



Note: the attached photo is of Reggie Ford by Don Yates.

Don Yates

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Nine-year-old Reggie Ford looked out his bedroom window and watched as a one man ran after another, firing shots with a pistol at the fleeing man. Violence, poverty and crime were a common occurrence in this downtrodden section of East Nashville.

The odds weren't good for Reggie but thanks to Reggie's own personal drive to make something of himself combined with a few helping hands along the way, there is hope for his future.

Ford, now a defensive back for the Vanderbilt Commodores, talked about his long road from that section 8 duplex to Vanderbilt.



"My mom had me when she was a child, she was 14," said Ford, now a redshirt freshman for the Commodores. Because of that Ford's family didn't even own a car until he was 10. Food stamps, WIC and other aid kept the family going.

Ford didn't see much of his father either. "My dad was selling drugs and stuff," said Ford. It was common for Ford's dad to go to jail a few months and then return. However, one time, when Reggie was eight, his dad didn't come home for seven years. "I thought he was going to be back out like every other time but he was there for a long time," said Ford.

Ford's way out of the ghetto came from a place he calls, "the center."

Ford had already shot hoops and hung out with friends at the center before but one day a friend told him about an organized football league at the facility. Ford was curious and one day stopped by to watch a practice.

The coach of that team noticed the 10-year-old Ford watching and invited him to join the team. That coach was Johnny Metoyer, a former Vanderbilt player who was volunteering his time for a Nashville non-profit organization called Backfield in Motion.

The Backfield in Motion's goal is to help give poor inner city boys a chance to succeed through sports and academic development. Ford not only played football but he was active in the Backfield in Motion tutoring program. "I went to every tutoring session," said Ford.

It was at those tutoring sessions that another volunteer, high school student Justin Elliot, noticed that Ford seemed very bright and academically gifted.

Elliot got in touch with the Backfield in Motion founder, Joe C. Davis, who made contact with the admissions office at one of the elite private schools in Nashville, Montgomery Bell Academy (MBA). The admissions office at MBA agreed to admit Ford, by then 13, and provide a full scholarship to cover the tuition.

On the first day of school Ford was shocked to find that he was the only black student in the entire eighth grade class. At his previous middle school there were only six or seven white students in the entire school. Ford felt out of place that first day.

While all the other students wore khaki shorts and collared shirts, Ford wore his usual big, baggy clothes. Language was also an issue. "I didn't seem to speak the same language, because they couldn't understand me for a while," explained Ford. To make matters even worse on that first day Ford got an unpleasant surprise at football practice.

As the MBA coach was introducing new members of the team, the player standing beside him threw up on him. "It was very gross and I thought to myself, 'why me?'" said Ford.

Despite the difficulties of that first day the students at MBA welcomed Ford and did everything they could to help him. "Everybody tried to reach out to me and make sure that I knew them and that they were there to help me," said Ford.

Ford not only adjusted to MBA's prestigious academic environment, he excelled in it. His list of academic honors grew to a record that other students at MBA could only envy. Ford earned such awards as the National Latin Exam Gold Medal, Cum Laude Society, College Algebra Award, and the P. M. Estes Award, the list goes on and on.

He also developed strong leadership skills, eventually being elected

by the MBA students as class president and captain of both the football and track teams.

Vanderbilt freshman tight end Fitz Lassing knows Ford well. The two attended MBA together and shared the same locker row. Lassing spoke fondly of his former MBA and current Vanderbilt teammate.

“He was a great teammate; I loved him,” remarked Lassing. Lassing went on to describe Ford getting in player’s faces at halftime and motivating them to give 100 percent. Lassing said Ford would do this regardless of whether it had been a good or bad first half.

Ford was a good football player too. During his junior year he came up with a key blocked field goal that enabled his team to eventually win the state championship. During his senior year, as a captain, Ford intercepted four passes, blocked two kicks and had 21 tackles; however, MBA fell badly, 35-7, in the state semifinals and was unable to repeat as state champions.

After the disappointing loss, although Ford had gotten football scholarship offers from Air Force and Ivy League schools, he almost gave up football, “At the time I wasn’t really sure if I wanted to continue playing football; I felt like it wasn’t there anymore,” said Ford.

Ford, whose father was now working several jobs and avoiding bad influences, spoke with his college counselor at MBA and let her know that he wanted to stay in Nashville so he could be close to his family. She helped him make the best decision.

“The best decision for me...was Vanderbilt,” said Ford. Ford was quickly accepted at Vandy and used scholarships and grants to pay his tuition. He also decided continue his football career and walked onto the Vanderbilt football team. Vanderbilt head coach Robbie Caldwell is glad to have Ford on the squad. “I’ll tell you this-- if he keeps doing what he’s doing, he’s going to find his way on the field.”

Ford, now an honor student at Vanderbilt, is majoring in Economics and minoring in Managerial Studies. He has returned to the Backfield in Motion program as a volunteer and is considering some day starting his own athletic league for young children. He enjoys cooking too and might also eventually go to culinary school and open his own restaurant.

Although Ford has a bright future ahead of him, he will always wonder what might have happened if he hadn’t gone to the center and caught the attention of Justin Elliot. Fortunately he did, and thankfully the Backfield in Motion program was there for him.