

Making dreams come true

Paine's Allen draws on his own past to build hope for struggling families

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Champion Digital | By Kayci Woodley

Laughter bounced off the walls, wild and uncontrolled. Marcus Allen had just shared his dream with his closest friends.

“I’m going to college.”

This was in 1982, when Allen was 10. Introverted, but confident in the classroom, Allen knew education could mean escaping a life of poverty.

Marcus’ dream was not an easy one. His friends mostly saw the end game and ridiculed his ambition of going to college. One of his friends wanted to be a millionaire, which resonated better with the group. But not Marcus. To the self-labeled thinker, education was his way out.

Three decades later, time has proved just how right he was.

After a successful college basketball career and an injury-shortened stint playing professional ball, Allen continued his education. Now at age 40, he heads ACHIEVEability, a Philadelphia-based agency that helps economically challenged families by providing housing and professional

development workshops. On the basis of four key elements – finance, education, personal development and parenting – ACHIEVEability gives families the stability Allen lacked as a child.

Raised by a single mother, Allen and his two siblings struggled with homelessness growing up. Their mother, Nell, reached out to friends in the area for shelter. After moving from house to house in Atlanta, Ga., and having difficulty putting food on the table, Nell sent the kids to live with someone she considered a mother. A family friend took care of the children while she worked to get back on her feet. Allen was in fourth grade before his family had a place to call home, in Thomson, Ga.

“I remember my brother and I didn’t sleep the first night because we were so happy to have a place to call our own,” Allen said. “Having a home was instrumental to me, and not long after that is when I really started focusing and thinking about going to college.”

Partial athletics and academic scholarships from Paine College, a historically black institution, opened the door to his dream. Allen’s commitment to learning paralleled his passion for sports.

He grew up idolizing NFL Hall of Famer and like-named Marcus Allen after playing running back in youth football. He and his younger brother played any sport they could think of together during the tough times in Atlanta. Allen saw the consequences of poor choices throughout his life. Family members for generations had repeatedly broken the law and

What is ACHIEVEability?

ACHIEVEability helps low-income, single parent and homeless families by providing housing and personal development skills, including relationship building.

basketball let his mind shift away from family troubles.

Basketball was always there, but his talent was not. Picked last for teams as a youngster, he made the team just once in his first three years at Thomson High School. A 6-inch growth spurt in a two-year span during high school helped his cause. Although uncoordinated and unfamiliar with his body, Allen's passion for the sport never wavered. And he was given a final shot as a senior when he made the team.

Allen peaked during his senior season and led his high school in both scoring and rebounding. Allen started turning heads despite playing with a McDonald's All-American and three all-state players for teammates. Division I schools inquired about the talented forward, but the decision to attend the Division II school just 30 miles down the road had been made.

During the early signing period in 1988, longtime Paine athletics director and head men's basketball coach Ron Spry caught word of Allen's growth spurt from a friend. Spry was good friends with Thomson coach Michael Thomas and decided to sign Allen based on his 6-foot-7 frame alone. Allen wasn't familiar with the college in Augusta, but he signed as quickly as he could.

Signing a player without seeing him on the court or committing to a college without visiting would be considered laughable today. But Allen's career was no joke.

"Growing up, my focus was always on how I was going to go to college," Allen said. "As soon as he gave me that offer, I signed on the dotted line."

'Breaking the Stereotype'

Spry pushed Allen beyond his comfort zone from the first day he stepped on the Paine campus. Spry's expectations were high, which produced an intense relationship between the sensitive, small-town kid and the longtime coach.

Through its family self-sufficiency program, ACHIEVEability creates measurable objectives for participants. Parents are required to work at least 30 hours per week and complete a minimum of five classes per year toward a post-secondary degree or its equivalent. In the past two years, 25 parents have earned college degrees.

The nonprofit organization in Philadelphia helps more than 300 children per year in a city plagued by high poverty rates, high unemployment and low educational attainment. Through various courses and workshops, parents learn valuable relationship management skills to progress toward self-sufficiency. ACHIEVEability staff members provide families with conflict resolution, anger management and self-esteem courses to create healthy environments for their children.

A leader in developing and managing affordable housing in Philadelphia, ACHIEVEability provides families with the stability they need to pursue education and obtain employment. The organization has developed 210 homes, primarily in West Philadelphia. ACHIEVEability currently manages 154 homes for families and in the future aims to better integrate with the community through health and wellness, and economic development.

Case managers and social workers at ACHIEVEability are referred to as "coaches" because of Marcus Allen's emphasis on motivational tactics. On Sept. 17, ACHIEVEability hosted its annual Coaches Cup golf outing and raised over \$55,000 for its family self-sufficiency program.

Information obtained from www.achieveability.org.

“Oftentimes you try to define leadership,” Spry said. “People either have it or they don’t. I knew there was something deeply special about him, and I had to capitalize on it.”

Spry named Allen co-captain as a freshman and frequently asked him to speak publicly on behalf of the team. Players were required to attend church every Sunday, chapel every Wednesday and dress appropriately.

“Coach Spry was the first person who told me I had to wear a tie,” Allen said. “He knew I was fearful of speaking, but he made me do it anyway. He allowed me to be the person and the leader I am today.”

In 1994, Paine College experienced many firsts. The Lions won their first Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference championship against Alabama A&M. Paine qualified for the Division II tournament. The Lions were ranked nationally, at No. 17, for the first time in school history. When the season concluded, Allen became one of only two players to have his Paine jersey retired. Inquiries from professional teams led to Allen’s departure before graduation and seven years of professional basketball overseas.

For Allen, though, his greatest personal accomplishment didn’t happen on the court.

He was honored as the Paine student-athlete with the highest grade-point average during his senior year.

“My greatest dream was to go to college,” Allen said. “The hard work in terms of studying paid off and to be a top athlete breaking the stereotype of how people look at athletes as dumb jocks, for me, was really important in terms of how I define myself.”

Like many NCAA student-athletes who leave college early to pursue professional athletics, Allen returned to school to finish his degree.

In 2001, seven years after he left Paine, he earned a degree in psychology from Temple University. He vividly remembers graduation weekend when family members flew in to watch the first-generation college graduate walk across the stage and listen to keynote speaker Bill Cosby at commencement.

“It was surreal to accomplish something that you set out to do 30 years ago,” Allen said, recalling his childhood dream. “My college experience on the athletic side, academic side and the social experience had a huge impact on me because I came from such a small country town.”

Augusta State Athletics Director Clint Bryant still remains impressed by Allen’s accomplishments. Allen played for Paine during Bryant’s first year as basketball coach at local-rival Augusta State, and Bryant noticed the ability of his young opponent to make a difference.

“He had an exceptional career at Paine but, more importantly, has turned into a real jewel of a businessman, community leader, just A1,” Bryant said. “I think he’s just a great example of what a Division II athlete from a small historically black institution can become.”

Helping Others Achieve

ACHIEVEability’s programs help families reach their goals through stress management, decision-making and financial literacy workshops. Counselors and therapists are provided for those who have experienced drug, alcohol or sexual abuse and tutors are offered for both parents and children.

Progress is tracked on a continuum based on the four pillars of self-sufficiency and they are held accountable to meet the standard. After accomplishing the goal he set at age 10, Allen now motivates and uses lessons ingrained in him during countless hours in the gym.

“Paine College gave me the confidence that no matter what challenges are before you, no matter how hard, the story can be rewritten,” Allen said. “You can’t judge life by a short journey. You have to step back and see the entire picture.”

A father of four, Allen spends plenty of time with a whistle around his neck. He previously coached his oldest daughter in nonscholastic basketball and now coaches his 8- and 10-year-old daughters.

“I see myself as a natural-born coach as well as someone who’s benefited from coaches and mentors,” Allen said. “But, man, it’s tough coaching your kids. I always have to say, ‘Call me coach, don’t call me dad’.”

Like thousands of other student-athletes, someday Allen’s children may have a coach who affects them as a father or mother would. With the help of the collegiate model, Allen walked away from the skepticism in Thomson, Ga., and into the lives of countless families.

“As a young boy, I didn’t have the capacity to imagine what happened to me in college,” Allen said. “My story and ACHIEVEability are defined by the education piece. It’s the biggest driver for success in our families, and something I believe in wholeheartedly.”

And something that can transform childhood dreams into adult realities.

Marcus Allen Bio

COLLEGE PLAYING CAREER: Division II men’s basketball player at Paine College, 1991-1994; 1994. Inducted into the Paine College Hall of Fame in 2002

EDUCATION: Graduated from Temple University in 2001 with a psychology degree; received an MBA from the University of Phoenix in 2008.

CAREER: Chief operating officer at VisionQuest, 1999-2009. Chief executive officer at ACHIEVEability, 2009-present.

HONORS: Philadelphia’s top 40 under 40 professional by the Philadelphia BusinessJournal, 2010; named to the Philadelphia Tribune’s top 10 Most Influential African-Americans under 40, 2010.

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