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Ex-drug-dealer warns youths to choose wisely

By Tom Mitchell

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FORD CITY -- Although the sky was gray and it was cold and raining, Terry Davis said Tuesday the day never looked better. After spending nearly five years in prison viewing time passing through iron bars, even the dreariest days look good to the ex-athlete, ex-drug dealer and ex-gang leader.

Yesterday, Davis, in the company of Robert Stanko VP of Operations of the Zelenople-based National Character Education Foundation, Terry told nearly 500 Lenape Technical School students how drugs led him to prison, endangered his family and nearly killed him.

A native of Queens, N.Y., Davis said he was raised in an upper-middle-class family. His father was a second-generation minister who hoped his son would follow in his footsteps.

We had a good life," Davis said. "I made good grades in school and was a good athlete. I excelled in basketball. Just before my senior year, my family moved to Orangeburg, S.C. But along the way I made some bad choices. The first bad choice was the people I began to hang out with. I started smoking and drinking, later I began smoking a little 'weed.' I had a basketball scholarship to Miami-Dade Junior College. At first I did quite well, but later, my grades started failing. I worked a part-time job and lived in a nice apartment. I made enough to get by.

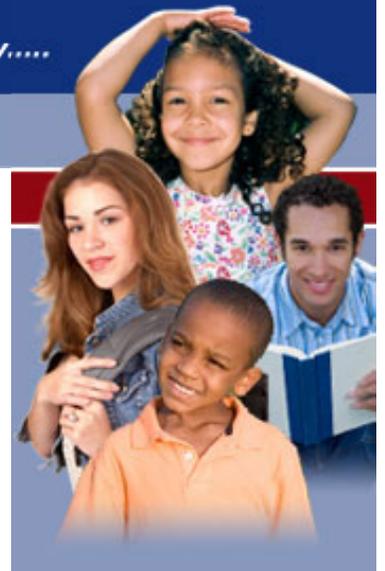
"One day I was approached by a man who told me that I could make \$5,000 or more a month just by 'delivering packages.' At first I declined his offer. Then I had a tragic kitchen accident in which I sustained a severe burn to my hand. I couldn't play ball, and I couldn't work. I got desperate for money, so I called the man back and took up his offer. That was another bad choice I made, but at the time, I could never imagine just how bad it was."

The packages Davis began delivering contained drugs, mainly cocaine, delivered to various gangs for resale to street-level dealers. Soon, Davis was making deliveries up and down the East Coast and throughout Florida: drugs, guns, stolen credit cards. Working his way up the crime ladder, he became a feared gang leader, a man who could collect drug debts and enforce gang rules on his "customers."

"I was 19 years old and had all the money a man could want. But soon I realized that the police had me under surveillance for some time. One day I was stopped while driving a stolen car. I was caught with a quantity of drugs, guns, stolen credit cards and a stolen car. In short, I faced 15 to 20 years in prison.

"I could lighten my sentence by making a deal with police, giving them the names of my bosses. However, I was sent a very clear message by the people I worked for. 'Keep your mouth shut and do your time or we'll do you.' They also threatened to harm my parents and my siblings if I talked, so I kept silent. My first stop was Roxbury Correctional Institution in Hagerstown, Md.

That's where I met a man who would change my life forever."



...that's where I met a man who would change my life forever.

Davis said while in Roxbury he met a man called "K.P." He said that K.P. stood for "King Pin," a fellow prisoner who "ran things" inside the prison.

"K.P. told me that he would never see the streets again, but I would," he said. "He told me that inside prison, he decided who would be 'hit' and who would be left alone. He also told me that he saw something in me that made me 'different' from the other prisoners. That's when K.P. told me that when I got out I was going to be his voice on the streets. I was going to steer young people from making the wrong choices in life to making the right choices, so they wouldn't end up like him -- or me. K.P. told me that I was going to finish my schooling and get my degree: He didn't ask me; he told me. I was 6 foot, 2 inches, and weighed over 200 pounds. K.P. stood a frail 5-foot 7, but you didn't say no to him. That's how it was. I faced at least 15 years, but K.P. said he'd 'fix it' so I got out in less than five. I don't know how he did it, and don't want to know, but I was released after serving only four and one-half years."

Davis said K.P. had just an eighth-grade education, but taught himself to read and do higher math, including calculus. He taught other prisoners to read and encouraged them to excel in education while in prison. He said K.P. died in prison without ever reaching his full potential in life, and that's the message he wants to bring to young people today: to excel and reach their full potential.

"I talk to young people who have the potential to become doctors, lawyers, carpenters, and even the next Bill Gates," he said. "But it all depends on the choices you make in life. Your generation embraces things that are extreme, so I challenge you to choose to excel to the extreme. Choosing to do drugs is a stupid choice -- I know. Let me tell you, every day in prison is like being on the front lines in Iraq. You're in prison with people who have nothing to lose. So if someone wants your shoes, or a pack of cigarettes, or whatever, they will kill you for them. You take your life in your hands every time you step out of your cell. It's a war zone. But every day, people choose to do things that get them sent to prison."

Davis challenged Lenape students to learn from his mistakes. He said no one will pay the price for wrong choices like the person who makes the wrong choices.

"Going to prison not only destroys your life, but it destroys families, too," Davis said. "I was blessed, however. When my mother learned that I was in prison she was devastated for some time. Nevertheless, she remained a positive influence in my life. The first thing my father said was 'Hallelujah!' He was glad I was taken off the streets and away from the drug scene. My incarceration influenced him to start a prison ministry in South Carolina."

After his release, Davis said he began making a number of "right choices." He obtained a degree in social science and became an ordained minister with the Assemblies of God Church. For several years he worked with Mayor Marion Barry's administration in Washington, doing face-to-face counseling with drug users and dealers in the capital's tough 7th and 8th Wards. Several years ago, he married and moved with his wife, Sheila, to Monessen where he became pastor of Newness of Life Ministries. Through the National Character Education Foundation, Davis goes on speaking tours to area high schools and colleges telling his story and encouraging students to make the right choices in their lives. However, yesterday Davis also sent a message to the adult community in Armstrong County.

"It's no secret that you have a drug problem in Armstrong County," Davis said

