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COLUMN: Devine brings emotion to his story

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MORGANTOWN — Perhaps we should have sat on this until Mother's Day, for this would go best on that special day that has its roots right here in West Virginia, but in some ways this can't wait at all for it grows out a special event held Tuesday in the Jerry West Lounge.

That is the day Dr. Carolyn Atkins' public speaking course for athletes steps forward and bares its collective soul with a gripping group of speeches that show a side of these campus heroes you don't see on the athletic field.

You might call it the Dr. Atkins Diet of Straight Talk.

Whether it be former basketball player Brian Lewin, who is scheduled to obtain his degree in May, 10 years after playing at WVU, talking about how his sport saved his life, or football player James Ingram talking of how he is looking to attain long-range family goals that he missed growing up, or women's basketball player Liz Repella giving an inspirational talk about never giving up, or football player Justin Hostetler talking about how you can overcome deficiencies by hard work and dedication, it is a reflection on the inner soul of each person.

But, it was the star running back of the football team, Noel Devine, and safety Franchot "Boogie" Allen, who gave us a look into why, when the TV cameras focus in on athletes on the sidelines, they look into the cameras, smile brightly, wave and say, "Hi, Mom!"

In some ways their stories, first told as part of the class SPA 170, Speaking to Communities to middle-and high school students, were eerily similar.

Devine's story is a now famous tale of a kid who lost his parents to AIDS-related illness, who was shuttled around between relatives and friends, who was befriended by the former NFL and baseball star Deion Sanders, and who now is making a name for himself at WVU. But as well-known as the tale may be among West Virginia football partisans, they can't sense the emotion that comes through when Devine tells it.

He talks of how he was one of eight brothers and a sister, raised with four of those brothers and a sister, "sometimes at home, sometimes with my aunt, sometimes with my grandmother." There was no real stability, and few creature comforts. For example, Devine revealed that "there were three beds and I had to share the bottom bunk with my two brothers."

His life lacked consistency and was anything but easy.

"My mother had been in and out of the hospital for a year. Even though she was sick, I didn't know what was wrong with her," he said.

Devine still has clear memories of the day.

"I was walking home from school when I saw my two cousins who told me to get in the car. They wouldn't tell me why because I wouldn't understand. I realized we were going toward the hospital," he began. They arrived at the hospital.

"My family was in a room, and when I entered my dad told me my mother had died. I was about to lose it. I couldn't believe what had happened and I felt bad I didn't get a chance to say 'I'll see you later.'"

He was 12 years old.

Allen's background was hardly as dysfunctional as Devine's. He had three brothers and two sisters, one of his older brothers already was in college.

"My mother was the soul of the family," he said. "She worked, she kept house, she motivated us. She was our disciplinarian."

Then one day she took sick. For 10 days she suffered, the family asking her to go to the hospital, but she kept insisting she was all right. Finally, they convinced her to go. She had pneumonia.

"I got picked up at school to go see her and by the time we got there Mom had passed. We were devastated," Allen said.

Like Devine, who went on to live with his grandmother part of the time, with a friend the rest of the time, Allen's family was split up. His father went to Tennessee; a sister left; he went to live with an aunt who did all she could for him.

"But it was not the same with my mother," he said. "I lost focus on my life."

His school work suffered, and he was heading in the wrong direction until his brother came into his life, told him of his potential and got him straightened out.

"My senior year was a new beginning," he said. His grades came up but his SAT score didn't qualify, so he went to Milford Academy, worked until he brought that up and now is doing well at WVU.

"I haven't missed one class ... which I can't even believe myself," he said. Devine, of course, found success on the football field at his grandmother's urging.

"It was the first time in my life I remember having freedom and fun. I was around different kids in a different environment," he said.

His coach put Sanders, also a star player at the same Fort Myers, Fla., high school, in touch with him. Devine said, "He offered me unconditional love. Since that time he has been a mentor, a father figure and a role model for me," Devine said.

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