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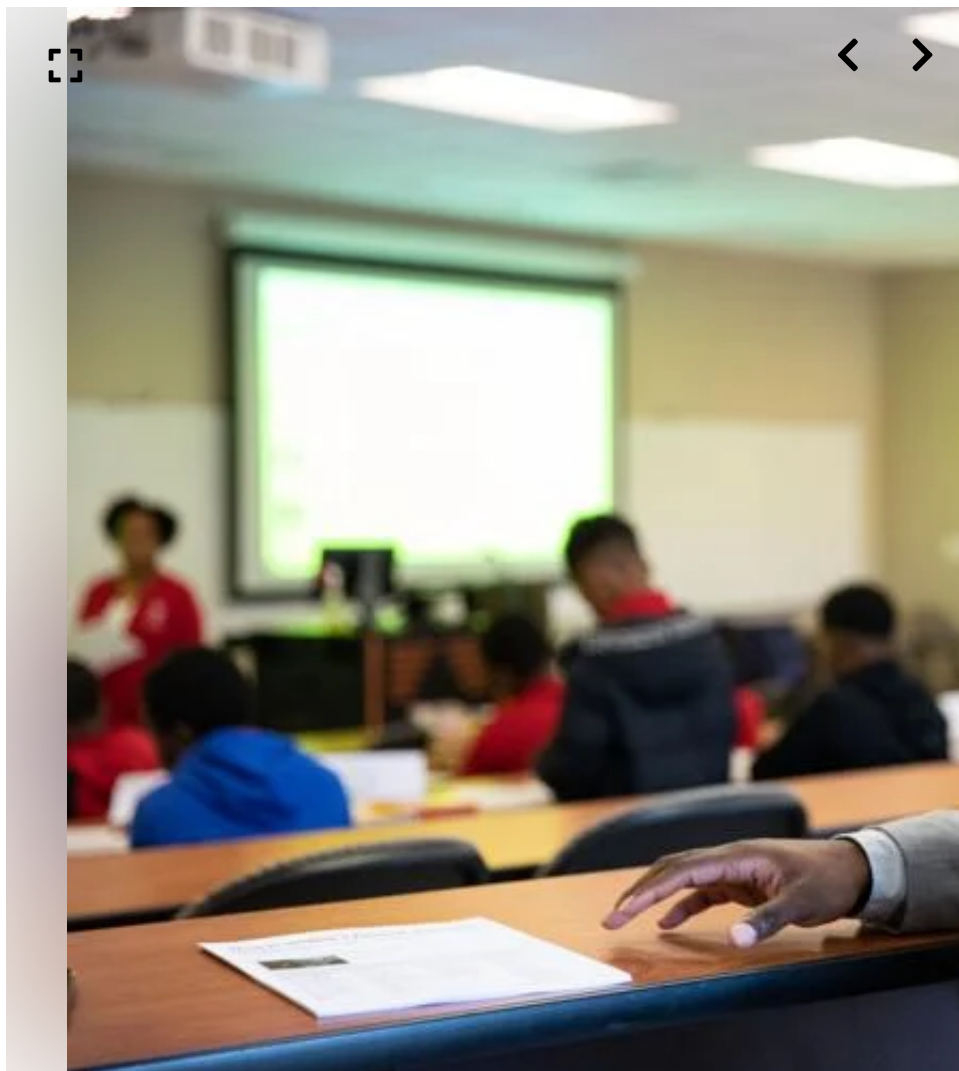
PROFILES 2023

Tyreon Clark: a mentor, coach and visionary

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Tyreon Clark, the head football coach at Henry Moss Middle, founder of 1 on the first day back for the Jonesville Academy at Western Kentucky University. Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com



Tyreon Clark, the head football coach at Henry Moss Middle, founder of Boys to Men group and co-founder of the Jonesville Academy, on the first day back for the Jonesville Academy at Western Kentucky University on Saturday, Jan. 28, 2023. (Grace Ramey/grace.ramey@bgdailynews.com)
Grace Ramey

MORE INFORMATION



WKU launches new Jonesville Academy for local Black, Brown youth

You wouldn't know it now, but Tyreon Clark was a quiet boy.

Danny Carothers, former community director of the Foundry, met Clark when he was 5 and living in the Housing Authority of Bowling Green. Clark was shy, he said. While he was involved in several sports, because of his reserved nature, he was often picked over for opportunities.

If this bothered Clark, he didn't let the frustration fester – he just stayed the course, Carothers said.

Clark went on to play football for Bowling Green High School and later, Austin Peay. In 2010, he said in a Daily News interview that after graduation, he'd like to return to Bowling Green and give back to the community.

“Everybody needs a father figure in their life,” he said at the time. “I figure if I’m playing college football, I can be a mentor and come back and look over the children in the neighborhood.”

Program fosters ties between WKU frat, Parker-Bennett-Curry students

Now, Clark is doing just that. He's the head football coach at Henry F. Moss Middle School. He's the director of the Boys to Men leadership group, a mentorship program for school-age boys providing guidance on how to behave like a "young professional."

In 2021, he co-founded Jonesville Academy with Aurelia Spaulding to pay homage to the former Jonesville community that once existed on WKU's campus. Jonesville Academy operates 14 Saturdays a year, empowering young Black men to know that they can and will be successful with specialized education.

"A lot of times, a lot of the kids might go through their whole elementary school experience and never have a Black teacher or a brown teacher," Clark said. "As a matter of fact, a lot of kids may go through their whole educational experience never having a male teacher and for us, we offer a variety of educators that provide services that can directly relate to who they are and what they're trying to become."

Now, Clark is stepping into a new role at the Bowling Green Boys & Girls Club, where he will work to build the club's financial and human resources and market the program to the community.

He wouldn't call it manifestation.

"It's just sticking to the script," he said. "I think that's the big thing that people don't realize – this is not for personal accolades, this is a mission that God has called me upon, and I feel like when you put things into the world, they happen. I always tell people: I don't try to put negativity into the world. I've never been that person."

Carothers said that he can't say he's surprised at Clark's success, despite his early reticence.

"The thing about these kids that we deal with every day is nothing surprises us," he said. "They are full of greatness, and we never know. It just takes a little push. ... All the kids from over on the West side – they are full of greatness."

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It's 8:30 on a Thursday morning in February. Tyreon Clark is standing in the middle of a classroom of boys at Oakland Elementary School, and all eyes are on him. He's already been to Bristow Elementary this morning, at 7 a.m. sharp.

Some boys wear ties, a symbol of good behavior in the Boys to Men program. After asking about their weeks, Clark leads them in "SPECIAL" introductions, which involves shaking hands, good posture, eye contact, charm, introducing yourself, asking questions and learning and listening.

Each student has to introduce themselves to five others in the room using the mnemonic and the question of the day: what do you want to be when you grow up, and what's your backup plan?

After several minutes of conversation, Clark asks the boys what they learned about their peers. One boy wants to be an artist, but his Plan B is becoming a doctor. Another

wants to be in the NFL, and if that doesn't work out, the NBA. Clark gently suggests sports broadcasting as another option.

Clark is a dynamic, but direct leader. He works in positive mantras, asking the boys to repeat after him: "There is nothing I cannot do, but it starts with me."

"You are somebody in this room," he tells the class. "Just because you had a hiccup last week doesn't mean you have to have a hiccup this week."

Two teachers watch Clark preside over the room. They say that the only male teacher in the school is a music teacher who students see once a week, at most.

"We wish we had him for more than 30 minutes a week," one says.

Clark wants the kids he mentors to respect their teachers, to be confident enough to address them as young professionals. He wants to show them that they have agency over their

education, and that they have a “village of teachers” that are there to help them along the way.



His impact is clear.

“They’re more confident, they’re more involved in their schools, they’re the leaders,” Clark said. “You might not see it in the state data scores or state testing, but you will see it in their life and our workforce and our community development.”

Clark sees the changes in his own son, a fifth-grader, straight-A student, multi-sport athlete and leader. Clark didn’t have a mentorship program like Boys to Men as a kid, and he doesn’t know how he would have received it, but he thinks he might

have taken more ownership of the young man he was becoming, he said.

“It’s cool to see my son be a part of what has been built because that’s my connection. That’s the next version of myself, the closest thing to it,” Clark said. “It’s pretty cool to see that, to lead him in the direction that I wish I could have been led.”

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It’s not uncommon for Derek Anthony to get a late-night text from Clark asking his opinion on a football play. Anthony, assistant football coach at Henry F. Moss Middle School, said that he’s not sure when Clark sleeps.

He’s always working on something, planning ahead. If a game is on a Thursday, Clark knows what the team is going to do by the Saturday before, Anthony said. He takes the time to get to know his players individually. He’s tough, but fair.

He's also young enough to be seen as an older brother figure, relatable but not judgmental, Anthony said.

"I think because of his experiences as a kid, he knows how to connect, and he knows exactly what to say to get through to them," he said.

Clark is always positive. Even down 10-15 points with five seconds left on the clock, he can make his players believe that they can win, Anthony said. That energy also applies in the classroom.

"His job is to make them believe they're the greatest student ever. He teaches effort. On the field is the same in the classroom. Sit up front in class, try hard, raise your hand even if it's a wrong answer, learn from your mistake and do better next time," Anthony said.

The decision to hire Clark extended beyond football.

"You wanted him in the building," Anthony said. "That's what you were hiring. You were hiring Tyreon. You

weren't hiring a football coach; you were hiring a life coach."

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As a child, Clark went to the old Bowling Green Boys & Girls Club. From the front door, he could see his mother's house in one direction and his grandmother's in the other.

He told Liz Bernard, CEO of BG Boys & Girls Club, that taking on his new role is like coming home.

"You can see it when he talks about it, it's just passion," Bernard said.

"That's going to be his legacy: how he was able to fuel back into the community that raised him."

Clark is a visionary, Bernard said. You can see his wheels spinning and the ideas formulating right in front of your eyes. He also has the capacity to put his ideas into motion, she said. Bernard hopes that bringing him on will elevate the Boys & Girls Club to the next level.

When Bernard introduced Clark at the after-school assembly a few weeks ago, the reaction was palpable. Half of the club's population is African American, Bernard said, but they struggle to get volunteers to represent the Black and male communities.

"You can just see it, it's a really important thing to see the way kids react differently when they see someone that looks like them," she said. "You can't believe something if you've never seen it before."

Aurelia Spaulding has seen Clark's commitment to the young men he mentors grow over the years. He often takes the time to check in with them by attending school lunches, talking to parents about their progress and celebrating their successes, she said.

He's taught her that the energy she brings into the room matters, and that it's important to keep trying even if something has previously failed.

“I think that in life, we should surround ourselves with people who contribute to us being all that we can be, being better humans,” she said. “Tyreon has been one of those people.”

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