

A force to put kids on right path

By ERNEST HOOPER

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King High junior Deandre Baroulette knew he was headed down the wrong road, and if he had any doubts, he need only look at his older brothers.

"My brothers, they tried to be successful, but they dropped out of school and took the wrong path," Baroulette said.

On Monday, Baroulette took his first steps on a different path, walking across a stage to applause as he shook hands with state representatives, school board members and legendary NFL running back, actor and activist Jim Brown.

Baroulette and more than 200 other students from four high schools and two middle schools gathered in the Leto High auditorium to become the first Hillsborough County graduates of the Amer-I-Can program, an 18-week self-improvement course primarily designed for at-risk kids.

Brown, who founded Amer-I-Can in 1988, came to town to salute the officials who help implement the program in Florida. State Sen. Arthenia Joyner, D-Tampa, and state Rep. Mitch Needelman, R-Melbourne, sponsored the bill that produced a \$1.35-million grant to bring Amer-I-Can to 14 public schools in Hillsborough, Manatee and Brevard counties.

But Brown called the students heroes and credited their improved grades and attendance for bringing him to Leto.

"Sometimes I'm asked, 'Why are you here when you could be in retirement and be somewhere else?'" Brown told the students. "To see your faces, your attitude, how you cooperate, how you laugh, how you listen. What could be more wonderful to someone who is 71 years old?"

After the ceremony, Brown stayed on the stage long after the officials had gone, shaking hands and fielding autograph requests.

The program reflects Brown's sincerity and generosity. It stresses eight critical life skills such as motivation, goal setting and decision making.

These tenets are not new, but the way the program's facilitators approach their task makes the difference.

Every lesson begins with a session in which the students talk about feelings.

"The first thing I do is tell them that I love them, and that I was like them, that I struggled with grades and adversity in school," said Eddy Calcines, the Leto facilitator who went through a week of training by the national staff.

"I tell them they are not throwaways, and I will become their ambassador for change. When they've got problems, I'm going to be there for them. When they have personal issues, they can come to me about them."

Calcines said too many times, teachers and administrators come down too hard on at-risk kids.

Leto senior Eddie Cruz said constant criticism made him feel like he had no future.

"Personally, the things other adults told me about going to prison, I used to agree with them like that was a better place," explained Cruz, who wants to be a firefighter. "Now I realize it's not where I want to be in my life. When I see my life, I want to be an entrepreneur and help other people."

Like Cruz, Baroulette sees a life where he once only envisioned trouble.

"After I graduate, I'm going to college," he said emphatically.

To my generation, Brown is the dynamic football player and actor who broke Hollywood's racial stigmas.

Before Monday, some of the kids probably knew him more for his role in Mars Attacks! than for his work with youths.

After Monday, Brown simply is a guiding force shining the light on a positive path.

That's all I'm saying.