

## **From the Streets to the Classroom – Making Meaningful Connections with Inner City Males: An Interview with Roynell Young**

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Roynell Young had been on the brink of flunking out of college. Instead, he earned his way onto the dean's list and became a first-round draft pick by the Philadelphia Eagles in 1980. This is his remarkable story.

Roynell Young founded Pro-Vision, a non-profit organization whose mission is to inspire hope and purpose for male youth, their families and communities through moral, cultural and educational opportunities. Pro-Vision achieves its mission through three core programs: the Pro-Vision Manhood Development Academy, the All Male Middle Charter School, and the Pro-Vision Job Enterprise Academy. Pro-Vision is located in Houston, Texas. Mr. Young traces this journey in the following interview.

**Ferrara:** Can you tell me about Pro-Vision? How did it start?

**Young:** First of all, it is not just a school. The foundation of Pro-Vision is a character development program, the Pro-Vision Manhood Development Academy -- and a job training and readiness program, the Pro-Vision Job Enterprise Academy. The Manhood Development Academy was established in 1990 in the community, not affiliated with any school. It began with a walk in the depressed areas of Houston and my hope was to engage young men who were not engaged. At first, I encouraged the boys to meet on the weekend and play basketball. Then one Saturday, three boys from the area walked on to the course and took a bet from me – that they could beat us in basketball. The loser would buy pizza for the winning team. We won but I bought the pizza. Next week, the three brought back 12 others. The numbers grew to 40 and then 50. After six months, I was able to purchase a location - a storefront. Teachers from Welch Middle School, which is across the street from the storefront, provided some homework assistance.

**Ferrara:** So the program became part of the middle school?

**Young:** The program benefitted the middle school but it was not part of the school. The students and teachers who became involved in the program shared their success across the county. They developed an “esprit de corps” – and involved students in bonding together and working on projects that would help others. The program focused on helping students develop their emotional development. And then, Ron Paige stepped into the picture and change took place in a significant way.

**Ferrara:** I am assuming you are talking about Ron Paige before he became Secretary of Education?

**Young:** Yes, Ron Paige was at that time the superintendent of the Houston Independent School District. He asked if we would be willing to come into the district and offer that opportunity to other young people in the district. We did with some reservation, as we wanted to be on our terms. By this time, I believe it was 1995, 60 young men were given an opportunity to be part of a charter school. The purpose of the school was to give our young men a purpose in their life and to close the achievement gap.

**Ferrara:** When Mr. Paige put his support behind your program, what were you able to do?

**Young:** In 1997, we started a residential charter school. It was a residential school in conjunction with the after-school program and was located in Pasadena, TX. Sixty students were selected to live on campus. These were students who were homeless, living in gang homes, abusive homes, or just released from prison environments. Right at the peak of the program, Dr. Paige left and funding soon dried up. In 2000, the residential school was consolidated and then moved to one campus.

**Ferrara:** Why is Pro-Vision so unique as compared to other programs that help boys with their learning and behavior?

**Young:** Pro-Vision was not started as a formal education program. It had heavy emphasis on social learning, and thirdly, it is not based on traditional education. It began from a grassroots, community initiative. In the early days, we made decisions and programs instinctively; then we found that what we were doing had theory and research behind it. What we were doing is verified by the work of Dr. Leonard Sax.

**Ferrara:** What is the present status of ProVision?

**Young:** At this time, there are over 200 male youth in our three core programs. After 20 years of moving from place to place, our board of directors decided that we needed to have a capital campaign and raise money to purchase our own land and build our own facilities. The new facilities include a community garden, a tree farm and other things we are doing – in agribusiness. Next year, we will start the first leg of the high school, 9<sup>th</sup> grade. At this time, the charter school includes grades 5-8.

**Ferrara:** Did you select unique teachers for your program?

**Young:** Yes, our teachers are unique, extraordinary human beings. We have some of the most profound human beings working here. These are teachers who are able to motivate our students, students who are typically two to three grade levels behind. Typically, our students come from young single mother households, and about 80% live in poverty. All our teachers are highly qualified or certified. But our teachers are also unique in that that work beyond their contract time; their hours are long, duties are difficult and multi-purpose. These teachers are competent, caring, and very passionate and result oriented individuals. At every level we have a committed and cohesive group and a family atmosphere. Typically, staff arrives at 7:30 am and students come in at 9:00 am. Staff puts in on the average 10 hours a day. The teachers try to get students ready about what education is supposed to do – not just passing the test but also to teach about thinking in a critical level both inside the school and outside the school.

**Ferrara:** How do you measure success?

**Young:** Success in terms of accountability is measured in ebbs and flows. Overall, I measure a student's improvement based on how well a student has made changes in his achievement over time. I use several achievement measures – the Texas criterion test and the Stanford 10 test. In addition, The University of Houston's Institute of Urban Education will be assisting us this year in establishing a Longitudinal Study to more effectively help track our students' success and needs.

**Ferrara:** Do you also have a uniform for students?

**Young:** We do have uniforms in the sense that we have white tops and dark bottoms. We also have other regulations; we do not allow young men to wear earrings and pants can't fall below the waist – all cell phones are checked in – no iPods allowed – no more than 5 dollars on a person. If you are checked and have more than 5 dollars, the money is taken away, until the end of the day. Hair styles must be very conservative- the reason for that is that it is an academic institution but also a social institute. Kids across the board are falling behind – we set the standards. There are so many variables learned before the young man arrives here – they get them from home and their neighborhoods – we cannot assume that their belts and shoes will be tied at all times.

**Ferrara:** You are heavily invested in this program. What would happen if you decided to drop out of being the director?

**Young:** My freedom is I realize that I am a part of – a steward of it. When I came to realize that emotionally – I started focusing on a transition plan. One of my earliest students, back in 1990, is now director of the Manhood Development Academy and is being prepared to one day take the helm of Pro-Vision. In addition, I have decentralized the operation. It is broken out among six different individuals. I am giving myself ten more years (been doing that for four years) to sustain the vision and pace. That is one of the things that drive me and one that keeps me up a night.

**Ferrara:** How did you get interested in the work of Dr. Sax?

**Young:** I believe that I discovered Leonard Sax at the NASSPE Conference and he is a godsend. I have used his books as part of my staff development. His work gave me insight on organizational design, staff and teachers' instructional development, and ways to transform our students and curriculum.