saw college as an option are now college graduates. Students who came from disadvantaged living environments are now homeowners and business leaders.

Some have even started foundations of their own to help the next generation of students achieve success. In the end, Dr. Martin Luther King echoed the words of Jesus when he said, " But the greatest among you shall be your servant." (Matthew 23:11). Jesus often referred to having faith, even if only the size of a mustard seed. Having faith gives us the foundation we need to thrive. He also spoke of the importance of providing fertile soil to nurture the seed of faith. Who does the planting? We do. Who does the nurturing? We, in partnership with God, do. Who provides the increase, the fruit? He does. What does the fruit provide? New seeds. The process is simple. God never intended it to be difficult. And Tyrone also states it simply: "I've spent half of my life playing football because someone saw some potential in me, and I've spent another 20 years seeking out the potential in others, namely at-risk kids. To me, these kids represent endless possibilities. Within each one of them there is tremendous power waiting to be unleashed. I've found nothing more gratifying than to see a student finally come into his own. It's possible for anyone with a big enough dream and a strong faith in God to accomplish unbelievable results." Can he have an "Amen"?

*To find out more about Tyrone Keys and All Sports Community Service, visit his website: www.allsportscommunity.org or "friend" Tyrone on Facebook at Tyrone P. Keys.*




# The Story Behind the Story…

by PEGGY WALL AND BARBARA HAMILTON

**Taking a 12-hour driving trip from Jackson, Mississippi, to Tampa, Florida, is a family vacation—right? Well, maybe, but not this time. This was a working trip, two authors off to see the wizard. We were following the yellow brick 4-lane highway to Tampa in search of a story.**

Months ago we met Tyrone Keys, former NFL great, in Jackson, Mississippi—our mutual hometown. Though we enjoy watching football, it is definitely not our point of expertise. So when the subject turned to writing a book about a football player and his foundation, at least it helped that one of us had attended Mississippi State University, Tyrone's alma mater. As our profession, we write inspirational books. Here we are—two white women preparing to write a story about an African American, 6'7" giant-of-a-man. We laugh and say we spend most of our time talking to his belt buckle. And so we began this 12-month journey with Tyrone. No, let me correct that. He insists the story is not to be about him. We decided to let him think that way while we were, in fact, framing the story around him.

Though his football life began at age 14 at a middle school in Jackson and later continued at Mississippi State University, his notoriety came as a team member of the infamous 1985 Super Bowl Champions, the Chicago Bears.

Following his success with the Bears, Tyrone played for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and eventually made Tampa his home. Wondering what life had in store for him, Tyrone began teaching at Leto High School in 1992. Ever conscious of the students who were in and out of his classes and on the playing field, Tyrone was able in a unique way to identify the potential in these kids who had basically nothing going for them. They usually came from broken homes, lived at or below the

poverty line, and had no idea where their lives could go. College was definitely not on their radar. With a chance meeting in the school hallway or on the school campus, Tyrone's eyes would meet the eyes of the student and immediately a connection was made. One by one the students were identified, their dreams were outlined, and a plan for their future was started. Using the assistance of other coaches and teachers in the Hillsborough County School System, Tyrone went about finding a way for his mission and a way for the future of the students.

With a little bit of help from other NFL teammates and a couple of local sponsors, Tyrone formed All Sports Community Service (ASCS), a non-profit mentoring program for struggling students. The program was available to male and female students, athletes and non-athletes. With a keen sense of judgment, Tyrone started identifying students who could participate in the All Sports program..

We made the 12-hour drive to interview a group of former students who had actually managed to escape low-income neighborhoods and the ugliness of their past to find a better future, a better life for themselves through their participation in the All Sports regimen. Their stories were touching, even gripping. And they were all inspiring. The stories are to be incorporated into our upcoming book.

As we listened, we were totally transported to their world—to be more exact, the world from which they had come. We marveled at their strength and determination and were impressed beyond words as they shared their hearts and such sensitive parts of their lives. We were moved to tears, and we were truly blessed.

Since 1993 the All Sports family tree (we refer to it as such because they truly are family) has so many branches that we can hardly count them. Tyrone, however, has done an amazing job of keeping in up with all of his "children". He says it best, "The key is to have them give back, and to know what it feels like to help someone else who needs help. We help a kid who helps someone else, who helps someone else. So many of our kids who have been a part of our program have gone to college and then come back and served as mentors to other kids. It's almost like a snowball effect."

Each of the young adults who shared their story said they needed guidance and someone to take an interest in them, to believe in them. They found that person in Tyrone Keys and his All Sports organization. Each person we interviewed directly attributes his or her success to the efforts of Tyrone and his foundation. The students all agree that without his intervention in their lives and without the scholarships secured for them by the foundation, they could never have completed college and achieved the dreams no one else thought possible. They would never have been in a position to sit across the table from two writers and pull open their hearts to show the battle scars of a twisted childhood and the victory that is possible when someone cares.

We thought we would go to Tampa for a couple of days, visit a couple of schools that participate with Tyrone's program. We planned to write down a few facts and make a quick trip to tour Raymond James Stadium. We could never have been more wrong. We sat spell-bound for two 14-hour days listening as former All Sports mentees told their stories.

We didn't want to leave them. We wanted to help—any way, anywhere. "Just let us be a part of this amazing organization," we said. "You can be," Keys responded. "Write about the great things the students have done and are doing. Shed some light on them. They are the heroes." We sat staring at this great man with a huge heart who takes no credit for himself. He gently moves about his life watching those around him, offering what he can to help, and surrounding them with love and a sense of peace.


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