

Communities In Schools/ Children's Home Society of North Carolina

LEARNING WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A REAL MAN

Although Roger Thompson was already 19 and the father of a one-year-old, he was still in the eleventh grade. He'd spent two years in ninth grade and two years in tenth, and if he had to repeat eleventh grade, too, chances were good he would drop out of West Mecklenburg High School in Charlotte, NC. At least, that's what a lot of his teachers predicted.

But then his English instructor noticed that Roger couldn't see the chalkboard from his seat near the back of the classroom. Concerned, she sent him to the bungalow housing the school's office of Communities In Schools of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, an affiliate of the national Communities In Schools (CIS) network, the leading dropout prevention program in the country.

At the "White House," as the bungalow is called due to its color, Roger met CIS Site Coordinator Andre Reynolds. Although Reynolds already serviced a caseload of over 100 kids, he personally drove Roger to a local vision specialist that provides qualified CIS students with pro bono eye care. Two weeks later, Roger had glasses.

But it didn't stop there. In connecting with CIS of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Roger was now part of a program that would give him the vision and the support system he desperately needed to get through high school and beyond.

"We did an assessment on Roger," Reynolds says. "We learned about his family life, his school life, his academics. We realized he was quite capable, that he was self-motivated and had good follow-up, but that he just needed some extra support from people who cared about him."

When Roger was nine years old, his father taught him how to drive. It wasn't long before the elder Thompson, an auto mechanic, was relying on his young son to drive him home from parties when he had too much to drink.

By the time Roger was 12 and living with his grandmother in Atlanta, GA, he was stealing cars. "Me and my buddies would smoke a lot of pot and then we'd break into houses to take things and pawn them," Roger says, explaining that the older brother of one of his friends was the group's leader. "He had nice things—a nice car, nice clothes—and I wanted that, too."

The ringleader also had a master key to Honda Accords. Roger and his buddies stole seven in a row and sold them at a local chop shop for \$1,500 each. "We never got caught and I liked living on the edge. That's what made it fun." It wasn't until he was pulled over for a simple license check that the police finally busted him. He was let off with a warning, but his grandmother sent him packing.

Back in Charlotte, Roger was dispatched to live with his mother's ex-husband, but his stepfather's new wife considered Roger a nuisance and locked him out of the house every afternoon. Eventually, the boy convinced his own father to take him in, but his father's new wife locked him in the backyard, often along with his siblings, unless it was raining—when she'd lock them in the basement instead.

At West Charlotte High School, Roger was placed in remedial classes. "I was bored," he explains. "I'd go to one or two classes and I'd finish my work in the first 20 minutes and then just sit there and sleep. And then I just figured I'd go find something better to do, so I'd leave with my friends."

Failing out of West Charlotte and switching to West Mecklenburg, Roger finally passed ninth grade. "But then in my first sophomore year, things got bad again," he explains. "I joined the Crips and we'd start riots in the cafeteria, fights in the bathrooms, turf wars in the neighborhood. I was a do-boy—I'd do everything the older guys asked." Most days, Roger was truant from school, but when he did show up, he says, "I'd make \$200 a day dealing. I bought myself nice things: video games, iPods, stuff like that."

While repeating tenth grade, Roger and a friend from school named Heaven hooked up at a party one night, resulting in a pregnancy. Although Heaven couldn't be 100 percent sure Roger was the father, it was very likely, so he took responsibility. "I thought my life was over," he says. "But I went along with what Heaven said: 'If you can lie down and make a baby, you can stand up and take care of it.'"

When Heaven gave birth to Angel, the baby lived with Heaven and her mother, Roger sleeping over at their home twice a week to help out. "I've felt connected to Angel since the first time I changed her diaper. That's when I knew I'd be there for her forever. Whatever she needs, I'll get the money together."

"My daughter changed my life," he continues. "I knew it was time for me to grow up. I started fighting less in school. I started getting more wise about what was going on around me and I didn't like it anymore. I wanted out of the Crips."

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That didn't prove easy. "I went to the head of the gang and told him I was leaving," Roger says. "He sent one of his guys to give me a ride home, and as I was getting out of the car, he shot me in both legs." It was six weeks before Roger was able to walk again." After that, the gang left me alone. Sometimes I'd be scared, but it's been awhile now and some of them are still my Facebook friends."

Andre Reynolds, the youngest of eight children, grew up in a neglected Baltimore neighborhood and faced many of the challenges inner-city youth experience. A fellow African-American, he could empathize with Roger's story. "A lot of students in CIS are raised without dads, or with dads who haven't had too much to do with them," he says. "We wear many hats: mentor, counselor, social worker, father figure—whatever it takes to help the students succeed."

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Success stories abound at CIS, a Virginia-based organization that helps 1.3 million young people around the country. Ninety-nine percent of them stay in school, and 96 percent of high school seniors graduate on time. For Roger, success very much relied on attendance. "I could see he was a very bright kid—he even made the honor roll one semester," says Reynolds. "But saying he was missing a lot of school was an understatement."

"Communities In Schools is awesome," says Roger. "Mr. Reynolds kept me on track. He'd tell me what I needed to do to make my grades go up, talk to my teachers if I wasn't understanding. . . . He'd set guidelines and give me goals to meet and help me make sure everything would happen on time. CIS is pretty tough on kids—they want you to follow through on your commitments. But they also make you feel like somebody cares. It's like another family."

Toward the end of eleventh grade, Roger began missing school again. "I had a falling out with my father," he explains. "I was staying in a motel and donating plasma to pay the bill."

"I called him repeatedly but there was no response," says Reynolds. "He passed the eleventh grade anyway—he'd done well enough before his absences to get through. But when he didn't call back, I figured he'd dropped out. Unfortunately, you feel like there's really nothing much you can do."

When school resumed that fall, Reynolds was surprised to see Roger in the media center, ready to head into twelfth grade. "We sat down and reviewed his schedule," says Reynolds. "I wanted to make sure he had the classes he needed to graduate."

Reynolds deployed other resources to keep Roger in school. "Through CIS, we reach out to community partners. One of those is Wise Guys, and Roger was number one on my list," says Reynolds, referring to a teen pregnancy prevention program aimed at helping male adolescents make more responsible decisions. Founded by the Children's Home Society of North Carolina in 1990 and conducted at hundreds of school and community sites in several North Carolina counties, Wise Guys empowers young men with the knowledge they need to make effective decisions and encourages them to respect themselves and others.

"I had no idea what it was at first," says Roger of the Wise Guys program. "One day in gym, Mr. Reynolds brought me a pass. When I got to the room, there were 12 of us and I didn't know most of the other guys, and I didn't know anyone well. But you could sit and have a

regular conversation without all the bickering and fighting. That's hard to do when girls are around."

"We all just bonded right away," Roger continues. "We found out we were all in the same boat. We became a family... you're my brother now. We talked about things on another level other than just 'hey, how are you doing?' We were more supportive ... we all wanted to help each other out. And a lot of these guys? Two or three years earlier I wouldn't have looked in their direction because of what I thought was in the man box."

"The man box" is a core concept of Wise Guys. "OK, so what should we put into the man box?" asked Jeff Rothberg, the Wise Guys facilitator assigned to Roger, as he addressed a circle of 12 African-American male students.

"He has to be tall!" shouted out a tenth-grader. "With big muscles!" said another young man.

"OK, tall and muscular... but are those really attributes you need to be a good man?" questioned Rothberg as he looked around the circle and got a shake of the head from Roger, now 20 years old though a high school senior.

"There's a lot more to a man than what he looks like," said Roger.

"That's right," Rothberg said, impressed. "There's a whole lot more."

"The minute I met Roger I knew he was different," says Rothberg. "I sensed he was more mature than the average high school kid, a little more worldly. I could tell the man box didn't control him and this got my attention."

The Wise Guys curriculum includes 12 chapters on subjects ranging from reproductive anatomy to sexually transmitted diseases to contraception, sexual harassment and dating violence. "We also have content on masculinity, goal-setting, values, decision-making, fatherhood, abstinence... really about what makes you a man," explains Rothberg. "And a big part is just about relationships: how men and women act, the ethics and morals behind a healthy relationship, general communication with regard to getting tested before sexual activity."

In the spring, Rothberg was a chaperone for a trip to the annual Man Up Conference, a day-long CIS-sponsored event at which 350 urban high school students participated in forums with motivational speakers, many of them older, successful community members. "They weren't telling us how to be men," says Roger. "They were telling us how they became successful men. They were telling us their life stories."

At the end of the summit, Roger was chosen as his group's representative to summarize their combined experiences. "He got up in front of 400-plus men and boys and articulated very eloquently what had been learned," says Reynolds.

Rothberg agrees that Wise Guys was highly beneficial for Roger. "I think he learned a lot about smart, healthy relationships. The hope is that going forward, when he meets a woman, he won't repeat the mistakes from the past ... until he's really ready to have another child."

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In June of 2013, Roger Thompson finally graduated high school. Although his mother had moved to Florida just three days before, his father and several of his siblings were in attendance. "I kept thinking of those teachers who said I wouldn't make it," says Roger. "My motivation was to prove them wrong. But if it hadn't been for CIS, I probably would have dropped out—there would have been no one to keep me on track."

In the fall Roger will enroll at Lincoln College of Technology in Nashville, where he plans to study heavy machinery and diesel engine maintenance. Eventually, he'd like to work at a car or truck dealership, or perhaps in the construction industry. "I like engines—I've always been a grease monkey. And it's better to have a career than just a job. It's better if you can get up in the morning and like what you do."

Roger has had a girlfriend for close to a year and is living with her now until it's time to move to Nashville. He believes Wise Guys has helped him understand how to behave in the relationship. "Wise Guys helped me to see what's right in terms of relationships ... it gave me more of an insight. Many things I thought were right about being a man were wrong. I thought it was all about the money, the clothes, the respect and fame. But as long as you're taking care of yourself and your kids, if you're taking care of your responsibilities, you're a man."

Spending time with Angel is still the best part of his week. He's learned from his own father's mistakes and knows he's already providing better parenting than he received. And what about Angel's paternity? Does Roger ever think of that? "I don't want to know," he says. "If I found out she wasn't mine, I'd be heartbroken. I've been there since she was born so she's my child. She's just mine."

The name of the young man profiled in this story has been changed to protect his privacy and his family's.

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