



A Hero Within — Learning...Life...Legacy

by Paul Vitale

One doesn't have to look far to see the challenges confronting tomorrow's leaders on all fronts. When we stop to consider what is yet to come, we realize that today's youth are tasked with leading our nation into the future. At the same time, they're increasingly confronted with stifling issues such as suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, pregnancy, obesity, depression, cyber bullying and domestic violence. In the midst of the trials, these budding leaders are in search of a message of affirmation and hope and a program to provide them with the mechanism to choose a path that will positively define their life's legacy.

Over the course of the last number of years I have had the privilege to spend many hours with students of all ages, from all demographics. From the inner city youth of our nation's capital to neighborhood schools in one of the wealthiest cities in the United States, every young person I've met has enriched me in ways beyond measure. Whether passing through metal detectors to enter the safety of eight hours at school, or racing to be the first on the bus for the class field trip; each child has the same potential for heroism.

When working with students at Laurence Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., I was struck by the distractions these inner city youth must surmount in order to avail themselves of an education each day. At first glance, the officers policing the hallways seemed threatening; but to these kids, their presence spelled "Safety." A young lady named Maria* explained that she couldn't wait to get to school every day and stayed each evening until they ran her off. "I know that I'll get two



meals here—breakfast and lunch—and as long as I'm inside the school, I'm safe; I don't have to worry about the crime that surrounds me in my neighborhood. School's my only chance to break free of the cycle...I want to go to college and become the best I can be." Perhaps without realizing it, Maria aspired to become a hero, someone noted for feats of courage or nobility of purpose.

Granted, not every student has to face the daily challenges that Maria does. But I can guarantee that across the tens of thousands of student voices I've heard, one cry rings true again and again: "Help me find a way to be my best!"

Throughout the years as I've listened to students, parents and educators I have learned many truths. Not every kid wants to be a doctor, lawyer or United States President. Some just want to survive their environment and hopefully improve their situation. Many want to pursue careers in art, business, music, theology, public service and domestic engineering, to name a few. There are others who want only to make an honest living doing something they enjoy. What they do all share in common is the desire to be an individual who matters, a hero to those they care most about.

While reflecting on the views and needs of young people I've

met, I began to explore what could be done to encourage their positive growth. Many programs existed to promote various character or career pathways; however, finding one that addressed the total individual—from life skills, to business savvy, to answering the call of service to others with sustainable methods—wasn't easily found. Through the need evaluated and the lessons learned, **A Hero Within — Today's Youth, Tomorrow's Leaders** evolved.

Established in 2004, this program provides young people with the opportunities needed to take longer strides in learning, life and legacy. **A Hero Within** impacts youth by providing the tools necessary to help shape their lives in the most positive manner, while challenging these future leaders to genuinely answer the question, "How do I choose to live my life?"

While the program contains several facets that can be used individually or in tandem, the message of **A Hero Within** is simple: **Unleash your inner hero.** Students who are exposed to its substance readily commit to a few life-altering ideals: making today count for something extraordinary; chasing the dreams that live inside; overcoming the fears that hold them back; serving others with a respectful attitude; and exemplifying fairness, trustworthiness, forgiveness and self-discipline.

One of the most recent examples I've had of the impact of this powerful program occurred when I was contacted by a student whose school implemented it three years ago. Trey* recently took time to email me his thoughts: "You may or may not remember me, but I was that guy at the **A Hero Within** assembly who said his worst fear

was not making it to college. I wanted to tell you how important some of the things were you said that day and how it has affected my personality...I thought about it and thought about it and finally decided that being mad or being upset is just a choice. You can choose how you want to go about treating someone or handling a situation. I'm leaving for college this year and want to thank you for the encouragement, friendship and overly satisfying faith you had in me and my dreams."

Trey's comments illustrate that the constructive, all-around outreach provided by this unique program can reverse the trend of growing statistics that affects our future leaders. The numbers are alarming: 7,000 students each school day or 1.2 million each year drop out of school; 60% of identified bullies have a criminal conviction by age 24; and, according to the American Psychiatric Association, suicide is the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24. Simply stated, more teenagers are dying from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke and chronic lung disease combined. Life skills strength training is a must to overcome these and other challenges.

How does this program fit in? Through its evolution, **A Hero Within** has emerged as a life strategy for students to continue to grow and improve personally, emotionally and intellectually. Anchored by functional

components tailored to their needs, the strategy employed not only champions the principled growth of our future generation of leaders, the program also encourages today's youth to choose a path that positively defines their legacy.

Its versatility has been demonstrated when working with groups as diverse as the one participating in the Arizona Cardinals Football Skills & Education Camp. The unique opportunity of this skills camp provided attendees the chance to receive on-field instruction from professional players and Cardinals coaches. The involvement of current NFL players as well as those retired was inspiring as they diligently worked to expand the horizons of the young athletes, and demonstrate that anything is possible.

It was evident: The 700 plus student athletes attending were thirsty for a message of affirmation. Seeing firsthand the intensity emanating from the high school players encouraged me as I prepared to deliver a message of heroism to parallel their on-field experience. Concentrating on the key points found in **A Hero Within**, I had the distinct pleasure of presenting a message intended to challenge each participant to focus on the moment, yet have a plan in place for the future. My hope was to reinforce the importance of not only dreaming courageously, but also seeing ambitions through by being resilient. The message aligned perfectly with the vision of

the Cardinals organization and the student response was affirming. One young athlete approached to tell me what the program had done for him.

"My parents are about to lose our home, and I almost didn't come today. Your message showed me that even with all of the bad stuff going on in my life, I can still reach my goals if I stay on the right path."

Examples such as this young man, Maria and Trey show that answering the cry that resounds from school to school and student to student is within our reach. We can help tomorrow's leaders be their best.

Sustainability, generosity and personal success are the end result of a program meant to give students the edge in a sometimes difficult, unforgiving world. **A Hero Within** instills hope, kindness, respect and service while challenging our youth to select and continue along paths of positive choices. It provides them with concepts and methods to ensure their life-long personal and social development, while living the response to the question all must answer: ***What legacy will I leave behind?***

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**Students' names have been changed to safeguard their privacy.*