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BROOKS AND HIS BOOKS

Derrick Brooks' passion for education and kids led to a new high school in Tampa— thanks in large part to Dr. Phildra Swagger

One of pro football's premier linebackers, Derrick Brooks cuts an imposing figure, as 10 Pro Bowls and a Super Bowl ring with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers will attest. Off the field, he's been just as successful. Through Derrick Brooks Charities, he established the Brooks Bunch in 1995, a foundation that provides area children with educational programs, overseas trips and Bucs tickets. Two years ago, Brooks started thinking even bigger. In his latest and biggest endeavor, he has partnered with the DeBartolo family (who once owned the 49ers) and long-time educator Dr. Phildra Swagger to start Brooks-DeBartolo Collegiate High School, the first school of its kind in Tampa.

Brooks: "When we started (the Brooks Bunch), my dreams were very simple—I wanted to give kids tickets to games. But the Lord's vision was bigger than mine. I started by giving two kids tickets to a game, to then blessing 20 kids each week, to twice leading a trip of 35 kids to South Africa and to now starting our own high school."

Brooks met Swagger in 2005, when they traveled together on one of the trips. Swagger, then an administrator for the Hillsborough County Public Schools, was amazed by the individual attention Brooks paid to each child. So she advised him to think bigger.

Swagger: "I could tell how much Derrick loved kids on that trip, and after working with his charity I thought there had to be a way to bring all his efforts under one roof so his resources would go further."

Brooks: "Even though 35 kids went

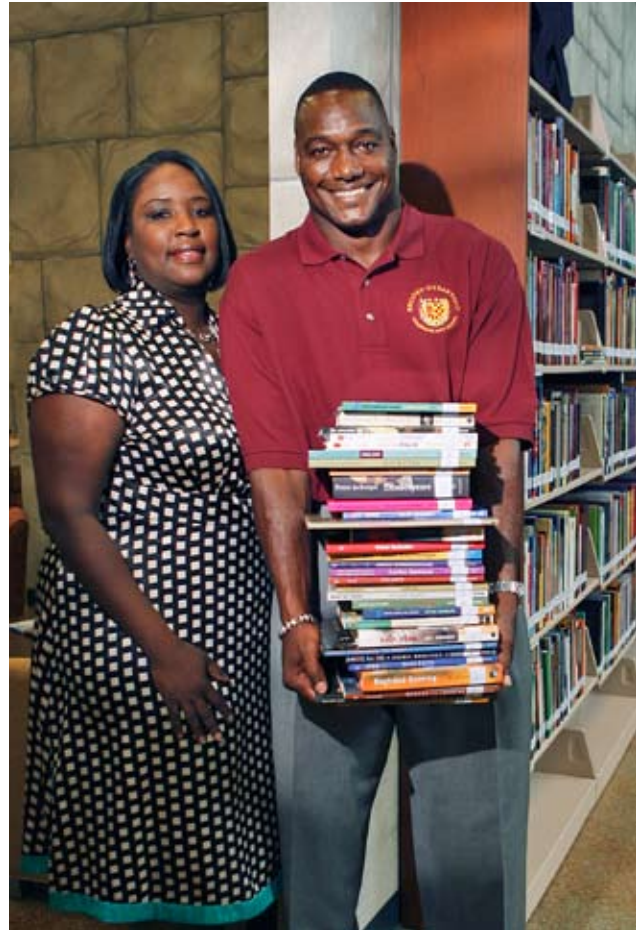
on that trip, there were 20 that didn't go. Personally, I was more concerned about how I could reach those kids and still have them be a part of what we were doing."

Swagger: "I told Derrick we should start a charter school, taking all of his programs and impacting so many more kids. He prayed on it, and the next thing I knew we were off and rolling with that vision."

Swagger and Brooks wrote a tight business proposal and selected a board of directors for the school. But they ran into obstacles trying to secure a physical location. Swagger encouraged Brooks to remain focused on the larger goal of making the school a reality.

Swagger: "I never once thought that we couldn't make it. I told Derrick that if we started this school, we would serve the purpose that we intended, and the students and community would be pleased."

Brooks: "We had our doubts at times. We went to one building, it would fall through, so we'd move to another and that would fall



Derrick Brooks (right) and Dr. Phildra Swagger started a charter school to expand on their vision for helping kids.

through too. But every time one door shut, another opened. And that's what kept us going."

Brooks and Swagger shared the belief that, given the necessary resources, every child could realize his or her potential. The school prepares students for post-secondary education by providing smaller class sizes and modern facilities. Brooks wanted to focus on dual-enrollment and advanced placement courses, so Swagger developed an innovative curriculum meeting those needs. In addition, BDCHS doesn't offer athletics.

Brooks: "We had to make our school different. Our kids are getting a private school environment in a public school setting. And it's free to attend. With athletics, we had to ensure that people understood

our focus was on education and not in building a sports academy."

The school opened with 183 students (grades 9–11) last fall and will likely double in size next year, Swagger says. So far, student and parent feedback has been positive.

Swagger: "Down the road, if people look at us as a community school that turns out scholars who attend Florida universities and come back to communities to help contribute, we've done our jobs as educators."

Brooks: "I've learned over the last 13 years that we can start out with the message of education, but we're taking it beyond the traditional institution. The unique thing about our high school is that we're preparing our kids for life, because education goes a lot further than just the classroom."

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