

A friend to city children

By Kirsten Ballard

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LaTerrie Ward stands in the empty gym of the W.A. Foster community center.

She remembers dances, games and laughter.

It wasn't always empty.

There was a man who filled the whole room with his presence and his love. All of Ms. Ward's stories start and end with her memories of her mentor and friend James "Tunk" "T.C." Coley.

"He inspired me," she says. "He was the father when my father wasn't there."

Community member and unsung hero Coley passed away Aug. 17. He was 83 years old. He is survived by his wife, Rosetta Coley, daughter Lori Coley Brantley and two sons, Kenneth Coley and Mickey Coley.

There has been a four-stage effort of honoring Coley. Stage one was making him grand marshal of the 2012 Dillard Alumni Parade. Stage two, naming the gym at the W.A. Foster Center after him. Next on the list is commissioning and erecting a statue of Coley on the grounds of the new community center. The final stage will be to create a scholarship in Coley's name.

Coley's work was honored last July when the gymnasium was dedicated in his name. The dedication celebrated Coley's 40 years working at the center, where he oversaw the after-school activities.

Ms. Ward was so pleased that Coley was there for the rededication.

"He was really teary-eyed. He's not a speaker, not even to say thank you, but he was really touched," she said.

She is helping lead the committee in charge of fundraising for the statue. The committee is selling DVDs of old photos at the center and a taping of the dedication ceremony with testimonials of how Coley touched lives. So far, the group has raised more than \$1,000. Ms. Ward says the goal is \$20,000 for the statue. The statue will memorialize Coley in his shorts and sunglasses, sporting his signature mustache.

"Always with the shorts," Ms. Ward laughed.

The fundraising for the statue will continue until next year when the new community center is slated to be complete.

Coley transformed the Leslie Street W.A. Foster Center into a refuge for many community members.

"I grew up during the '70s. During that time, there was very little was for teenagers to do," Larry Johnson said. "There were drugs; there were other types of negative activities. He helped provide a refuge for me."

Johnson estimates he was at the center playing basketball and hanging out for up to 20 hours a week.

"The time I spent at the center was probably the most influential part of my growing up," he said.

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 Full Size



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LaTerrie Ward, director of community affairs for the city of Goldsboro, remembers her mentor James "T.C." Coley. Last July, the W.A. Foster Center gym was dedicated to Coley to honor his work in the community. Ms. Ward is leading the charge to erect a statue of Coley at the future W.A. Foster Center.

Johnson credits Coley with encouraging him to stay in the Air Force. Coley was one of very few positive male role models in Johnson's early life.

"The things that he imparted to me is who I am," Johnson said.

Johnson isn't the only person who credits Coley with changing the course of his life. Coley's Facebook page is full of memories and thanks.

"He wore the biggest pair of shoes in Goldsboro, I'm not sure if anyone could ever fill those shoes! He was an amazing man," Bren Rich wrote.

Ms. Ward met Coley when she was a young child going to the community center.

"We became so close that when I went to college, they wouldn't let my father off work to take me to school, so TC took me to school. And then he came back to bring me other stuff. He just took off work to take me to college. I'll always remember that," she said.

Coley inspired Ms. Ward and taught her discipline. She credits him with teaching her how to face confrontation in a calm and reasonable way. Coley also made sure she was behaving herself throughout her childhood.

"He made sure I stayed out of trouble and wasn't behind bushes. If he saw someone with a guy they weren't supposed to be with, he'd say 'nuh-uh, nope.' I thank the Lord today that he knew what I didn't," she said.

Coley oversaw a weekly sock-hop in the gym. Ms. Ward said hundreds of students came through the center doors on those Wednesday nights.

"He was the only person here and you had a houseful," Ms. Ward said.

Coley was always the person there.

"He was basically the baby-sitter, mentor and father to all the kids who came through here."

Coley was a fair leader. He had no tolerance for misbehavior, but Ms. Ward remembers how "he loved to laugh."

Ms. Ward looks around the empty gymnasium, wiping her eyes.

"It still doesn't feel like he's gone, he's just not here."

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