

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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# Education of Dasmine Cathey

*Brad Wolverton*

*Photos by Lance Murphey*

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e hid them in a shoebox under his bed. "My own little secret," he said.

Inside the box, he kept 10 thin paperbacks he was given as a child. For years he didn't touch them. But as he reached 19, they became a lifeline.

Each night after dinner, he closed his dorm-room door, reached under his bed, and opened the box. Resting his head against the blanket his grandmother had made him, he pulled out the books: "First Grade, Level 1, Ages 6-7."

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he words are tattooed on his arms: "Family First." But 23-year-old Dasmine Cathey looks after far more people than that. A buddy who just spent four years in jail. A local gang leader looking to join a church. A friend of a friend who had lost a brother. They all remind him a little bit of himself: abandoned at some point by family or friends, too weak to stand up for themselves.



ine Cathey's tattoos are two prominent words:  
" It's a reflection of his many commitments  
ge.

Most mornings the University of Memphis football player rises just after 5 to drive one of those friends to work. He pushes his 6-foot-4 frame up from the recliner he sleeps in, steps quietly past his brother resting on the couch beside him, and readies himself for the day ahead.

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...not enough gas to make it through the morning, by early afternoon, when his first class of the day meets, the fifth-year senior will have logged more than 50 miles shuttling family members and friends to where they need to be.

Unfortunately for Mr. Cathey, all of that motion has not helped him get where he needs to be. With less than three months until graduation, he hasn't shown up for classes in weeks. Last semester, during his final season of football, he failed three courses. That dropped his GPA below the 2.0 required to complete a degree, putting extra pressure on this semester's grades.

On paper, three classes are all he has left. But for a guy who could barely read three years ago, every class is a mountain.

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rowing up, Dasmine Cathey hated everything about school—reading, writing, even the smell of books. To him, school was nothing but a needless burden. Once you learned about your ancestors and your heritage, he figured, what else did you need to know?

He still remembers the day a middle-school teacher asked him to read aloud in class. As he mumbled through, clearing his throat on words he didn't understand, he heard snickers around him. "How can you be so good at sports but so dumb in school?" a classmate asked.

His sixth-grade teacher suggested he enroll in a tutoring program to overcome his reading problems. Mr. Cathey's parents didn't have enough money, so an aunt helped cover the cost. He took classes for two or three

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By high school he still hadn't read a single book. It took him hours to wade through a handful of pages, and by then he'd forgotten most of what he'd read. But outside of class, things were looking up. He was a finalist for Tennessee Lineman of the Year in football and played on a state-champion basketball team at Ridgeway High, in suburban Memphis. And so he got a pass. Few people seemed to care if he was learning.

If not for football, and his hope of one day playing professionally, he never would have set foot in a college classroom. He had offers from other colleges, but he stayed close to home so his mom could watch him play. His first year, there wasn't much to see. His poor high-school grades and test scores forced him to sit out the whole season. Without his sport, he felt lost.

It was the job of Joseph P. Luckey, and the university's eight-person team of academic advisers, to get him eligible to play.



ckey, the U. of Memphis's director of athletic  
rvices, was surprised by the results of a reading



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Mr. Luckey, who is president of the National Association of Academic Advisors for Athletics, says players like Mr. Cathey are the biggest challenge in college sports. While the NCAA says the academic profile of many athletes is improving, big-time programs are identifying an increasing number of players who come to college severely ill-prepared. That puts an extra burden on staffs like his to help athletes whose academic backgrounds look less and less like the rest of the student body.

Until two years ago, when Memphis's athletic department ramped up its screening for learning disabilities and started requiring incoming athletes to take a reading test, Mr. Luckey didn't realize how bad his university's situation was.

"I was like, 'Holy crud, I can't believe how many kids are reading below a seventh-grade level,'" he says. For Mr. Luckey, the question is how many of those students to let in. "What we've all got to decide," he says, "is what's our breaking point?"

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Y

ou can't hide for long in college when you're semiliterate. But somehow Mr. Cathey slipped through his freshman year with just under a C average, taking classes like elementary algebra and music appreciation. Then he saw the syllabus for HIST 2010: U.S. to 1877, his sophomore history class. How would he ever finish five books in four months?

He knew there was only one way: He had to go back to the beginning.

Mr. Cathey talks about his

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After practice every night, he would close the door to his room in the Carpenter Complex, reach under his bed, and pull out his 10 learn-to-read books. *Twenty minutes*, he thought, looking down at his watch. *I've got to beat 20.*

Over the sound of his roommates goofing around, he practiced the basic skills he had skipped over all those years. His first few sessions, it took him three or four minutes to make it through each book. But week by week he improved, shaving seconds and finally minutes off his times. He was a long way from finishing college-level texts, but it was a start.

Who knows what gives a 19-year-old man the courage to start over? Fear, perhaps? Shame? In Mr. Cathey's case, a sense of urgency seemed to drive him as much as anything. If he didn't do it now, he knew he never would.

As he read the books, he kept his voice low so his roommates—three other football players—wouldn't hear. It was his first season suiting up for the Tigers, and his reading practice was the last thing he wanted spread around the locker room.

Now that he was finally eligible to play, he put his full attention into the sport—or as much as his home life allowed. In his first game, the season opener against Ole Miss, he had three tackles against a team that would finish the year ranked 15th in the country. "You don't see many guys his height who can run a 4.6 forty," says Shannon Morrison, a former Memphis coach, referring to Mr. Cathey's time in the 40-yard dash. "He had all the tools you could ask for."

But off the field that year, his life was starting to unravel. Within weeks, he found out he was going to be a father—not once, but twice, with two different women. His own parents were not around to help. His father

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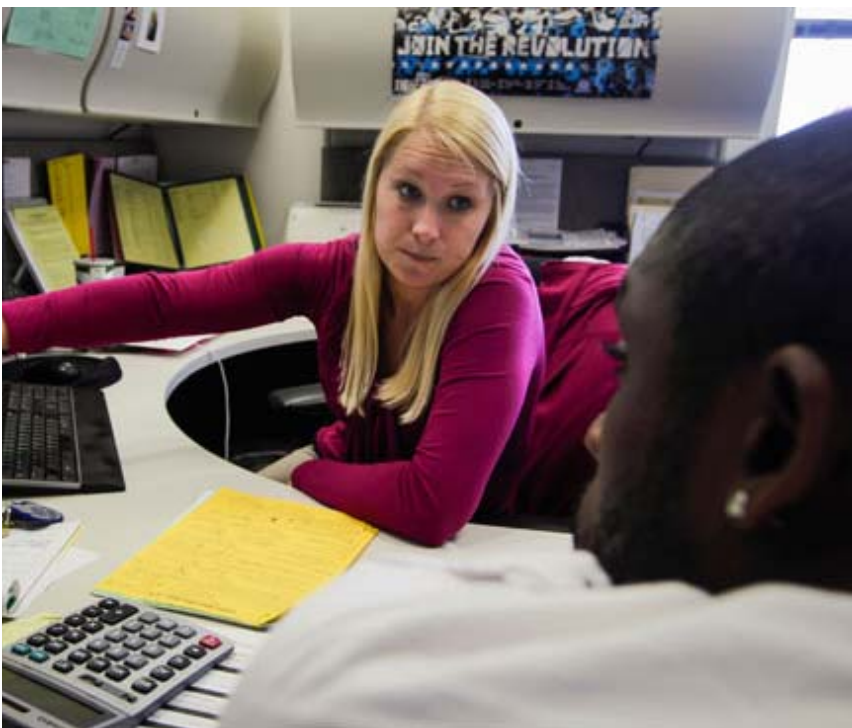
...from campus, and he started chipping in on bills and driving them to school and practice.

With a 40-hour-a-week commitment to football, and all those kids and friends to look after, there was little time left for studies.

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"W

here r u?" pings the text on Mr. Cathey's phone. He is halfway through his senior year, but he hasn't made it to campus in two weeks. Sharyne Connell, the university's head football counselor, knows that if Mr. Cathey is going to get his degree, she still has a lot of work to do.



nell, the university's head academic counselor  
just wish Dasmine cared more. You can't make  
e."



"Coming trying to get a good car to drive sorry."

Mr. Cathey and Ms. Connell are a study in contrasts. She played soccer at Eastern Illinois University, finishing her degree in three and a half years. She arrives at work by 6:30 most mornings, an hour before the first study hall of the day for athletes, and rarely leaves before 7 at night. In three years at Florida International University, where she worked before, she took off one day—to interview at Memphis.

Mr. Cathey's academic path has been every bit of up and down, and the semester-by-semester grade-point averages on his transcript, which he shared with *The Chronicle*, show it: 2.0, 1.5, 2.3, 2.8, 1.5, 2.1, 1.4, 2.5, 2.8, 1.3, 2.0, 2.9, 0.5, 0.8. "He's like Houdini—he's here, and then he's not," Ms. Connell says. "I just wish Dasmine cared more. You can't make someone care."

He cares a lot about football. But once that ended, Ms. Connell lost her stick. Before, if he skipped class or study hall, his coaches could hold him out of games or put him through extra conditioning. Now, if he doesn't show up, his grades are all that suffers.

A few minutes before 1, Ms. Connell texts one last time: "Mr. Cathey, where r u?"

"Trying to get my ride or some gas \$," he writes. "How about you come get me?"

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He can pocket the room and board money he receives from the university for his family. He's lived in some of the city's most-distressed areas, including South Memphis.



He walks with his girlfriend on the way to a study hall.

Memphis has one of the country's highest violent-crime rates, and the south side of town is among its bleakest spots. The place where Mr. Cathey used to stay sits on a street filled with vacant homes. A neighbor's house is surrounded by yellow tape, and a sign on the boarded-up front door says, "Property of Memphis Police Department, Organized Crime Unit."

He was evicted from that home after his roommate—a cousin who is his best friend—was arrested for armed robbery. Although Mr. Cathey himself has largely stayed out of trouble—he's been in some bar fights, and has a pile of unpaid parking tickets—he hangs out with a dangerous crowd. Several of his closest friends are in gangs, and almost all have spent time behind bars.

His friend Domaniko (Niko) McCrary, who's 20, just got out of jail for the

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The two met through a mutual acquaintance, and bonded after learning they had both lost close friends to gang violence. Mr. Cathey's best friend in high school was killed in a drive-by shooting. Mr. McCrary's older brother was gunned down, too. One took his emotions to the football field; the other to the streets. If Mr. Cathey hadn't been there to help, driving him to work and offering him a spot on his intramural basketball team, Mr. McCrary says, "I probably wouldn't be here today."

Mr. Cathey's tutors and coaches know bits and pieces about his home life, and even that is enough to worry them. One of his coaches was so concerned for his safety that he started sleeping with his cellphone. "I was always nervous my phone would ring at 3 or 4 in the morning and someone would say, 'Daz got shot,'" Mr. Morrison says. "I never got that phone call, but he was the guy I was worried about."

Mr. Morrison and others have urged Mr. Cathey to cut himself off from those friends, but he always resists. In fact, the worse the situation, the more he seems to get involved.

"I hate to see people feel like they're on their own because I always felt like I was on my own," Mr. Cathey says. "I ain't never give up on a friend."

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"I

'm a little scared," Ms. Connell says, knocking on the front door of a weathered ranch house in East Memphis. A few steps away, one of Mr. Cathey's pit bulls sits barking in a parked van, and a Mercedes with tinted windows creeps by.

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ected in a mirror at home, has avoided living  
s, moving six times in his senior year alone so  
is room-and-board money for his family.

In her six years working with athletes, she has never visited a player's house before, but Mr. Cathey is a special case. Memphis's academic-counseling staff, which includes some 20 graduate assistants, interns, and tutors in addition to its full-time counselors, has spent hundreds of hours guiding him through college. All for a guy who wasn't even a regular starter on a team that won just three of 24 games in the past two seasons, one of the worst records in Division I.

The NCAA requires colleges to provide academic support to athletes, and programs can lose scholarships and postseason opportunities if too many of their players fail to graduate. But that's hardly what motivates Ms. Connell.

"I'm here," she says, waiting by the front door, "because I won't give up on him no matter how many times he falls."

Finally, Houdini appears from the side of the house. Wearing flip-flops and black sweats that accentuate his long frame, he moves with a sense of

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Mr. Cathey takes a seat in the family room, near a table of high-school trophies. The shades are drawn, and a large-screen television flickers from the back of the room, showing images from the NFL Combine.

He and Ms. Connell listen as ESPN's commentators size up Dontari Poe, one of Mr. Cathey's teammates. "Rare size, rare speed. Did a lot of things at Memphis State, fits a lot of defenses. Almost 6-foot-5, runs the 40 in under 5 seconds," says one analyst. "Impressive large athlete."

Mr. Cathey slopes back in his chair. They're not talking about him on the draft show, but he's got his own pro tryout coming up. At best he's a long shot, but he still holds out hope.

He and his counselor sit quietly for a minute, then Ms. Connell looks over at him: "Dasmine, where were you today? I saw like three cars in the driveway."

"Had to pick up my uncle and didn't have no more gas money," he says, staring at the screen. He doesn't mention that his day started before dawn, when he ran a friend to work, then drove his brother to school. Or that it's the end of the month, and his Pell Grant money ran out weeks ago.

"I know you've got to take care of your family," Ms. Connell says. "But if you want to graduate, you need to show up."

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ctually, that's not always the case. Colleges channel players into all sorts

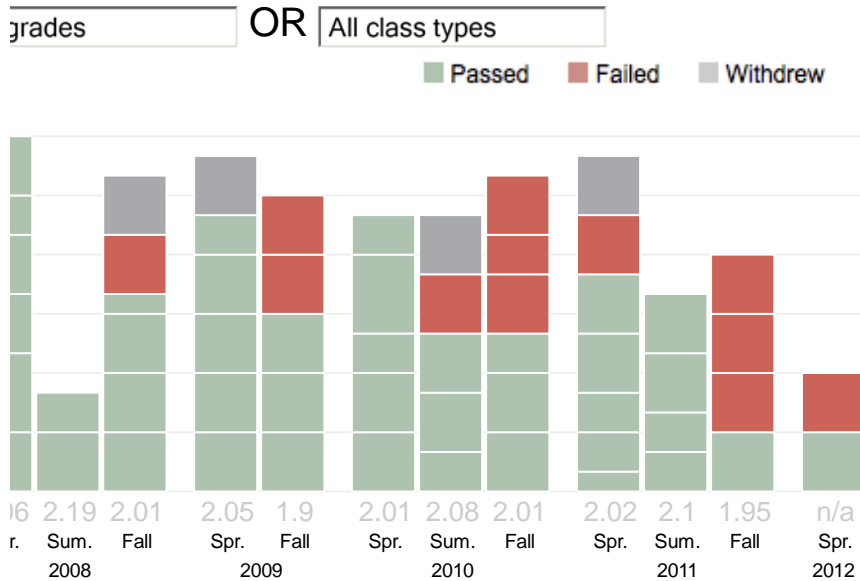
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...and many, a kind of the potpourri of courses, hardly building toward any specialization. This year he is enrolled in "Area/Facility Planning" designed for working adults and students looking to build their own degrees.

ey, Class by Class

Is from a copy of Mr. Cathey's transcript, which  
o *The Chronicle*



PA's are a running tally, showing a computation of cumulative grades. Graphic by Brian O'Leary

Most semesters he takes a potpourri of courses, hardly building toward any specialization. This year he is enrolled in "Area/Facility Planning" through the School of Leisure Studies, and an online family-communication course. He has also taken "Wellness Concepts," "Introduction to Dance," and a class called "The Developing Adult" (which he failed—twice).

Fortunately for Mr. Cathey, D's count toward graduation in almost all of his classes. And one-third of his credits can come from electives. Over his five years at Memphis, he has gotten credit for 10 phys-ed courses, including yoga, kickboxing, free weights, and beginning tennis (which he aced—twice).



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years ago, the athletic department started a summertime "bridge" program for transfer students and first-year athletes with academic deficiencies. Of the 50 players who have come through the program, nearly half tested at or below a seventh-grade reading level.

The university recently hired a part-time learning specialist to help those athletes. She is trained to teach basic reading and writing skills, and works with players who have learning disabilities and other academic problems. Across the country, many athletic departments are facing similar challenges. In the past year, nearly one out of every five major-college athletics programs has created a new learning-specialist position.

Even with the help of his academic advisers, Mr. Cathey has still struggled. The university would not provide the names of his professors, saying it didn't want to expose faculty members to scrutiny. But papers from various courses Mr. Cathey has taken—which he provided to *The Chronicle*, in part to illustrate his improvement during college—show a student who has had trouble completing basic assignments. For a developmental-writing class his first year, he submitted a two-page paper, titled "Some Important Womens," in which he was asked to describe common issues or challenges facing characters in several books.

"Fannie Hou Hammer, Irma Muller and Aurthor Mayo-Raggie are important people with struggles, detonations, and failure that surround their environment," he wrote in his introductory paragraph. "Then I give you my points on, 'what I thinks the point that I thought it was making?"



## Dasmine Cathey: 4 Academic Papers [\(Browse the documents\)](#)

Joseph Jones, an associate professor of English and director of the university's first-year composition program, says many students with little exposure to analytical writing commit even more "surface" spelling and grammatical errors than they might normally as they try to articulate complicated ideas.

Without commenting on Mr. Cathey, he says instructors are encouraged to evaluate students on a variety of factors, including their improvement.

"On an absolute scale, you might think maybe this student doesn't deserve to pass a class," he says. "But over 15 weeks, if you see a certain improvement and can project a trajectory over the next couple of years that she'll be an adequate college student, you might make a different call."

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**A**fter failing an introductory mass-communication course in his sophomore year, Mr. Cathey signed up for it again two summers later. He showed up the first few days, but then missed much of the next two weeks, recalls Candace Justice, the assistant professor who taught the four-week course.

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radles his daughter Kassidy while talking to his  
e.

When she questioned his absences, Mr. Cathey pulled out his phone to show off pictures of his newborn daughter. "He was like, 'I have a daughter. Oh, she's so beautiful,' and his face just lit up," Ms. Justice says. "I thought, Well, we need more fathers to care about their children in this world."

She allowed Mr. Cathey to make up several assignments, and was impressed that he didn't try to use his status as a football player to get special treatment. "I've had some athletes say they're not going to play football if they don't get a better grade in my class. To his credit, he never mentioned eligibility," she says. "He really tackled whatever I gave him with determination."

For one assignment, he had to look at the covers of 10 magazines he had never read and describe their target markets. "Ladies if you looking for a maganize thats is tagering just you and all about you. Then this one is for you," he said about *Woman's World*. "Telling the ladies how to eat. What diet to be no for your body, and more."

In addition to the grammatical problems, he misspelled "magazine" 13



"This is a beginning class where we try to get students to discover the media and start expressing themselves in writing," Ms. Justice says. "If this had been a writing class, I'm sure he wouldn't have passed because spelling and words are so much more important there."

By Mr. Cathey's fifth year, he was still misspelling and misusing words but starting to write complete sentences and tying points together more coherently. Some of his tutors and professors had taught him to write about subjects that he is familiar with, a change that helped him put more voice into his writing.

Lorraine Meiners-Lovel, who teaches his senior-project class, for which he must write a 15-page paper, encouraged him to explore a topic with which he had a personal connection. Initially, he said he wanted to look into communication problems between parents and their children. But after a consultation with his instructor, she figured out what he really meant: parental abandonment.



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A social worker by training, Ms. Meiners-Lovel was excited to help him understand the subject. He had told her how upset it made him when his parents moved away—his mother attended only one game out of nearly 50 his team played over four seasons—and how he had to shoulder responsibility for his siblings.

Mr. Cathey and his instructor met several times to discuss the paper, and a librarian helped him locate journal articles for it. But with less than two months left in the semester, he switched topics. His new subject—should college athletes be paid?—is closer to his field of study, his academic advisers say, and will be easier for him to complete.

Mr. Cathey himself gave another reason: His parents have stepped up lately, reducing the burden on him. His father recently bought a restaurant a few miles from where he and his siblings live, bringing him to town more often. And his mother has taken the bus up from Florida a couple of times this year to be with her children. Maybe abandonment, he says, was too strong a word.

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"O

k time to go running for a month I need track sprint shoe size 12 or 11.5," Mr. Cathey posted on Facebook in late February. He may cut corners in class, but he never scrimps on football. He needed the shoes to try out for NFL scouts in late March, a last-ditch effort to resurrect a disappointing college career.



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nished his career at Memphis with 67 tackles in

e Murphy Photography)

Mr. Cathey may have had the height and speed to compete at the highest levels, but his outside distractions prevented him from ever fully committing to the sport, his coaches say. He also never bulked up for the positions his coaches played him at, including defensive end and linebacker. At just 210 pounds, he always had more of a slim basketball body, limiting his playing time.

The football staff gave him anything the NCAA allowed, including weight-gaining supplements. "But the boy just didn't eat," says Mr. Morrison, who now coaches at the University of Cincinnati. "I think he trained his body to survive without food."

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Strawberry shortcake awaits the attention of Mr. Cathey, a few feet from the recliner where he sleeps at night.

Plenty of people tried feeding him. One person says Mr. Cathey came to his house once or twice a week for dinner and always left with granola bars and cans of soup from the cupboard. Others say he often stopped by looking for food for his family. Mr. Cathey says his family has never had much food around, and he probably has a smaller appetite as a result.

Had he gained the weight or made the needed commitments, his story might have a different ending, Mr. Morrison says.

"If he ever could've filled out or 100-percent committed," he says, "there's no telling how big he could've gotten or how good he could've been."

So if not a football player, then, what will Dasmine Cathey become?

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...the first common sense, trying to imagine the life after football.

"So what are we doing here?" she asks. "Are you looking for jobs?"

"When I get my car, I'm gonna be looking for jobs," Mr. Cathey says.

But a glance at his résumé makes it clear he hasn't spent much time thinking about what's next.

At the top of the page, his name is centered in small type. A few lines down, in boldface lettering three times larger, he has typed, "University of Memphis."



letes with GPA's under 3.0 must spend about 10  
k in study hall, where academic advisers guide  
n their courses.

"You need to delete this," Ms. Rusboldt says, pointing at the college's name. "Make the focus be you, not the university."

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track and because I miss running and I love to run."

She changes the heading to "Leadership and Activities," and asks about any awards he has won. He lists a few from years ago. "Sorry, you can't use anything from high school," she says. "You'll now have a college degree."

She casts about for leadership roles: "Tiger 3.0? Student Athlete Advisory Committee? Athlete of the Week?"

"Yeah, I've been Athlete of the Week," he says.

She plays down the pizza-delivery job and offers advice on the summer warehouse positions he's held. "What you do in a résumé is talk yourself up. Yeah, you worked at Wal-Mart, but you need to show what you learned. Did you have to work with others? Did you work with any computer programs?" she says. "Actually, what was your title there?"

"Stock," Mr. Cathey says.

"That was your title?"

"Yeah."

Mr. Cathey sings the Memphis football team's pregame song.

Ironically, he hasn't played up his football activities, so Ms. Rusboldt encourages him to. "Show Memphis football as a job," she says. "You can talk about teamwork, you can talk about organizational skills, you can talk about memorization of plays. And if you think about it, it was a job.



Finally, she asks about his degree, which he hasn't listed.

"What's your major?" she asks.

"Sports management."

"Is that a bachelor of science or arts?" she says.

He doesn't know, so he walks a few steps away to ask Ms. Connell.

"Do I have a bachelor of science or arts?" he says.

Ms. Connell comes out of her office and heads toward Ms. Rusboldt. "He has a bachelor of liberal studies in interdisciplinary studies," she says.

Mr. Cathey sits back down, a staff member by each side. He taps out, "Bachelor of Liberal Studies."

"Type 'in Interdisciplinary Studies,'" Ms. Rusboldt says.

"How do you spell that?"

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fter putting himself through a month of twice-a-day workouts, Mr. Cathey decided to ice his NFL dreams. "I'm not gonna go through with it," he said, a few days before scouts were due on the campus. "If I get it, I don't want to be out of the picture with the family."



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repares for a tryout with NFL scouts, in pursuit of turning pro.

He also worried about his friend Niko and the other people who rely on him. "If I'm not there physically," he said, "I know for a fact that ain't enough."

He had always taken better care of people around him than himself, but even this sacrifice seemed extreme. His academic advisers saw it as a sign of maturity. "It sounds like he's actually being more realistic than a lot of guys, and there's a lot of merit to that," said Mr. Luckey, the head of Memphis's academic-services staff. "Daz had a good career here, and physically maybe there's a chance he could go. But maybe he's better off this way."

Then, just two days before tryouts, he changed his mind again, persuaded by his new girlfriend and an old teammate who never took his shot. "Am going in with the east memphis on my back," he wrote on Facebook. "Wish me luck!!!"

He fell short in the tryout, posting slower times and lower marks than he had hoped. But that same week his academic fortunes appeared to be



And then, in a snap, his world came undone. On his way home from a funeral for an uncle, he was pulled over for speeding. What should have been an ordinary traffic violation turned into something far more complicated, as he was cited for driving on a suspended license with \$700 in unpaid parking tickets, and for having failed to show up for a court appearance to defend himself. A police officer handcuffed him and drove him downtown, where he was booked and handed a blue jumpsuit.

Mr. Cathey describes what a college degree would mean to him.

He spent the next 12 hours sitting in a jail cell that reeked of feces, thinking about how fast his life was spinning. He said a prayer, asking God for help in understanding what mattered most as he neared the end of his college days. Football was over months ago, but it still ruled his life. His agent had lined up workouts with Canadian and Arena teams, which would leave little time for anything else.

He knew he was treading water academically, with several big tests ahead. He decided to put football on hold—for real this time—while dedicating himself to his classes.

Soon after he was released from jail, he sent Ms. Connell a text: "Dnt u b gvng up on me. Amma gradate," he wrote. "I need u now mre then eva. We gne do dis."

But it was too late. During his court date the next day, he missed a deadline for his family-communication class, and his professor—who had already offered extensions on previous missed assignments—wouldn't let

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...the common suggestion that Cathey, to devote his full attention to his other two courses. Her advice helped, as he finished with a C-minus in his leisure-studies class. And he got an incomplete on his senior project, giving him an extra 45 days to complete his paper. He plans to return this summer for his final class, with the hope of still completing his degree.

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few miles from the Memphis campus, in a neighborhood called Orange Mound, one of the roughest parts of town, Mr. Cathey walks toward the back door of an elementary school.

He is here to work with a fourth-grade student who reads at a first-grade level, a volunteer assignment he picked up this semester.

Inside, he takes a seat at a long table beside a boy with apprehensive eyes.

"Hey, I'm Dasmine," he says, smiling. "What's your name?"

"Darion."

He sizes up the boy, who looks big for his age. Change a few letters in the name, and this child could have been Mr. Cathey a dozen years ago.

"You like reading?" he asks.

"Yeah?" the boy says, his voice rising.

"What do you like about it?" Mr. Cathey says.

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The boy pauses, looking down at the table.

"Nervous?" the boy says. He looks at Mr. Cathey, who nods his head.

"I know how that feels." He pulls his chair forward, inching closer to the student.



year winds down, Mr. Cathey has many ideas he'd like to do next. Fixing cars or working at a car wash are some of the options, but if he had his choice, it would be to start his own business.

"When I was your age, you couldn't pay me to read," Mr. Cathey says. "I couldn't read a lick, not a single thing. All I wanted was to race around the playground, be the fastest kid in school."

Darion laughs.

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"When you come to a word you don't understand, look at the pictures," he says. "That way, you have a better idea of what you're reading."

After the session ends, Mr. Cathey says he's been thinking more about his career. He's got a lot of ideas. Maybe he'll fix up cars with his uncle, or help out in his dad's soul-food restaurant. But if he had his choice, he'd really love to work with kids.

Then, last month, he took a job delivering beer. Five days a week, he rides around Memphis in a truck, loading and unloading boxes. The hours aren't great, but he says he could see himself staying for a while.

[Reader comments](#)