

Posted on Wednesday, January 16, 2008

Brown honors Amer-I-Can grads

Students get their certificates at the Amer-I-Can graduation Ceremony Tuesday at Braden River High School. Congratulating them are Florida Representative Bill Galvano, Florida Senator Arthenia Joyner, Lt. Governor Jeff Kottkamp, and Jim Brown, chairman of the Amer-I-Can Foundation for Social Change and member of the football Hall of Fame.

GRANT JEFFERIES/gjefferies@bradenton.com

By ROBERT NAPPER

rnapper@bradenton.com

EAST MANATEE --

Harlee Middle School student Brintina Houston captured the essence of football legend Jim Brown's aspirations for a program he started 20 years ago.

Brown came to Manatee County on Tuesday to congratulate the first local graduates of his Amer-I-Can self-improvement and life-skills program at a ceremony at Braden River High School.

The program is an intensive, 60-hour course looking to steer at-risk students away from gangs, crime and dropping out of school.

Brown told an auditorium filled with legislators, law officers, teachers and students that the 2008 Manatee Amer-I-Can grads fulfilled his vision.

Brown said he envisioned a program that would reach into public schools and capture the underlying hopes of students like Brintina. Students some might call "at risk," but Brown calls victims of circumstance.

"They do not determine the circumstances under which they come into this world," Brown said. "We do. Parents do."

When speaking about her experience in Amer-I-Can, Brintina admitted to the mind-set of many students selected for the program. There is natural resistance to a difficult program that challenges young people to change, to at times stand up to peer pressure, according to Brown.

"When Amer-I-Can came, I didn't like it," Houston told the crowd at the ceremony.

But that resistance almost always eases when someone takes an interest in a young person who feels like no one cares.

"When you give young people love, give them caring, give them education, show them you care, they respond," Brown told the crowd. "It is not complicated."

Brintina agreed.

"After a while, I managed to understand what Amer-I-Can was trying to tell me," she said. "I learned a lot about how to treat my teachers, my classmates and go after my dreams."

More than 150 graduates from Harlee, Johnson, Lincoln and Sugg middle schools joined Brintina in walking across the Braden River auditorium stage.

They shook hands with Brown and several legislators, who had obtained the funding for Amer-I-Can in Manatee in response to violent gang-related shootings last year.

Florida Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, state Sen. Arthenia Joyner, D-Tampa, and state Rep. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton, greeted the students on stage as they received their diplomas and had their pictures taken with Brown, the former NFL Hall of Fame running back.

The mother of Sugg Middle School student Brandon Baserva summed up the mood of change and hope for the future, stirred by Amer-I-Can on Tuesday.

"I have witnessed the positive change I have seen in my son, in how he treats his family, and in his report card," said Michelle Jimenez-Baserva. "Now all of the graduates have the opportunity to be an example for other students to follow."

The Sarasota Herald

Article published Jan 16, 2008

Middle-school students complete attitude-adjustment program

By CHRISTINA E. SANCHEZ

christina.sanchez@heraldtribune.com

MANATEE COUNTY -- The fatal shooting of 9-year-old Stacey Williams III, struck last spring by a stray bullet from gang gunfire, was the last straw.

A community outraged by his death and by mounting gang violence in the county did not want to see another victim, or another young teenager pulling the trigger.

Amer-I-Can, a national anti-gang program, became the community and school system model to deter similar violence.

The semester-long program promotes strong family relationships, learning to control emotions, setting goals, solving problems and making decisions, among other things.

And parents, teachers and community leaders pinned their hopes on 160 middle school-age students who went through the program to be examples of success.

On Tuesday, those 160 students became the first teenagers in Florida to graduate from Amer-I-Can, which was founded 20 years ago by National Football League Hall of Famer Jim Brown.

"When we give them the love and caring, they respond; and when we give them the opportunity of education, they respond," Brown said during the graduation ceremony Tuesday.

School officials say they saw a 40 percent reduction in the students' absences, and that grade point averages went up by 17 percent.

Students will be tracked to see if their progress continues.

Some of the students said changing their attitudes and raising their grades took work and dedication.

Shakara Freeman

Age 14

Lincoln Middle School

Past troubles: She used to get mad easily, skip class, walk out of class and get detentions.

What she learned: Establish the facts, find out what you need to know before acting.

Her new attitude: She doesn't get detentions and thinks before she gets mad. "Others may hate on you. If they say you can't do this, prove them wrong."

Tyler Wilson

Age 13

Sugg Middle School

Past troubles: In seventh grade, he earned mostly Ds and Cs, and he did not do homework.

What he learned: You give respect, you get respect.

His new attitude: Now, he gets all As and Bs.

"I changed my attitude a lot especially toward school. I've gone up in behavior so much, and I respect my teachers and they like that."

Tyler Finney

Age 14

Sugg Middle School

Past troubles: He often skipped school, and had a 0.17 grade point average.

What he learned: Good decision making is important

His new attitude: He earned a 4.0 GPA for the first half of the year.

"If you make the wrong decision, you'll get yourself in deeper trouble and you won't be able to get out."
