

Sports World Is Rocking the World, One High School at a Time

NFL's Lee Rouson and Dave Szott Speak to Area High Schools

By Jo Schloeder

Fourteen-year-old Hannah thought nobody cared. Pregnant and hopeless, she drank, took drugs, cut herself, and tried to find love and acceptance by having sex with different boys. Then, a Sports World pro came to her school and rocked her world with a message of hope, and Hannah realized there was a different way.

“We challenge students with the message that we are not born winners, we are not born losers... we are born CHOOSERS,” said Lee Rouson, two-time Super Bowl champion New York Giant. “We share our own life experiences, helping them recognize the consequences of their choices while challenging them with a message of hope.”

Rouson, along with NY Jets assistant coach Dave Szott, who played for the Jets, Kansas City Chiefs and Washington Redskins, head up the New York/New Jersey division of Sports World, a national organization founded in 1978. The organization's

mission is to bring pro athletes into school assembly programs where players capture the attention and hearts of students, and use their celebrity to hammer home messages about the consequences of trying to use drugs, alcohol and violence to cure today's problems.

According to Rouson, a father of four and New Jersey resident, the need for prevention and motivation programs like Sports World is overwhelming.

“Everyday in America, over 4,000 children are arrested and almost ten percent of those are for drug abuse charges,” he said. “When children hear from a sports celebrity that there are alternatives to their abusive and destructive behavior, they respond.”

He said that the suicide statistic among children is the most devastating, making his involvement in the organization vitally important.

“Five young people under the age of

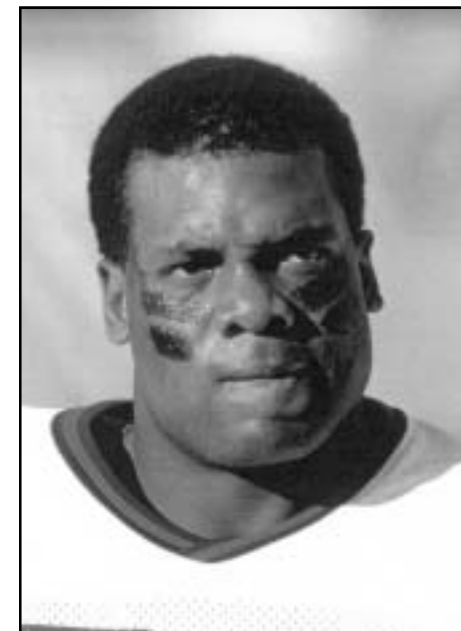
20 will commit suicide in America tomorrow. At Sports World, we help prevent that,” Rouson said.

Make no mistake about it – this isn't the sugarcoated assembly program of days gone by. Sports World assemblies tackles the toughest issues head on. At a typical assembly program, students will hear and talk about everything from drug and alcohol abuse, to sex, smoking, and suicide... and they hear pros share personal experiences on each topic, helping the kids to recognize the potential cost of their choices. After the assembly, they fill out comment cards to give their reactions to the program and its impact on their lives.

And the comments are simply astounding... or should I say, devastating?

Chelsee, an eleventh grader, said, “I agree with (your speech) completely. I've been drunk a lot.”

And Andrea, grade 12, said, “You



Former NY Giant Lee Rouson

made some very good points... I am a recovering drug addict and now a soon-to-be-mother.”

Her classmate Lauren, added, “The message got through to me ... drugs, alcohol, and sex are bad.”

“I felt you showed me that even when

everything is bad, suicide isn't an option, as well as drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. I felt it was powerful. I could relate to the feeling of being left in the dark and feeling very hopeless," said Thomas, a sophomore.

And Thomas isn't the only one feeling hopeless.

Hanna, also a sophomore, said, "I agree with your thoughts... I can relate to your message because I've had sex before and many of my friends are on drugs. I have cut myself before but no one knows."

And, out of the mouths of babes, young Mason, an eighth grader, put it this way, "I thought you were the most honest person I have ever heard from. You made me quit smoking."

It's hard to imagine... A 17-year-old who is a recovering drug addict and soon-to-be mother, a 16-year-old who drinks a lot, a 15-year-old who feels hopeless, a 13-year-old who smokes, and a 15-year-old who has had sex and cuts herself for attention... all in just one school assembly program. Yet, each reacted positively to the powerful message presented to the students in a non-judgmental, non-preaching manner.

The end result? When the world revolves around sports, pro athletes can make an impact that scores big in the lives of kids. After a Sports World program, students make changes that will forever affect their lives. Drug and alcohol abusers find freedom from chemical control; kids who were dropping out are propelled to academic

leadership; and kids who were previously aimlessness and suicide find that someone really does care about them, and their hopelessness transforms into meaningful, purposeful living.

But there are so many more kids to reach.

Despite the fact that each year, Sports World pros reach out to an average of 750,000 students, teachers, and administrators nationwide, here in New Jersey there is insufficient funding to bring this dynamic and motivational program to all of the schools that need their services. Though the group has recently attracted the attention of some big name sponsors like Trinity Financial Sports & Entertainment Management Co., Millstone, they look for clubs and service organizations to "sponsor" their

local visits and cover the costs of bringing pros to multiple school assemblies in one town.

"They don't just swoop in on a school and leave town," said Peter Grandich, whose company Trinity Financial has just signed on to help Sports World increase its visibility here in New Jersey. "They stay in one school district for several days, holding multiple assemblies so each and every student can experience their message."

Why so important to reach out to every kid? Grandich explained with passion:

"Because the one student you miss could be one of the five who plan to take their lives tomorrow. It's THAT important."

Who can argue with that logic?