

NFL football player encourages investment in youth

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Former NFL football player Shawn Harper said he grew up a "mad boy" on the south side of Columbus, Ohio.

"Bad has nothing on mad," Harper told a packed house at the Heartland Lutheran High School Red and Blue Banquet and Auction in Grand Island Sunday night.

Harper's father left when he was just 4 years old. Harper was one of six children, who then struggled in school.

He was kicked out of two schools and diagnosed with numerous learning disabilities before he finally completed high school as the last in his class.

When a junior college coach from Mason City, Iowa, called him to come play football there, Harper was surprised and didn't want to go.

But he was talked into giving it a try for a year.

His coach and teammates took interest in him -- as did girls at the school -- and suddenly Harper had a new passion. Football gave him an acceptance, a love and an identity, he said.

He went on to play for Indiana University, then for the Indianapolis Colts and Los Angeles Rams during the mid-1990s.

But an injury fairly early on during his college career could have changed his entire football career. Instead, what it did was change Harper's outlook.

Harper said while he was down and recuperating from what could have been a career-ending injury, he began to realize how caught up in himself and the "dark side" of football he had gotten.

He had become self-centered.

As he began singing the songs of vacation Bible school days gone by, Harper realized that God truly does have "The Whole World in His Hands." Harper began to recalibrate his life.

Just as a GPS system relies on three points to make a reading, so, too, are three points needed for people. One point is the origin, one point is the destination and the third and most important point is the point of reference -- God, Harper said.

Everyone needs a reference point of truth, a reference point of integrity and a reference point of authority, Harper told the crowd.

"If there is no reference point, there can be no destination," he said.

That's why he encouraged the crowd to continue coming together to support Heartland Lutheran, to support its 75 students and support the school's 10 year history.

It's investing for the future, Harper said. "The best investment is people," he said.

"He hit the nail on the head," said Heartland Lutheran development director Lloyd Wagnitz as he kicked off the auction. "We are investing in the future."



Shawn Harper, a former NFL player, speaks Sunday at Heartland Lutheran as part of the Red and Blue Banquet and Auction. (Zach Mayhew/For The Independent)



Former NFL player Shawn Harper rips a phonebook, "the script of all the negativity in the world," Sunday at Heartland Lutheran. (For The Independent/Zach Mayhew)