



PHOTOGRAPH BY RALPH ABBERTON

Much more than **Hoop Dreams**

One of Nashville's favorite sons, Charles Davis fulfills a vow to help inner-city children from his old neighborhood.

Lift me up to the sky," singsongs the tiny child in ragtag clothes and braids, her words as sweet and plaintive as the old hymn "Love Lifted Me." Towering over the birdlike child at 6'7" and 248 pounds, Charles Davis reaches down with his ham-size hands and draws the grinning girl up, up, up until she floats like a feather above him.

Below, a flock of children peck,

paw, and pummel the giant man, sidling close for their own scattering of affection. "CharlesDavis, Charles-Davis"—the chant rises forth from dozens of kids spilling out of the mean government housing surrounding the Nashville playground. They are eager to see the man who is called by both his first and last name like some continuous cheer.

Just a street over, yellow tape cordons off a crime scene, police interview witnesses, and an ambulance wails off into the dying light. People here live—or die—among poverty, violence, and addiction.

As a child, Charles Davis could easily have become yet another statistic in the Tony Sudekum public housing development. Before he turned pro-basketball player, before he coached for Vanderbilt, before he earned admiration as one of the city's favorite sons, he was just another anonymous kid, trying to get by in these South Nashville projects.

Like a compass seeking direction, the young boy swung from hoodlum-bad to choirboy-good. "We stole hubcaps off cars and made Frisbees," he recalls. "We'd throw eggs." At other times, he'd study and throw himself into sports. Good or bad, he always heard his grandmother's voice urging him to get right with God.

One night, an older boy asked Charles, then 13, to break into a warehouse. Charles refused. Afterwards, he wandered back to this very court, looking through the chain-link fence with awakened eyes. "Older guys were over there, shooting craps. People were playing basketball. I just knew in my heart I wanted something better. I can remember saying, 'God, if you give me an opportunity to successfully change my life, I promise I will always come back.'

"I got a shoebox, and I made a model of these projects," he continues. "I looked in that box and said, 'This is my life. This is where I am. I've got to get out of this box.'"

Like thousands of desperate kids before him, Charles banked on basketball to help him escape. He

created a photo collage of National Basketball Association players, then centered it with a mirror from his mother's compact. He literally visualized himself among them.

Next, the skinny kid ran, bicycled, lifted weights, and practiced basketball every day. When people dismissed his dream of playing ball for Vanderbilt, then the NBA, he fueled his hunger with their words. "If you tell me I can't do something, it drives me more," he says.

He made McGavock High School basketball history and won a scholarship to Vanderbilt, where he earned kudos as one of the university's all-time top scorers and rebounders. He majored and graduated in special education, but his past resurfaced in a prison rights class. While visiting a jail, he spotted the running mate who had urged him to break into the warehouse. The man had been imprisoned since the night Charles made his decision.

At Vanderbilt, the basketball star met philosophy major Toni Francis, a Dayton, Ohio, native. Although Toni's upbringing was upper middle class, she gained her love for helping all people from her family, which was actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

Toni and Charles married in 1981, a year earlier than planned. "It was important to me to get married before he made the pros," Toni says. "I wanted him to know, come thick or come thin, we are a team." Together, they fulfilled Charles's long-ago vow, establishing the Charles Davis Foundation (CDF) in 1982, around the same time he began playing for the Washington Bullets.

In the 12 years of his pro-ball career, he also played for the Milwaukee Bucks, the San Antonio Spurs, and the Chicago Bulls, as well as teams in Italy and Japan.

The Nashville native returned



"I try to hug them all at once when I can," Charles Davis says.

"A lot of these kids are not touched in a loving way." Asked if their constant tugging drains him, he replies, "Oh, no. It's all love."

each summer to conduct basketball camps, which he underwrote personally. Today, 18 years later, the CDF includes year-round activities involving sports camps and leagues, mentoring, job placement and training, tutoring, computer training, drug prevention, character development, HIV/AIDS awareness, survival skills, scholarship awards, and financial and economic development.

Toni joins Charles in fund-raising efforts and contributes most of the written words outlining the CDF philosophy. "We believe that if you can

empower people from the inside out to become self-sufficient and personally responsible, then they're always going to be okay," she explains.

The program's motto, "Giving Back To Our Future," ties in with the mission statement: "To empower inner-city youth to reach their full potential through P.E.A.C.E.: Positive Educational, Athletic, Cultural and Economic development."

The majority of the CDF's approximate \$500,000 annual budget comes from local private donations. The Foundation has two learning centers housed in donated facilities: the basement of the Metropolitan Development Housing Authority in the projects where Charles grew up and Metro Parks' old Ted Rhodes Golf Clubhouse in Metro Center. The Tennessee State Park System also partners with the Foundation.

Ora Kay Thedford, a Napier Elementary physical education teacher, is the CDF's executive assistant. Norman Carter became learning



center director in 1998. Other part-time staff members have included area coaches and sports stars. Camp kids who have a good attitude and work hard often win paid positions as camp counselors.

"I've been going to Charles's camps since I was 9," says one such counselor, 18-year-old Larmonz "Monzie" McDaniel. Monzie lost his sight in a New Year's Eve gun accident a few years ago.

After the accident, Monzie explains, he wanted to continue his studies at McGavock High School. The Foundation bought him a talking computer. Now on the honor roll and the debate team, the McGavock student plans to attend law school.

Across town, about 200 inner-city Camp P.E.A.C.E. children arrive at



"I wanted someone like myself to come around here, someone I could reach up to, someone who could show me opportunities," says Charles, when asked why he helps children from his old neighborhood.

the old Ted Rhodes Golf Clubhouse learning center in CDF vans. Here, they enjoy computers, tennis, basketball, and a driving range.

"If it were not for Charles, some of them might not be here," says counselor Ty Reed. Drugs, violence, broken homes, whatever, the P.E.A.C.E. program can help, Ty believes.

I've been
all over the
world and
to a lot of
different
cities. This
is home.

Charles Davis

"The whole thing is to empower these kids to show potential," Charles says. "They still have to go back to their real world and their life situation. I try to help them stay focused, no matter what their surroundings."

Sometimes, that means giving them a respite from their relentless neighbor-

hoods. Through the Tennessee State Park partnership, the kids learn about nature as they raft, canoe, rappel, swim, and camp out.

"One kid last year said the thing he liked about being around Radnor Lake was there isn't any violence," explains Mike Carlton, park manager of the lake.

"Kids are going to be involved in something, whether it's right or wrong," says Mike. "So you give them something positive to be involved with."

On this day, that translates into rappelling at Henry Horton State Park. Eleven-year-old Derrick Ferguson, who rappelled at last year's camp, advises the novices about to enter the unknown abyss.

"All you've got to do is walk down the cliff," he says. "If you can't stop, they'll stop you. Never look down."

The words echo what Charles Davis asks of them as they tread through craggy childhood terrain. All they've got to do is walk the straight and narrow. And he's there, reminding them to never look down.

No, never down. Always look up—up to the sky.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

GIVE P.E.A.C.E. A CHANCE

If you'd like to help provide opportunities for the children, write the Charles Davis Foundation, P.O. Box 60464, 615 Main Street, Nashville, TN 37206; or call (615) 254-0396.