

THE INDIANAPOLIS NEWS

Friday, August 29, 1997



Bonnie Harris

Tough obstacles to overcome

At 14, Wesley Bailey possessed two guns, a .380-caliber and a Tech 9 semiautomatic. He was selling crack cocaine on the street, had been since he was 10. He didn't use the stuff; smoked marijuana instead, which is how he got his nickname, "Smokey." He says he puffed a joint every morning on his way to middle school, so when he got to school, he slept in class. He didn't care about learning, anyway. And maybe worst of all, he was angry.

He was mad at his father for leaving him when he was a baby. He told people he didn't have a father.

He got mad at his mom, too, usually for telling him what to do.

If she scolded him for not doing the dishes, he felt hurt. But he never cried.

"I'd do the dishes and smile," he says, "but I'd be crying inside."

He was just plain mad about a lot of things.

"I was always the type to keep feelings in," he says. "It was stacked up inside."

Those times were like "a nightmare on Amtrak," says his mother, Sandra Bailey. She took him to get drug counseling, but change was slow to come.

Then Wesley met Miss H.

It was the fall of 1995. Jill Haughawout was new at Manual High School, and so was Wesley. He was a freshman, and Miss Haughawout was beginning her teaching career.

At first, Wesley was in a life skills class, but it was too crowded, so after a few days he and some of his classmates were placed in Miss Haughawout's class, which was built around a curriculum called "Overcoming Obstacles."

Wesley was not happy about this. Already he had seen the movie *Cool Runnings* in the first class, and he was prepared for a semester of movies and "easy credit."

"Wait, you can't take away my TV," he remembers thinking.

At first, he played the "quiet role" in Miss Haughawout's class. After a few weeks, though, he decided she was kind of cool. She had a good sense of humor, and she didn't let him goof around.

He liked her so much, he began to call her "Miss H."

He also began to read the book for the course. The chapter on self-esteem is the one that he practically memorized.

"High self-esteem is when you think good thoughts about yourself — thinking you can do something even if everyone is saying you can't," he says. "Low self-esteem is being a follower, not a leader."

The combination of the book and Miss H made Wesley start thinking about his life. Until then, his goals had been short-term — a nice car, nice rims, speakers, gold to wear around his neck.

In Miss H's class, he began to think about how he was going to take care of himself in the future. He didn't want to sell drugs anymore or work two or three jobs to stay alive. He wanted to go to college and study computer science. He knew change was going to be difficult. He lived in a housing project. He was selling drugs.

'Wesley's change was not an overnight thing, his mom says. Sometimes he still struggles in his life. There are times when he wants to quit his job. But his mom encourages him to stick with it.'

He was in deep.

He didn't realize how deep, though, until the night of Jan. 5, 1996. He was home, just getting ready to go over to his friend's house, when Miss H called.

She wanted to make sure he was OK because she had heard that Wesley's good friend, Marcus Unsel, had been shot to death. He and another friend had been playing with a handgun.

Wesley had not heard the news, and he was devastated. He had been on his way to hang out with Marcus and the other teen. Having Miss H there for him made a big difference. That night, she gave him her home phone number and told him to call her if he needed to talk.

A few days later, Miss H took Wesley to Marcus' funeral and out to lunch afterward so they

could talk.

"Miss H was more of a friend than an average teacher," says Wesley. "She helped me deal with my feelings through that."

In class and after class, she helped him see that he had to help himself. She didn't baby him.

Over the past two years, he has quit selling and using drugs. He has earned and kept a steady part-time job at O'Malia's Lockerbie Market Place. He isn't thrilled with bagging groceries, but he knows it's a step toward his larger goal of college. He is going to play football, basketball and run track this year. He goes to church with his mom and plays the bass guitar in a quartet. He even contacted his father, then visited him in Texas.

He's come a long way.

In fact, he just won a National Achievement Award from the Overcoming Obstacles program. He was one of four students from around the country to earn the award, which included a paid trip to New York City for him and his mom.

Wesley's change was not an overnight thing, his mom says. Sometimes he still struggles in his life. There are times when he wants to quit his job. But his mom encourages him to stick with it.

Wesley also has a couple of other daily reminders of the importance of his life. His 14-year-old brother and another youngster in his neighborhood watch him closely, and he doesn't want to set a bad example for them.

"Wes is extremely smart," says Miss H. "He has massive potential and if he uses it, he will have no problem being amazingly successful in college." But he has to keep hold of the big picture and not let the little day-to-day things get in his way, she adds.

His mom wishes he could stay in the "Overcoming Obstacles" class until he's out of high school. But he can't. "They ought to pour a lot of money into that," she says.

Even without the class, he has a lot of people pulling for him. His mom and the rest of his family. His church. The people he works with.

And Miss H.

Harris is a News editorial writer. Her e-mail address is bharris@starnews.com.