

Michael Sheppard

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Michael Sheppard remembers “the feeling.” As a Brown Deer High School student, he was low, his life filled with tragedy and pain. But one man gave him a life-preserving message: correct your attitude, change your ways, work hard.

That inspirational message made Michael realize that he could accomplish everything he wanted to. So he set out to do just that and never looked back. Captain of every football team he joined. President of the North Dakota State University Student Athletic Activities Council. Earned an electrical engineering degree and became a certified financial planner, certified plan fiduciary advisor, certified exit planning advisor. He pays it forward as a volunteer for Junior Achievement, Employ Milwaukee, Milwaukee Chamber Theater and The Nature Conservancy. Father, coach and self-proclaimed golf addict. And as a Rotary member, he places special value on connections.



Despite all that, Michael was feeling unsettled last year and knew there was something more he needed to do: replicate the feeling that changed his life when he was a teen. Using sports as a hook, he set out to inspire young people to prepare for the world of work. With a goal of reaching out to 1,000 high school students this year, he posted the offer through IronwoodDrive Financial Group on LinkedIn and received an enthusiastic response from schools and organizations.

“I was never the most talented athlete,” he said. “But I was the most disciplined. We need people in the grind talking about the grind. I can do that because at 40, I am young enough to relate and old enough to be respected.”



It is a chilly March morning and 20 students from the Milwaukee Academy of Science file through the revolving doors of IronwoodDrive Financial Group on Kilbourn Ave., some fingering cell phones, all not knowing what’s ahead. Michael is juiced. “Let’s inspire some people. Let’s make a difference,” he tells a colleague.

The doors open on the 17th floor. Students see a dramatic view of Fiserv Forum. They walk past the “Dream Big” room where a financial planner works. A student slips into an office chair and says with a grin, “Are they calling in with the money?” This is exactly what Michael wants.

“Your mind is a muscle just like the rest of your body. It needs to exercise. With exercise you can have an office bigger than mine. I want someone like you to sit in my office.”

The students listen to someone who has walked in their shoes. He's heard the deafening roar of fans in the famous Fargodome at North Dakota State University. He's learned many lessons from sports including financial ones. "I never made a dime in the NFL," said the former Tampa Bay Buccaneer, adding that hard lessons matter as much as success stories.



But this day was more than stories.

"Drop!" It's the call for pushups and Michael shines. If the students are surprised at his fitness, they hide it well. Two hours pass quickly with lessons, food, indoor golf and clowning for photos. The kids leave with wrist bands that say: "Believe you can. Dream big."

Although Michael's initiative is in its early stages, he imagines it growing and touching teen's lives through other companies, especially those involved with programs like Junior Achievement.

"Imagine a young person walking into a bank vault and holding a stack of money," he said. "Wouldn't you call that a memorable moment?"

Michael believes there are hundreds of memorable moments that employers like him can give Milwaukee youths—moments that produce "the feeling" a youth needs at a particular time just like he did. As a military kid, he lived in 10 states throughout his childhood. When his second mother died, his sister stepped in to raise him. During this painful time, he lived on Ironwood Drive, so he honored his mother and his sister through his firm's name.

"As a person of color, I have a different level of responsibility," Michael said. "Someone came into my school and changed my life for the better by giving me that special feeling. I want to do the same but on a larger scale. It's a valuable investment in the next generation of leaders in Milwaukee."



Editor's Note: *Rotary People of Action* is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Jeff Smoller.