

07/23/09 - Coach Carter's Sequel: A Marlin boys' school

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By J.B. Smith Tribune-Herald staff writer

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MARLIN ? In this hard-luck town, Coach Ken Carter is about to take his biggest gamble yet.

Carter was the man who turned a San Francisco Bay-area high school basketball team from doormat to powerhouse ? then locked the gym and benched all the players until they brought their grades up. His tough-love approach won him national acclaim and a 2005 Hollywood movie, Coach Carter, in which he was portrayed by Samuel L. Jackson.

But for the real-life Coach Carter, all that past is prologue. Now he's laying his reputation on the line with an unconventional boarding school called the Coach Carter Impact Academy, on a pot-holed back street of Marlin.

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"This is my dream. I've always wanted a school," he said. "I'm scared to death. But in life you have to do things that are uncomfortable. You go to some people's funerals and all their dreams are buried with them. I don't want that to be me."

He has plowed hundreds of thousands of dollars of the money he made off his fame ? movie royalties, speaking tours ? into renovating an abandoned Marlin middle school on Kendrick Street. He plans to open this fall with up to 150 boys in grades eight to 12. Sixty-four will live on campus, which has been furnished with Spartan dorm rooms, a kitchen and laundry machines.

This isn't a reform school. Carter said he'll take troublemakers and underachievers who are ready to make a change. But he also hopes to attract straight-A students who want something they might not find in a conventional school: A demanding academic and athletic atmosphere, with opportunities to study such fields as entrepreneurship, video game design and aviation.

"Kids today need a high challenge," he said. "If you set the bar low, they'll hit it. If

you set the bar high, they'll hit it. Every player I've ever coached has been to college."

For Carter, setting the bar high means a 12-hour day of school, homework and sports, including basketball, football, soccer and baseball. Resident students will wash their own clothes, cook their own meals and operate a store and barber shop. They'll learn etiquette, eat off real plates and learn to show up early to scheduled events, Carter said.

Carter is applying to make the academy a state-funded charter school, and he's hoping to win official accreditation within three months. He is still hiring teachers, all of whom will be certified, and he plans to offer distance learning for specialized courses.

Carter's project is all the more remarkable when you consider that until a few years ago he had never heard of Marlin.

"At the end of shooting the movie, I was doing some traveling, doing some media for the movie," he said. "I was in Dallas and feeling a little tired, so I rented a car and started driving south, just wherever felt good."

He drove south on Interstate 35, headed east on Highway 6 and came upon Marlin, a town of 5,581 that few would mistake for paradise. Once famous for mineral springs, hotels and fine homes, it has sunken into deep decline, with a 31 percent poverty rate, deteriorated roads, struggling schools and almost no remaining industry.

Coach Ken Carter walks through the main lobby of the Coach Carter Impact Academy before the Marlin town hall meeting Thursday. (Rod Aydelotte photo)

Coach Ken Carter sorts papers with his nephew, Eugene Carter, at the new Coach Carter Impact Academy. The famous basketball coach is planning to open the boys boarding school in Marlin this fall. (Rod Aydelotte photo)

But when Carter saw it, he wanted to be part of it.

"I kind of fell in love with this little town," he said. "I enjoyed the people, and I loved how green everything was."

He bought an old mansion and began renovating it for a second home, keeping his other house in Richmond, Calif. His Coach Ken Carter Foundation bought the old middle school around the corner, along with a 10-acre tract for sports fields and a

gym.

Carter, a gregarious firecracker of a man, quickly made friends in Marlin. On Thursday, about 150 people showed up for a "Marlin Town Hall Meeting" at his newly renovated school, featuring Martin Luther King III. Dressed in a white linen suit, Carter rallied the crowd with a pep talk and led them into the cafeteria for fried chicken.

Bishop Williams, the retired former principal of the middle school, was one of the guests.

"Wow," he said, looking around the freshly painted hallways. "I'm very impressed with what he's done, with the renovation and the initiative he's put forward. The kind of discipline you can get here may tend to make for a better situation in Marlin. I think I can see it."

Carter said he hopes the school will be a beacon of self-improvement in Marlin. He's opening the school for evening GED classes, and he's planning to renovate other old homes for his teachers.

"Marlin is no different from any other city," he said. "We want the new generation to start thinking differently. People ask me, 'Why Marlin?' And I say, 'Why not Marlin?' They act as if no great thing can come from Marlin."

Carter himself was born in tiny Fernwood, Miss., but moved to blue-collar Richmond, Calif., when he was 12. As he recalls, he was small for his age but set school records in basketball and kept busy mowing lawns. After attending George Fox University, he returned to Richmond, opened barber and sports supply businesses, then took a position as coach at his high school alma mater in 1997,

He quickly built the team into a basketball machine while demanding that his athletes maintain a 2.3 grade-point average. In 1999, when the team appeared to be headed to state with a 13-0 record, he discovered athletes skipping class and letting their grades slide. Without warning, he padlocked the gym, canceled games indefinitely and ordered all 45 players in the school to the library for study hall. Grades improved, and the team resumed its season, ending with a 19-5 record.

Damien Carter, Coach Carter's son and now the second-in-charge at the Impact Academy, was one of the players affected by the lockout.

"I found out at the same time everybody else did," said Carter, 27. "My friends

weren't mad at me, but I got all the questions. I didn't know any more than they did.

"Dad is a very compassionate person. But he won't take no for an answer. His philosophy is that if you're going to do something, be great at it."

Carter admits he's a bit extreme. A few years ago, he rode a foot-powered scooter 80 miles from Richmond to Sacramento to draw state officials' attention to underfunded schools.

"Everybody who gets things done is a little fanatical," he said.

And, he says, people of Marlin expect no less from him in the newest chapter in the Coach Carter story.

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