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For Derrick Brooks, philanthropy as important as football



Derrick Brooks Charities is a nonprofit organization that mentors children and helps provide college scholarships and stipends. DERRICK BROOKS CHARITIES



By Martin Fennelly | Tribune Staff
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TAMPA — Natasha Spencer met him when she was 12. She dreamed of being a doctor, but didn't know how she'd get there, or even escape her crime-ridden Tampa neighborhood.

One day, at her local Boys & Girls Club, she met Derrick Brooks. He had come to visit the children, to talk, but mostly to listen.

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That's how it began.

"My mother always told me the sky was the limit," Spencer said. "It was Mr. Brooks who showed me how. He told me anything was possible and helped me get there."

This weekend, Brooks will be enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame — a celebration of his 14-year career with the Buccaneers. It will be mostly about football.

But here, in Tampa Bay, it is impossible to consider Brooks' 11 Pro Bowls and his prototype play at outside linebacker without also paying homage to his philanthropy, his commitment to scholarship and his unwavering desire to help people.

Especially children.

Even one child.

"Numbers don't matter," Brooks said. "To me, you could say it was just one and I'm still satisfied, because that's all I was trying to do was change one kid's life through our programs. That's all I wanted. That's all I prayed for. It could be one or it could be a thousand. It doesn't matter, as long as it's not zero."

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Spencer, 29, is a doctor, a graduate of the Florida State University College of Medicine. While her story is among the most inspiring, there are countless tales of Brooks' impact since he arrived in Tampa nearly 20 years ago, lives touched and dreams realized, a growing brigade of college graduates and solid citizens.

"Derrick has enriched this community for generations to come," said Ricky Gallon, director of community relations for the Boys & Girls Club of Tampa Bay. "There are all those children he helped lift up, and their children that they'll help lift up, and their children's children. Now there's the school he started. The kids tell me all the time that there'll be a special place in heaven for Mr. Brooks."

Brooks said it goes back to growing up in Pensacola, seeing his grandmother, Martha, and his mother, Geraldine, reaching out in the neighborhood, feeding friends and strangers alike.

"I think it was that spirit that probably could be the genesis of it," he said. "I think my personality, how I feel about education, molded it together."

It began with Brooks providing tickets to Bucs games for children at local clubs, but the focus soon became youth education. Brooks graduated in three and a half years at Florida State, then earned his master's degree across several Bucs offseasons. He was on FSU's board of trustees from 2003 to 2011. Education, knowledge. And relationships.

"My whole theme of life is relationships, connections, and that's how it kind of all started," Brooks said.

DERRICK BROOKS AWARD

Co-recipient, 2000 Walter Payton NFL Man of the Year Award — Honors a player's volunteer and charity work, as well as his excellence on the field

2003 Bart Starr Award — Player who best exemplifies outstanding character and leadership in the home, on the field and in the community

2004 Byron "Whizzer" White NFL Man of the Year Award — Player who best serves his team, community and country

IN THE COMMUNITY

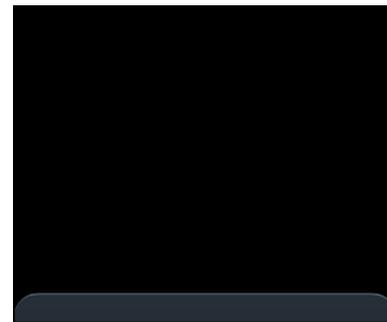
Brooks Bunch — Founded in 1997, Brooks Bunch began as a way for Brooks to work with Boys & Girls Club to encourage children to excel in the classroom. The Brooks Bunch took several educational trips, incorporating a several classroom elements. Trips included college tours, Atlanta and Washington, D.C., the western United States and two visits to South Africa.

Derrick Brooks Charities, Inc. — In addition to Brooks Bunch, the nonprofit feature programs that focus on youth education: crime prevention, financial literacy, life skills, young male programs and a "Rites of Passage" program for young women, as well as annual a Thanksgiving feeding and Christmas party. The Brooks Bunch and Beyond scholarship program provides semester stipends for students who meet academic criteria.

Brooks DeBartolo Collegiate High — A Hillsborough County public charter high school co-founded by Brooks in 2007. "A" rated the past four years, the school has an

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What's This?

Soon there was the Brooks Bunch, which took children on educational trips, including two tours of Africa. There is Derrick Brooks Charities, a nonprofit that mentors children and helps provide college scholarships and stipends.

Spencer was a charter member of the Brooks Bunch and received financial aid through Derrick Brooks Charities during her undergraduate studies at Florida State. The mountainous costs of medical school were paid through Brooks and his friend Stuart Lasher, a private equity investor and Tampa philanthropist.

enrollment of 430 and a mission statement to “provide a rigorous and relevant academic environment” to prepare students for post secondary education opportunities. The 68 students in the recent BDCHS graduating class have been offered a combined \$1.6 million in scholarships.

And since 2007 there is Brooks DeBartolo Collegiate High, the nonprofit public charter school Brooks founded with Edward DeBartolo and his family under Brooks DeBartolo Charities. The idea came to Brooks from Dr. Phildra Swagger, an educator and the school's first principal.

“I think the idea was always in Derrick's heart,” Swagger said.

“How did I get involved? It was Derrick. Derrick reached out,” said Eddie DeBartolo, the former owner of the San Francisco 49ers who resides in Tampa.

“We talked one night about starting a charter school and getting kids prepared for college. Our (DeBartolo Family) foundation is about education. It took five minutes. I told Derrick that's enough — I'm in. Derrick became obsessed with the idea. No detail was too small. He's a greater person than he was a football player, and that's saying something.”

“He's a gentle soul.” said Brooks DeBartolo principal Kristine Bennett. “He's a role model. The learning that takes place here outside the standard curriculum when the students see someone with the means and opportunity to give back, to invest in them, it's very powerful. His presence, his involvement, his messages, to see what he does in the community, it teaches all of us.”

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BDCHS's most recent graduating class, 68 strong, received scholarships offers totaling \$1.6 million. The school has yet to field a football team.

Brooks' giving has little to do with football, other than the opportunity the game gave him to see his mission through, to “throw the rope back,” as he tells children ... to help people as you were helped.

Brooks recalled those early days at the Boys & Girls Club.

“With these kids, I wanted to have a level of accountability that they could see. So many disappointments in their lives, so many false stories, so many relationships that weren't genuine ... abusive ... relationships that were false. I wasn't going to be that. My yes was going to be yes and my no was going to be no. If I told them I was going to be somewhere, I was there, early, and stayed late.”

He added, “For me, it was a great way to spend my time, to protect me from other influences here in Tampa. So, I tell these kids sometimes, 'You guys probably saved me as much as you say I saved you.'”

Brooks attended Spencer's graduation from medical school.

“He was as emotional as my mom,” Spencer said.

When she completes her residency next year at Sacred Heart Hospital of Pensacola, she wants to return to Tampa.

“My ultimate goal is to go back and do missionary work or work in free clinics or appear at any function where maybe my story can touch someone and provide a role model,” Spencer said. “That's how I want to throw the rope back.”

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