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After-school club entices kids with a mix of reading and sports

By Arika Herron Winston-Salem Journal Apr 8, 2017



Wake Forest University professor Alan Brown moderates a young men's reading club Wednesday at Paisley IB Magnet School.

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David Rolfe/Journal

For the better part of the last year, Wendell Dunn has spent every Thursday afternoon looking into a mirror — and he's found 10 faces looking back at him.

Dunn, a senior at Wake Forest University and defensive end on the football team, and Wake education professor Alan Brown have spent the school year at Paisley IB Magnet School working with a group of eighth-grade boys — all bright, but unengaged academically — in an after-school sports literacy club.

“These are going to be kids who have a lot of academic potential, but for whatever reason — discipline or lack of engagement in class — haven’t done so great academically,” said Bailey Allman, an eighth-grade English and language arts teacher who’s helped coordinate the club. “The program is designed to tap into things these boys are interested in.”

Essentially a reading club, on the surface the group spent the year reading through one sports-themed book together.

Ask anyone, though, and it’s been so much more than that.

“Sports gets them in the door, but we’re not talking about sports that much,” Brown said.

Instead, they’re talking about school, friends, their home life.

And, well, some sports.

“We start every day asking three questions,” Dunn said. “I’ll ask, ‘Who’s the best NBA player.’ That could go all day.”

Dunn sees himself in the group members. As an eighth-grader, he wasn’t particularly interested in school.

“I remember who I was in eighth-grade,” Dunn said. “I didn’t want to read anything.”

But, he had a great teacher. Jen Borton was Dunn’s eighth-grade science teacher and she helped turn it around for him. She stuck with him, made him believe in more than just football and even took him in for his final year of high school.

“I wasn’t just another kid in her classroom,” Dunn said. “I knew I could care for the kids, like she cared for me.”

He’s done just that, Allman said. Allman, a Wake Forest graduate in her second year at Paisley, teaches eight of the 10 boys in the sports literacy club.

“He’s quite a presence,” she said of Dunn, “and the kids kind of worship him.”

And her students are better for it, she said. Their grades are up and they’re more engaged in class.

“When I ask who wants to read out loud, all these boys raise their hands now,” she said. “I think it’s built their confidence — and not just in reading, but in the importance of school.

“It’s made them more engaged in all of their classes.”

Avery Brown recognizes the change in himself, too. Brown said he used to have trouble behaving in class and getting his work done. That’s changed this year, he said.

“I know if I do what I’m supposed to do, I can see my friends right after,” Brown said.

Brown said his grades are up and he’s not getting sent out of class like he used to.

Javouse Chambers said he, too, has done better in class. His self-control has improved, Chambers said.

Cintrell Johnson said the club has done even more than keep him out of trouble — it’s keeping him looking toward the future. In addition to their afternoons reading, the group has also taken several field trips. They’ve been to a Wake Forest football game — where they got to see Dunn play — and to a Deacons basketball game.

Many kids in Forsyth County live just minutes from three college campuses but have often never set foot on one.

“We went to Wake Forest,” Johnson said. “That’s my favorite college now.

“Things like that are keeping me inspired.”

Most of the boys said they weren't huge readers before the club, but this was different. The book they read was "The Contender," written 50 years ago by a young boxing reporter for The New York Times. They read it together.

About a high school dropout who joins a boxing gym to try and stay out of trouble, the sport in "The Contender" might have gone out of style, but its message hasn't.

"Being a champion is often luck ..." said Robert Lipsyte, the book's author. "Being a contender is about hard work and talent."

Lipsyte recently got to see firsthand how those lessons are still resonating when he visited Paisley's reading group. Lipsyte first met Brown several years ago when they were on the same sports literacy panel. Brown brought Lipsyte out last week for a reception with the kids and some supporters of the work the group's been doing.

"I don't think there can be a greater gift to a writer than a reader," Lipsyte said.

Each student chose a favorite quote to read and explained why it was important to them.

Corie Boston read a quote about the book's protagonist Alfred and his troubled friend, James.

"I think I'd like to have a friend like James that's always been there for me," Boston said.

This group of boys will move onto high school in the fall, hopefully with a new perspective on school.

The program will keep going at Paisley. Dunn has one semester of school left and another year of football eligibility. He's looking into graduate programs so he can keep working with Brown and the sports literacy program.

Dunn said he's still interested in pursuing football, but if that doesn't pan out he'd like to go into teaching.

"I just want to be that light in someone's life," he said.

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