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HERTZEL COLUMN- Upbringing helps shape WVU's Clarke

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By Bob Hertz

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MORGANTOWN — Will Clarke is an imposing figure at 6-feet, 6-inches tall, even if he isn't wearing his No. 98 West Virginia University football uniform as he does throughout the fall as a defensive end for the Mountaineers.

He is a man from Taylor Allerdice High in Pittsburgh, and even though that is in Squirrel Hill, which is a nice suburb, the school is fed by many other neighborhoods that are less-than-desirable addresses.

As part of Dr. Carolyn Atkins' "Student "Athletes Speak Out" class, which for the last 23 years has trained athletes in the art of public speaking, bringing them before the area's youth to offer stories out of their own backgrounds that are intended to inspire, Clarke was speaking of his father and his family life.

Too often in these settings, be they part of Dr. Atkins' class at West Virginia or anywhere else, such a speech would inevitably lead to talking about the abandonment of the family by that father and the battle the athlete had to make to overcome growing up without a male role model.

Certainly, that was what was expected from Clarke's speech.

Yet, while he would delve into that topic, he would do so from the outside looking in.

"Most of my friends were African-American," Clarke, himself an African-American, would say. "We played high school football together, hung out together ... so we had similar lives. However, there was one aspect of our lives that was quite different. I was the only who had a father who was a consistently active and involved parent."

The shame of this is that Clarke was the exception to the rule.

"Pope John 23rd once said: 'It is easier for a father to have children than for children to have a real father.' Fortunately, my sister and I have a 'real' father. My friends were not as lucky," Clarke said.

This, Clarke realizes, gave him a huge advantage ... some of it athletically, but more an advantage in life.

"My dad didn't tell me how to live; instead he lived, and I watched him do it," he said.

Clarke had a role model, someone whose example he could follow.

"My dad made me want to be someone," he said.

Will Clarke's father, Bill, had played basketball in high school and at Duquesne University in 1979. He opted to play in an effort to make his father proud of him and he participated not only in football but basketball and track.

One thing he noticed rather quickly that whenever he played, his father would be there to support him, while that wasn't the case with his friends.

"Even though that occurred from the time I first got involved in sports in grade school, I didn't realize the importance of his support until I entered high school and saw that others didn't have it," Clarke said. "Even though he didn't realize it, my father pushed me to beat the odds."

While others were getting no direction, Will Clarke was being shown right from wrong.

"For example, he reinforced the idea that gangs and drugs were not for us," Clarke said. "As a result, my sister and I were never in trouble with the law or with our schools."

Instead, he emphasized the importance of a good education, something that any educator in a big-city school will tell you is that too often this is not pushed from within the family.

Because of this, Clarke will be the only male in his family to graduate from a four-year university, and his sister has graduated from a community college and is working toward a certificate to work with special-needs children.

Because they had a father who cared, who lived up to his responsibilities in an era and area where this is not the norm, they are prepared both educationally and emotionally for what lies ahead in life, be it professional football or wherever life may take Will Clarke.

"The absentee father is a big problem in society today," Clarke said in concluding his talk. "Research has shown that many adult sons who are abandoned by their fathers have problems developing self-confidence ... forming lasting emotional attachments ... recognizing their feelings ... or being expressive with people they care about."

He wrapped up the message he was delivering with an apt quotation:

"A father is neither an anchor to hold us back ... nor a sail to take us there ... but a guiding light whose love shows us the way."

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