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In these Duval youth, he sees himself. For them, this mentor wants more

After decades in jail, heart change spurs man to lead juveniles away from crime.

- By [Bridget Murphy](#)



JOHN PEMBERTON/The Times-Union

Brian Hughes (left) talks with Sylvester Black. Black was once in trouble with the law and now helps young men avoid the same pitfalls he experienced.

People around here used to know him as "No Mercy Black."

First as the boy, then as the man who kicked in their doors and walked off with their valuables, sometimes while they watched.

Sylvester Black was a hustler who bounced in and out of jail, with Jacksonville police catching drift of his game and booking him into the Duval County jail - 27 times since he turned 18.

"It was like a game of basketball," he says. "Out of bounds, in bounds, out of bounds, in bounds."

But life has tipped in his direction these days. People call him Mr. Black. He totes a briefcase and wears an employee I.D. tag from the Public Defender's Office.

But even when he swaps his shirt and tie for casual wear on weekends, the clock still is running on his second chance and the one he hopes to give the young men in whom he sees flashes of his younger self.

On a recent Saturday morning, Black looked like a coach arriving at the West 25th Street apartment of Brian Hughes' family in a track suit and FUBU jersey. The 52-year-old was ready with a pep talk he prayed would help change the 16-year-old's path.

He knocked at their door as a man cycling out of a revolving door of crime and punishment that sucked him in as a teen in this same neighborhood as his single mother worked late. As a man grasping at legitimacy after spending 27 years, nine months and 8 days of his life behind bars.

"The last time I got out, I asked the people," Black will say. "I asked them to give me an up-to-date printout of my entire life of being incarcerated."

It is this life he wants to spare Brian Hughes and young men like him.

Black is the sole mentor in a pilot program that he is designing himself. It started after Public Defender Matt Shirk heard about Black's story and his desire to help young men facing criminal charges avoid his poor choices.

"I see me in a lot of these kids," Black says. "...The pattern that they're doing, I helped mold that pattern."

'You feel me?'

Hughes is a sophomore at Raines High School, where he hopes to play football. Sports trophies gleam on the living room coffee table as he and Black sit and talk on the couch.

In the kitchen, Maria Hughes Harris explains how her husband went to prison on drug charges about a year ago. How the bank foreclosed on the family home. How she had to move Brian and his younger brother three times before they found this place.

More misery came in November when police busted Brian on cocaine charges. A judge put him on home detention as the case worked its way through the justice system. And his 41-year-old mother tried to understand why a son would mimic a father's mistakes.

"I guess because it wasn't like we had what we used to have. I guess he saw the struggles of his mother," she says.

Weekend visits are part of Black's part-time job - with full-time hours - that also includes standing up for teen clients in court and fielding their phone calls at any hour of the day or night.

This Saturday morning, the smell of bacon and eggs and the sound of Hughes Harris' gospel singing seasons the air as Black asks Brian about his report card. He admires the teen's budding biceps from weight training, and jaws about pro athletes and other public figures who came from this Northwest side of town.

"What it is, we're all going to make mistakes in life," Black tells Brian. "... But we stand up and knock that dust off. ... It's not about this neighborhood. It's about the individuals in this neighborhood."

Black tells him about his days as a bag boy at what was the nearby Daylights grocery store, including how he made more tips than anyone else.

"If we do good, then the good come," Black says. "You feel me?"

Brian smiles, nods.

On another day, Black might reveal how the grocery gig was a guise for an illegal racket that inched him closer to a convict's life. He's planted the seeds of the story of how the street made his heart hard, of how it was too late to fix things with the law when his single mother grew wise to his ways.

But Black senses the moment isn't right.

The mentor soon leaves the apartment feeling a step closer to a mission he often explains like this:

"I'm gonna save me a kid. I'm gonna save me a kid if not more."

Fast track to a thug's life

If they didn't have everything they wanted growing up on West 22nd Street, Black said his mother made sure he and his two older brothers had everything they needed.

Black said he was 9 when his father, an Air Force veteran, died of a stroke. That left his mother as solo breadwinner and disciplinarian. And Lord, would she dish out whoopings when she caught him out of line.

Black's brothers watched over him when their mama was working. But he stretched what space they gave him. He blended with older, faster fellas until the distance in his head between right and wrong melted to a foggy limbo where what was easy, what got him attention, what put fast money in his pocket, was just fine.

While Black could fix bicycles, he didn't have one like other kids. He had a pair of Union Hardware roller skates, metal slip-ons that fastened to his shoes with leather ankle straps.

By the time Black turned 15, he was on the fast track to a thug's life. He'd been using marijuana and pills for about a year and hiding his skates at his cousin's house. Sometimes Black skated five miles a day, bringing bags from place to place for bookmakers in an underground gambling operation.

"It wasn't no drugs in the bag," he said. "It was book numbers. And they paid me good."

Before his sophomore year, Black dropped out of school for good. Four months later, his mother found out and demanded he find a job.

But being a neighborhood grocery bag boy only made it easier for his customers to pass him bets. Before long, Black also fell in with a female loan shark who lived nearby.

She played rock music, and had free drugs and a pool table for kids at her place. When she told them to go take someone's T.V. or stereo, they believed that person owed her money. But not everyone hailed their collection habits.

It wasn't long before police knew Black's face and name. His moral fog had brewed into a dark cloud, forecasting a future of death or incarceration.

A woman the loan shark sent him to, one he knew only as "Suzy Guzy," plucked bullets from his body after two different shootings. Black said her street medicine involved Valium for pain-killing and use of fatback bacon and a penny in the extraction.

By 21, Black landed his first prison stint on a burglary charge. In the next two decades he'd do multiple stints, usually for the same offense or probation violations. He got out in 2003, but a weapon arrest sent him back to jail in 2007.

After authorities dropped that charge, Black said he returned to West 22nd Street to find the city had knocked down his condemned, fire-scarred childhood home. His mother was in a nursing home. Black didn't want to push his problems onto other relatives he felt he'd failed.

For about a year, he says he slept on a bed of cardboard near City Rescue Mission. One day, he finally went inside.

"It was like the spirit was telling me 'You weren't born to live like you're living. It's your choice.'"

Right thing at the right time

Black was finishing a 16-week janitorial class at Clara White Mission when C.C. Newby asked if any of her students would give testimony at the charity's fundraiser.

By late 2009, the ex-convict had gone through addiction counseling and was in City Rescue's transitional housing on McDuff Avenue.

When Black spoke to the fundraiser's pearls-and-cufflinks crowd, many teared up when he told of his pride about finally finishing something in his life besides a prison sentence.

"He said, 'Even if I could help one person,'" Clara White CEO Ju'Coby Pittman said. "His story, all the things he'd been through. He said the right thing at the right time."

Shirk, the public defender, learned that night that Black wanted to mentor young men. It wasn't long before Black had his own employee I.D.

"I really was moved by his story and what he's done," Shirk said later. "...If you spend any amount of time, you'll see his heart is really where it needs to be for what he's doing."

Kids in a courtroom

Courtroom 2 at the Duval County Courthouse is packed on a Wednesday morning.

Some teens wear shackles and orange detention center jumpsuits. Others droop next to serious-looking adults in the gallery's crowded rows.

Judge James Daniel is on the bench, overseeing arraignments and hearings for juveniles whose desperate circumstances wash into one another like a sea of tears.

Shortly before 10 a.m., a boy in a golf shirt who might be 5 feet tall faces the judge. The gallery learns this 17-year-old is a father himself, and known to police as a tattooed gang member.

"You have to make the decision in your heart and head that you're gonna change," Daniel tells him.

The judge calls Brian Hughes' case next. The teen's mother and mentor approach the bench with him. The lawyers talk before the judge seals a guilty plea deal with a probation sentence.

"Where others don't learn from their mistakes, he has," Brian's mother tells the judge. "... I thank Mr. Black for being a mentor ... It took that help to get him to the point where he is now."

Then there is a warning, with the judge telling Brian he doesn't want to see him again.

Before Brian can leave, a court official takes DNA swabs from his mouth and impressions of his fingerprints.

In case there is a next time. In case the hope floating in his mentor's mind someday sinks. In case Brian shows Black he isn't a kid he could help save.

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Want more info?

To find out more about the Youth at Risk Mentor Program at the Fourth Judicial Circuit Public Defender's Office, call (904) 630-1440. Sylvester Black is looking for donations of sports equipment and clothes for the young men he mentors. He also wants to hear from employers who may have summer job opportunities for them.