



Monday, December 13, 2010 Updated: December 14, 1:20 PM ET

Brooklyn school receives assist

By Matt Ehalt Special to ESPNNewYork.com

Curiosity drew Sam Jones to the Trey Whitfield School. The Hall of Famer and former Boston Celtic great had heard wondrous tales about what goes on inside the walls of the Brooklyn school that was co-founded by his friend A.B. Whitfield and had constantly received invitations to pay a visit. For years, he could never find the time. When Jones finally visited the school a few years back to attend a dinner, he was quite glad he did.

"Once I got there, I was so impressed with these young people. The manners, how they dressed, how the teachers taught them, how they studied. The hallways were empty during class period. They had their own library. I was so impressed," said Jones, now 77. "Once I saw the school, how could I not be involved?"



NFL Hall of Famer Lenny Moore (second from left), former Knicks forward Mel Davis and exforward Rick Mahorn join students and staff from the Trey Whitfield School.

He's not the only famous athlete who has felt the urge to help the students at the Trey Whitfield School.

More than 40 athletes, both retired and active, assist the Trey Whitfield School through financial contributions and time spent with students or at fundraiser events. Their contributions and aid in getting others to support the school help cover the cost of educating the school's more than 400 students, as it does not receive subsidies.

Athletes who have helped the school include NFL stars such as Jim Brown, Dick Lynch and Rosie Brown, and NBA greats such as Earl Monroe, Rick Mahorn, Shaquille O'Neal, Ray Allen and Rasheed Wallace.

"I donate because I didn't have those opportunities and here are some young people that got the greatest opportunities in the world," Jones said. "I felt we should start giving something to this foundation to keep the school giving a lot of people in need. It's not money being thrown away; it's money to get the right thing, and that's a proper education."

The Trey Whitfield School was originally named Bethlehem Baptist Academy when it was founded in 1983 by Whitfield and Janie Whitney to give a better form of education to young students. It was renamed after Whitfield's son Trey died in a boating accident at the age of 18 in 1989. It currently houses students from nursery school to the eighth grade, with its enrollment at 430 students, Whitney said. Whitney also said the school is near the 90th percentile in test scores. The school is 98 percent African-American, according to its website.

The school used to be housed in the annex of Thomas Jefferson High School in Brooklyn but moved to its current five-story location on Hinsdale Street in 2004 with the help of a bank loan. The school first reached out to athletes for help in 2002 as it prepared to move and braced for higher mortgage costs and other expenses.

Since the school does not receive any subsidies, it has to rely on outside help to keep it running. The school charges only \$4,000 per student so it can appeal to middle- to low-income families, and it costs almost \$16,000 to teach each child, Whitfield said. That's how the athletes enter the equation.

Whitfield played in the NFL with the Denver Broncos and the Dallas Cowboys in the 1960s, along with some time in the Canadian Football League. Through his NFL playing days and his time as a college athlete at Division II Elizabeth City State University in the Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association, Whitfield had a long list of friends in the athletic world whom he could lean on, and he called out for their help.

The school started with career days, and its first fundraiser was in 2002. Whitfield credits Lynch, Rosie Brown and Jim Brown as being the catalysts for a fundraiser that earned \$300,000 for the school.



Janie Whitney, founder and CEO of the Trey Whitfield School, poses with students and a \$35,000 check from The David Lerner Family Foundation.

On Monday night, the school hosted its 2010 Athletes for Education Dinner, with Monroe, Mahorn and others present, raising more than \$300,000 for the school. That money will help the school get a new ventilating and air conditioning system.

The athletes also help raise money for the Trey Whitfield Foundation, which provides scholarship money for students through a banquet and golf tournaments. Some athletes also make monetary donations.

"These guys really are for the children," Whitfield said. "You got so many guys under the radar who really, sincerely care about the advancement of children. And I think it's a story that ought to be told."

The athletes don't think of their helping hands as being anything out of the ordinary. They are enamored with the school, and believe strongly in helping out children and lending a hand to a friend.

Monroe, the Knicks legend, has donated money and time to the school since the first fundraiser. Monroe first met Whitfield when he would go back to attend some of the CIAA's tournaments. The two would talk, and a bond developed. He was at Monday's event, even though he had to check into the hospital the next day because he was having back problems that affected his walking.

He complimented the school in educating young children and helping to create better students. Monroe said the real kudos go to the teachers and the faculty at the school who mold the children.

"Once you see what they are doing in the school, it really justifies what you are doing," Monroe said. "They do a wonderful job, and anything that anyone can do can only enhance what they're doing. That's about it. Once you see the kids and the job that they are doing, you're almost sucked into the whole system."

Jones, who could not attend Monday's event, is so impressed with the school that he said he does not go into New York without stopping in Brooklyn to visit the children. He said it makes him happy to see kids using correct English, dressing in the proper manner and simply carrying themselves properly. He added that while he initially supported the school to help a friend, he also believes he is helping give back to the black community with his contributions.

Jones is at the school once or twice a week as part of The Amer-I-Can Program, and praised the school and the level of discipline it instills in its students, which leads to students taking responsibility for their actions.

Walter Beach, a former Cleveland Brown and Boston Patriot in the 1960s, also is a friend of Whitfield, dating back to their playing days. He said his son will be attending the school next year. He also donates his time to fundraising events and money.

"If I'm not going to extend myself to help my community, I don't know anything more worthy than that," Beach said. "Nothing is more important to me than family and community. I don't speak for other people, but I would make the assumption that's the way Jim [Brown] feels, the way A.B. feels; we don't put anything in front of that."

Not all of the stories of athletes helping the Trey Whitfield School deal with monetary donations. Whitfield fondly remembers how two weeks before Lynch died at the age of 72 in 2008, he couldn't stop thinking about wanting to spend time with the students.

"He's lying in bed, and his words to me were, 'I gotta get out there to see those kids,'" Whitfield said. "I said, 'You stay here with your lovely wife and you rest.' He said, 'I gotta get out; I feel so bad I can't get out there to those kids.' This is while a guy is lying down with cancer and I'm with tears in his house."

While the athletes deflect praise toward the children, the founders of the school are more than thankful for the help they receive from the athletes. Even when they're not contributing or raising money, the founders appreciate the moments when the athletes take the time to meet with the children and talk about life lessons, like Mahorn did Monday afternoon before the dinner, when he discussed with the students how their goals are reachable.

It's the sports world combining with education. It's a winning equation for everyone involved.

"The fact that I'm there is all well and good. People would like to see me and so forth, but once people see what's going on with the school and what it's giving them, it's the impetus to donate," Monroe said. "Being an athlete is OK, but we're not the teachers and we're not at the school. It's basically what they do at the school. It's like the Christmas tree; we're just the ornaments."

Matt Ehalt is a regular contributor to ESPNNewYork.com.