

United Way kicks off campaign

21-year-old speaker shares his testimony

By **LINDSEY ADKISON**

The Brunswick News

Standing behind the podium, clad in a crisp shirt and tie, Quamii Haywood looked every bit the young professional.

But the 21-year-old had a long road to walk to get to where he is today. He grew up in desperate circumstances – his mother was addicted to drugs and, as a child growing up in Miami, he resorted to whatever he could to get by.

“I robbed, I stole, I sold drugs. My mom was strung out on cocaine and we lived in a hotel,” he said. “My brothers and I would go sell CDs and DVDs on the street. I’d take that money and go buy ham, bread and cheese. That would be our dinner and sometimes we didn’t have dinner. We’d just have a cup of water and would go to sleep.”

Haywood was the surprise speaker at the United Way of Coastal Georgia’s official kick off, held at the Golden Isles Career Academy Monday. As he shared his trying times with those in attendance, he had to

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Lindsey Adkison/The Brunswick News

Quamii Haywood, from left, Dr. Jeff Capes, United Way campaign chair, and Rick Townsend, CEO of Golden Isles Career Academy, pose Monday at United Way of Coastal Georgia’s kick-off event.

United Way: Has \$1.2M goal

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stop to fight back tears, not because he was sad about his experiences but because he was happy with how far he has come from those grim days.

"Life is about changes and choices. I've been through some obstacles, and it's changed me. I don't know how I got through elementary school, but I did, and we moved here when I was in middle school. I went to Glynn Middle, and I wanted to play football, so I knew that I had to start getting good grades," he said.

That's when the transformation began. And he wasn't alone. His mother got clean and Haywood started to focus on his future. He started attending classes at Golden Isles Career Academy, eventually focusing on welding, one of the programs offered at the charter school.

"We took a field trip to PAR Marine and I thought, 'This is where I want to be,'" he said.

And that's exactly where he is today. Haywood was accepted into the apprenticeship program with PAR Systems in Brunswick and will complete three years of work there.

He continues his apprenticeship with the company today and will likely become a full-time employee soon.

It's something that brings a huge smile to his face.

"God never puts any obstacles in your way that you can't handle

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didn't change, I would be dead or in jail now."

Haywood received a standing ovation from those in attendance after providing a shining and inspirational example of how the United Way can make a difference in a life and in a community. The nonprofit offers grants for educational institutions like the Golden Isles Career Academy – among its many other programs – which made it possible for Haywood to take part in competitions. It was the school and program that helped put him on the path of a now promising future.

Rick Townsend, chief executive officer of the school, says the grants, made possible because of the contributions by individuals and businesses, have made a difference in the lives of students.

"Students come here to find their passion. The career academy is all about the students, and it's important for them to be engaged," he said.

Even with Haywood's serious story, the event was an upbeat occasion with a superhero theme.

United Way campaign chair Dr. Jeff Capes charged the audience

with finding their own superpowers and using them to promote good in the community.

"A lot of people think that if you're going to change the world, you have to be a superhero or have superpowers," he said. "A superhero is defined as a fictional character who has amazing powers. But I've found my own superheroes in Glynn and McIntosh counties. There are amazing things being done here by amazing people. And they are my superheroes."

This year United Way hopes to raise \$1.2 million to help support the 22 agencies and 30 programs under the umbrella of the nonprofit organization.

Capes encouraged those in attendance to share whatever they can.

"The biggest misconception is that 'someone else is going to do it.' But that's not true and the United Way needs your superpowers," he said.

Dana Haza, United Way's chief executive officer and president, agrees.

"I'm very excited that the community has come together to make this a strong kick-off," she said. "It's really not even about the (monetary) goal. It's about changing lives. That's what the United Way does. It truly changes lives."

• Reporter Lindsey Adkison writes about business and other local topics. Contact her at ladkison@thebrunswicknews.com, on Facebook or at 265-8320, ext. 346.