

**Faces of Miami-Dade County Public High Schools:
An Intimate Perspective on the Struggle for Education
(A Series)**

Article II: Donny Brown Makes a Change

From the smile on Donny Brown's face, you would never guess he grew up with a stepfather who often came home from the shooting range waving his shot-up paper target in little Donny's face and threatening to do the same to him. From his energetic demeanor, you would never imagine that when he was a child, his young mother was too busy partying and meeting men to worry about whether her son and three daughters had done their homework or eaten a hot meal. His kind eyes show only a young, enthusiastic kid trying to turn his life around, to make it out of the ghetto and the circumstances he's grown up in.

Donny Brown, 17, is a senior at Miami Southridge Senior High School in Miami-Dade County, currently an F school, where he is trying to stay focused on his classes and off the streets he once roamed as a child. Like 39 percent of the students at Miami Southridge, he is African American.

Donny is bursting with energy. He likes to speak in different voices and imitate his favorite TV characters. Despite the seriousness of his life, he is constantly smiling, his gold "grill" on his bottom teeth shining behind his lips. At 5'6" and 180 pounds, Donny is a strong boy. He gets a lot of exercise in his weight training class, and it helps him to stay fit. He shares his story with anyone who will listen, speaking in a soft, yet bold voice as he fiddles with the rubber band that holds his shoulder-length dreadlocks away from his dark brown eyes.

Donny's story is almost hard to believe. After growing up with little home support, especially from his mother, no money and no father, in a neighborhood crawling

with the temptation of drugs and violence, Donny found the strength within himself to make a change in his life and achieve success against all odds.

Today Donny spends more time in church and at school than on the streets, and his biggest concerns are earning As and Bs, his drama activities and staying away from the marijuana that once controlled his life. He puts all his energies into learning everything he can in his Acting II and Comprehensive Theater classes, which he hopes could give him the chance to win a theater scholarship to college.

Donny also receives tutoring after school so that he can pass the FCAT reading test, which he failed last year; then, he hopes, he'll graduate in June and go on to study theater at the university level.

Growing up in Goulds, a gritty southwest Miami town nicknamed G-town, Donny often found himself walking alone in a neighborhood he says was filled with drug dealers, shootings and gambling.

Triangle Park, also known as "trap," is nearby. This area, Donny says, is filled with thugs and drug dealers as well. A big drug hole called "the village" or "the jungle" is also part of the area of Miami Donny calls home. Both areas are small plots of deserted land with trees and grass where the dealers, users and gangsters hang out, Donny explains.

Growing up, only Donny's great grandmother, Sylvia Rolle, and grandfather, Richard Johnson, concerned themselves with his welfare, as well as that of his two older sisters, Shonte and Jاليا, and younger sister Angelique.

Donny grew up without his father, Tyrone McIntyre.

“He stayed walking distance from my house, and he never came to see me,” Donny says, the disappointment clear in his eyes. “I never knew who he was until I was 14 and I actually saw him for the first time.”

It was his great-grandmother who woke him up for school every day, laid out his clothes and made sure he always had a full stomach. At 80, Sylvia was still working to make sure Donny and his sisters did not lack any of their basic necessities. She kept a job in the kitchen area at Baptist Hospital of Miami, where she was allowed to do light work to earn a paycheck.

When his grandfather died in 1999, things at Donny’s house started getting rough. Now, there was only one very elderly person left to raise Donny and his sisters.

The situation worsened when Sylvia died in 2005. It was now up to Donny’s mother, Chinetha Johnson, a Metro-Dade bus driver, to change her lifestyle and focus on her four children.

Chinetha had had Donny just two days after graduating from Miami Southridge High. As a young mother, she had missed out on doing the things young people are able to do, Donny says. While his great-grandmother and grandfather took care of the four children, she had been able to go out and make up for those lost opportunities. There was no time for that now.

Donny’s stepfather, Angelo, had an on-and-off relationship with Chinetha for as long as Donny could remember, but he did nothing more than terrorize Donny.

“We [Donny and Angelo] almost ended up killing each other, literally killing each other,” Donny says with an angry, shock-filled look. “He told my momma that if we ever crossed him, he was going to kill us.”

Angelo eventually moved out, but other men continued to disrupt the peace in Donny's home. He could not tell his mother what to do, but the older he got, the angrier he became.

"I got to the age where I got sick and tired of it," Donny says defiantly. "It got to the point where hey, if they're going to come up in here, I'm letting them know, right at the door, this is what it's going to be like, and if you can't handle it, you just go right out the same door you came [in]."

Donny was 15 when his great-grandmother died. Suddenly, he found himself without the only two people he had ever trusted. He quickly began getting into trouble both at school and around the neighborhood. Marijuana became his escape from a world that no longer made sense.

"My uncle used to live with us," Donny says. "I used to smoke with him."

But even after Donny's uncle moved out, Donny continued to smoke on his own.

"I was in the streets with my homeboys," Donny says. "I was smoking with them every day. I used to come home from school, drop off my stuff and go smoke. I would come home, had homework to do, and tried to do it high. My grades were slipping really bad."

When Chinetha discovered Donny's drug habits, she gave him an ultimatum. If he wanted to play football at Miami Southridge, he would have to quit immediately. So he did.

By the end of the first season, football was no longer a passion, and he slipped back into his old ways and began smoking again. He says he lost interest in the game because there was no one at the games to cheer him on.

“I had no one there to discipline me, make me stick with it,” Donny says miserably. “My mom always had to work. She could never be there to encourage me.”

Even though Donny’s mother had objected to his pot habit before, he didn’t believe she would really care.

A few years earlier, when Donny was just 13, he remembers that his mother had taken him to a nightclub, where she allowed him to drink and smoke cigarettes with her. If she was OK with that, Donny thought, why shouldn’t he continue smoking marijuana?

It was not until his junior year in high school that Donny began to realize he was slowly ruining his life. After a long hiatus from the church he had grown up in, he decided it was time to go back and get his life in order.

“One day my grandmother [Chinetha’s mother] came over, and I just felt something tell me, look, you need to go back to church. You need to hurry up. So I said, ‘Hey, come and pick me up on Sunday. I want to go,’” he recalls.

Donny says the church, Saint Matthew’s Community Missionary Baptist Church, has helped him because it gives him faith. It makes him believe that even though his situation is a difficult one, he will get through it.

Church has not been his only source of help, however. Teachers like Osvaldo Quintana, Sedric Cherry and Connie Monroe have all put in the time to show Donny he is someone worth caring for.

Quintana is Donny’s drama teacher at Miami Southridge High.

“He has helped me [Quintana] because he showed me all of the [drama] tricks that I’ve never seen before,” Donny says cheerfully. “Coming in here with attitude, saying ‘I don’t want to do this,’ or ‘I don’t know why we have to do this,’ that’s going against

what you want. If you just sit down and listen to what he says and do what he says, I have a feeling that nothing can stop me.”

With Quintana’s help and encouragement, Donny will be attending the annual Florida Theater Conference in Lakeland, Fla., this spring for the first time. The annual conference gives drama students the chance to audition for scholarships to college.

Donny is hoping the conference will be his big chance to get to the University of Central Florida, which he dreams of attending. A price tag of \$200 to attend the conference initially left Donny with little hope of getting to that crucial audition.

“I was like, ‘Damn, how the hell am I going to get the money?’”

Quintana would not let Donny abandon hope. He suggested that Donny could raise the money to pay for the conference by selling candy at school. He even offered to help him sell.

In addition to Quintana’s support, Donny knows he can also count on Coach Sedric Cherry, his weight training coach at Miami Southridge High, to listen to him and counsel him when he needs advice or has a problem.

“He always tells me, ‘Hey, boy. Don’t get involved in anything stupid out there. Keep your mind focused.’ He tells me that every day. He encourages me not to give up.”

Connie Monroe, Donny’s junior-year English teacher, has worked overtime with Donny to make sure he passes the reading section of the FCAT this year. He took it again in October and is now waiting for his results. With Monroe’s extra tutoring, Donny is confident he will receive a passing score this time.

“I think he [God] gave me favor with a lot of people,” Donny says, grinning. “I can need a lot of things, and he’ll put it in people’s hearts, ‘Look, do this for him.’ That’s him looking out for me in a lot of different ways.”

In addition to getting involved in church again and having adults at school who support and push him, Donny says his involvement in drama has helped him stay out of trouble. The “homeboys” who used to smoke and roam the streets of Goulds with Donny have pressured him to return to that way of life, but Donny has resisted every time.

“You got the dudes out there who are looking at me like, ‘Man, you were down with us, and now you’re doing that drama stuff, hanging around all the white kids,’” Donny says. “I don’t care. I rather be here doing what I got to do than being over there doing nothing.”

Although Donny currently attends an F school, he firmly believes his teachers are doing everything in their power to prepare him for college.

“I think the label of the F school doesn’t label the teachers that are in there,” Donny says. “You can have an F school and have good teachers that teach you something because I’m learning something now.”

In addition to his two drama courses, Donny is also enrolled in TV production, weight training, Spanish 2, English 4 and an honors math class. His current 2.175 grade point average is an immense improvement from the D average he had just one year ago.

“Just because you come from an A school or you got grades doesn’t mean that you necessarily have to go to college,” Donny says assertively. “It’s not fully the teachers, it’s yourself. If you don’t want to go to college, you’re just not going to go, but

if you got a mind that's saying, 'OK, I want to go to college,' then that's something the teachers can't make you do."

Donny admits that his life might be easier if he were one of the better-off students who attend an A or B school in some of the higher-income areas around him, namely Miami Palmetto Senior High School, just a few minutes away from Miami Southridge. Still, he says, the only difference if he were better off financially would be not having to worry about how to pay for school supplies or important school trips, like that to the Florida Theater Conference he hopes to attend this spring.

"As far as learning," he says, "you have teachers here who tutor you. They're staying after school and trying to give you that extra boost and try to make you understand."

To keep his grades up, Donny keeps to himself.

"That's the best way I can stay focused," Donny says. "To pray, stay by myself and listen to my iPod."

So how does a kid who grew up with nearly every disadvantage maintain his determination to reach his dreams?

"It's simple," he says. "First, you got to believe in God. Go to church and just trust, and do what he says. If you trust and don't worry about what people say, everything will work out fine."

"Things might not look, on the surface, like they are good, but at the end, you're going to come out on top, and that's how I got to where I am now."