

PEOPLE

ProStudents: Cortez Brown's brilliant idea realized

BY MARY SCHENKEL
Staff Writer

Bright, athletic and with a thoroughly engaging smile, Cortez Brown approaches life with an optimistic enthusiasm that he hopes to convey to students at Indian River Academy (the school was Highlands Elementary when he attended).

Brown has developed a summer learning program that will take place this June at Saint Edward's School called ProStudents, specifically targeting boys and girls from that Title I School in one of the county's most impoverished districts.

Twenty-five students, rising fifth- and sixth-graders, will take part this year, with a goal of adding rising fourth-graders in the future.

Brown's story is an inspirational one, built on the solid foundation of a loving, single mother of two who has nurtured his aspirations of becoming an orthopedic surgeon, specializing in sports medicine. Brown, who was headed to Florida State University College of Medicine on June 1, has a younger sister who is a dual-enrolled junior at Charter High School and IRSC with plans to study nursing.

Brown attended Oslo Middle School and spent his freshman year at the Charter High School before transferring to Saint Edward's, where he graduated in 2012. In May he graduated from Sewanee: The University of the South with a B.A. in biology.

While there he played football, ran track, was a dorm proctor and a member of the Honor Council and student government. He also took an interest in the community off campus.

"We were surrounded by the poorest county in Tennessee, but we really didn't go outside our bubble," says Brown.

Determined to help, he founded and was president of the Sewanee Multi-Cultural Health Society, collaborating with the Morton Memorial United Methodist Church. They helped provide food to more than 300 people every second Saturday, while also studying the habits and diseases, such as smoking and diabetes, that impact the Appalachian culture.

Convinced that he could possibly have accomplished even more if he had experienced a stronger academic foundation in his early school years, Brown decided to develop a program to improve the academic skills of children in the Vero Highlands area, where he still has family.

"I thought I would rather change



Cortez Brown with 5th grade students from Indian River Academy, (back) Sarah, Zachery and Christian; and (front) Chelsea and Edrick PHOTOS: DENISE RITCHE

my own community since it needs so much help," says Brown. "I realized that I wanted to do something genuine, that I truly enjoyed. I enjoy academics and I love sports so you combine those two and it's with that premise that I spoke with Mr. Mersky about the idea."

Mike Mersky, St. Edward's Head of School, was completely on board, putting the resources of the school behind the program and providing the structure of the academics.

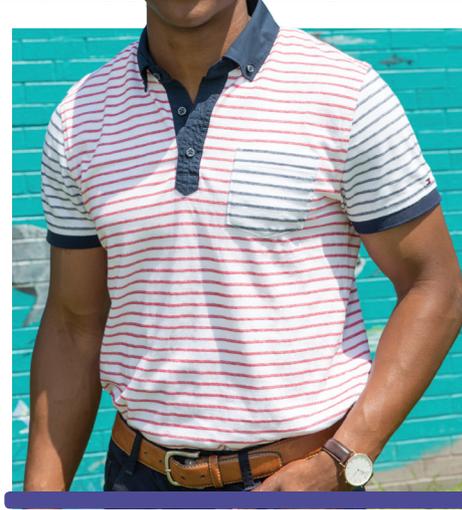
In his junior year Brown enrolled in an independent study course on building an effective summer learning program. "My independent study professor, Nicky Hamilton, has been developing programs for the community for years. She made me create a literature review – basically what you do in graduate school – she had me do it as a junior in college."

That summer he also interned at Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center where the director, Linda Mayes, connected him with people in the New Haven area who had established similar programs and could help him determine best practices.

The program he has worked on for the past two years is now ready to launch – but Brown won't be here to see it happen.

"But I'm missing it for a good reason – to go to medical school. That's been my dream since attending St. Ed's. But the camp isn't for me; it's for the 25 kids. As long as they have a great time that's all I really care about."

Thomas McGilberry, Brown's friend since middle school and his ambassador in the endeavor, will liaise between children, parents and



ProStudents developer Cortez Brown.

faculty. McGilberry's mother, Rhonda, is a longtime teacher at Beachland Elementary School. McGilberry, who will be returning from Europe about the same time Brown leaves for medical school, will transfer in the fall from IRSC to FSU.

"Thomas will be the day-to-day guy while I'm away," says Brown. "He's been dedicated to this program since last year around this time and he helped get seed money for the program. He pitched the idea to the Indian River Community Foundation."

McGilberry obviously did a good job – the ProStudents program is made possible by a grant from the Sameth Family Fund at the Indian River Community Foundation.

Greg Zugrave, St. Edward's Upper School history department chair and the school's basketball coach, will direct the programming.

"The teachers under him for this program are all Lower School teachers," explains Monica Jennings, director of Marketing and Communications. "It's a nice collaboration between divisions. This is an opportunity for them to work together as well."

Academic teachers Anita Meadows, Jacqui Flynn, Kelly Hudson and Cynthia Roth will teach the students in Singapore Math, literature-based reading, Tinkering with STEM, history and geography. Lonnie Scott, who graduated St. Edward's and Sewanee with Brown, will direct the program's sports aspect.

St. Edward's offers a number of other camps during the summer, but this is a stand-alone. "This ProStudents really is dedicated to them and their academic success; and they get to have fun while they're doing it," says Jennings.

The students were selected by Indian River Academy Principal Diane Fannin and her faculty, and the parents had to attend four ProStudents meetings in order to qualify.

"It requires a significant amount of activity from parents," adds Jennings. "It's not like they're just sending the kids off to St. Ed's. They've had to really participate in their own level of commitment."

Parents will pay a nominal fee of \$100 for the four-week, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. camp, where children will strengthen their academic skills in the morning and engage in plenty of sports activities in the afternoon. Breakfast, lunch and transportation are provided, and students have submitted an academic baseline to enable improvements to be tracked.

"The thing that really strikes me is that this is not just something he is doing for his resume to get into medical school," Jennings says.

"He is deeply committed to this; this is not just a one-time deal. He wants to watch these kids come up through their academics and their athletic ability and really be able to see the needle move."

"I was looking at the grades of the kids and talking to Ms. Rodriguez, the fifth-grade teacher here, and she was saying they're going to be starting college in 2023," says Brown. "I'll be finishing my fellowship in orthopedics around that time. So we're going to both be moving through our own academic experiences at the same time."

"He's a really busy guy, and the fact that he's pulled the right people in to be able to keep it going was really impressive to me," adds Jennings. "It's a sign of a good leader; to be able to know who to bring in. Anybody who can run an organization has to have good folks with them along the way and he's managed to really fine-tune that. I expect this to go on for years." ■