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HERTZEL COLUMN - Alston on track for law school

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By Bob Hertzell
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MORGANTOWN — Sometimes all a kid needs is a chance.

Too many of them are caught up in a life they can't escape, a life of poverty in a broken family and a broken society where drugs and crime rule, where school is nothing more than a place to stay warm in the winter.

Basically, all of them are born good but twisted by the world around them. They need direction and, if there is this desire to do something the right way, to make something of yourself no matter what you face, then you can do it.

West Virginia University's Shawne Alston has proven that.

Alston, a 5-foot-11, 225-pound running back, was an Orange Bowl hero. After scoring the winning touchdown in two of the last three games, against Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, he led everyone in rushing with 77 yards in the 70-33 victory over Clemson in the Orange Bowl with two more touchdowns.

But the biggest score in his life came in his personal life.

"We lived downtown in a bad neighborhood, on the outskirts of the projects," he said the other day as he addressed a distinguished group of lookers-on as part of Dr. Carolyn Atkins' "Athletes Speak Out" class.

It was Alston, his grandparents, his mother and older sister.

No father, though.

"My father was absent," Alston said. "He was within walking distance of me, but I would go years without seeing him. He never paid child support. It used to affect me, but as I got older it didn't bother me as much."

Alston did have his sister's father to look after him, placing a father figure in his life.

“Life was good until I was about 15 years old,” he said. “Then both my grandparents died within a six-month span. Beginning then, my family wasn’t so tight because my grandmother was the matriarch of the family and held everything together.”

As any young person might, Alston was confused about the death of both grandparents and angry. He didn’t know where to turn.

“My reaction to losing both my grandparents was negative, and all of a sudden I was out of control,” he admitted. “My grades began to slip, and I began to hang out in the streets more. I began doing the wrong things.”

And when you are out of control and do the wrong things, there always are consequences.

“As the result of this, I ended up in juvenile detention. It didn’t take me long to realize that life on the streets wasn’t pretty, so I learned a valuable lesson from this experience,” Alston said.

At 16, as Alston says, “a transformation took place in my life.”

He moved to Hampton, Va., and lived with his uncle, Thomas Boddie, who gave him guidance and a nice place to live.

“I enrolled in a school that had a much better environment. I didn’t have to worry about getting shot while walking to the bus stop or about school lockdowns while drug-sniffing dogs went through our hallways,” he said, referring to the life he was leaving. “I didn’t have to worry about backing up my homeboys if a fight broke out.

“Instead, it was a fresh start with new friends and a much better academic setting. For the first time, I thought about attending college. For the first time I actually had a future.”

His grades improved, not because they were given to him, but because he worked at it, graduating with a 3.0 GPA.

“I was being recruited by schools like Penn State, Ohio State, UVA and WVU. It was easy to pick WVU because coach (Randy) Galloway made me feel most comfortable,” he said.

And upon his arrival he found that he was well suited both for football and school. He is only a junior, yet he plans to try to graduate in May, the first step toward a dream he never could have dreamed as a young man.

“If I do it, it will have only taken me three years to complete it. In the fall I will begin a master’s degree in legal studies, which I will basically complete while on football scholarship,” he said.

And there is more.

“After that I will go to attend law school and become a criminal attorney,” he revealed.

Why a criminal attorney?

“It’s interesting that someone who was on the road to a life of crime is now planning to attend law school,” he explained. “Some of my friends have been convicted of crimes they have done, but there are others who have been convicted of crimes they did not do. These are the type of people I would like to represent.”

See, Alston has this vision of life that he has constructed.

“Life is all about change. My final thought is this ... sometimes you can change the situation. When you can’t change it, change yourself. That’s what I did,” he said.

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