

Larry Thomas Youth Development impacting youth

DREW SCHOTT
AFN Staff Writer

On June 22, 2019, people gathered at the Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church in Phoenix to celebrate the life of Larry Thomas.

A dropout prevention specialist and head track and field coach at Mountain Pointe High School, Thomas died at 45 from brain cancer.

During his career at Mountain Pointe – where he was preparing to be the head coach of the freshman football team – as well as at Desert Edge and Copper Canyon high schools, he worked with numerous students and made a profound impact on those who he coached and mentored.

Between 75 and 100 kids showed up at the funeral and spoke about Thomas' influence on them.

"It was just one story after another about how he had touched their lives," said his father, Joseph Taylor. "How he had worked with them and pushed them in the right direction. My wife and I were talking, I said, 'What can we do to help keep that going?'"

"How can we continue to help kids be successful?"

To honor the legacy of their son, Joseph Taylor and his wife Charley Taylor started Larry Thomas Youth Development last year.

Defined as "a transformative organization empowering young people to excel beyond limitation," LTYD is impacting kids across the South Phoenix and Ahwatukee area, most recently with a backpack drive for students at Kyrene de la Colina Elementary School.

Ahead of the 2021 school year, 150 backpacks filled with school supplies such as rulers, glue, pens and pencils and notebooks were donated on behalf of LTYD through fundraising and donations.

According to Charley Taylor, the principal of Kyrene de la Colina said she and teachers sometimes bought supplies for students who needed them in the past, a



From left: Jocelyn Taylor, Charley Taylor and Joe Taylor are all part of the Larry Thomas Youth Development, named in honor of former Mountain Pointe dropout prevention specialist, track and field and freshman football coach, Larry Thomas. (Pablo Robles/AFN Staff Photographer)

role taken up by LTYD in 2021. She added that the organization hopes to do a backpack drive at the school every year.

Students impacted by Thomas contributed to the effort. One who currently runs track for Glendale Community College was "so excited" to offer supplies because Thomas inspired her, according to Charley Taylor.

"(There are) lots of stories like that where he just showed them that it was a better way of life," Charley Taylor said. "They didn't have to settle. They could be successful."

The backpack drive is one of the many initiatives LTYD is embarking on across South Phoenix. It helped start the Mountain Pointe Pride Pantry, which has provided boxes of food to over 200 families with the help of high school students at Mountain Pointe.

The "Leave a Legacy" series brings in professionals across various fields to talk with kids about preserving through challenges and embracing opportunities. Additionally, LTYD gives a Legacy Award

to one or two Mountain Pointe students every month who are working on their goals and potential.

Another way the organization works with kids is through sports. LTYD runs a scholarship program with the Arizona Saints, a youth football program in Laveen that Thomas helped start in 2007. This summer, a wide receiver camp organized by LTYD and run by a former National Football League player will occur for the second straight year after a strong turnout in 2020.

In September, LTYD is hosting a golf tournament at Raven Golf Club in Phoenix. Originally planned for 60 people, there are nearly 150 registered to attend.

"The more we can do, the more we're gonna have individuals coming to us, not only students that he's worked with, but also organizations," Joseph Taylor said. "It's not always about a group of kids. It may just be about one kid that needs our help."

Thomas was known for a saying that has become a guiding mission of LTYD:

"Each One, Teach One." He reassured kids that he was a resource available to them whenever they needed him. Whether once a day or once a week, Thomas would talk with students about obstacles they faced and how he could help with a plan to conquer them.

One of Thomas' students performed on the cheer team at Northern Arizona University at the time of his passing. After her freshman year, she was considering quitting and returning home to the East Valley. Thomas kept encouraging her to go back to NAU each year, and she eventually graduated.

During NAU's virtual commencement, she included a message: "Thank You Coach Thomas."

"He walked them from every aspect of their lives," Charley Taylor said. "He found resources to help. We're kind of that resource, you know we can't actually walk in his shoes because he was the only one who could fill his shoes. But it's been very, very rewarding."

The Taylors hope LTYD becomes the preeminent organization helping South Phoenix youth within the next five to 10 years. Within the next few months, the organization hopes to expand to Tolleson.

One of the key ways it hopes to continue impacting kids is by learning what their needs are. For example, Joseph Taylor said students at Mountain Pointe came up with the idea of the Pride Pantry after sharing that they knew students who were not getting lunch and dinner at home. The pantry's location at Mountain Pointe is just one of the many ways in which Thomas' memory is being honored.

Thomas' drive was to educate and coach kids. He would listen to anybody who needed a mentor and would help them. Through the work of LTYD, his family is looking to continue that mission for years to come.

"Larry's looking down on us smiling," Charley Taylor said. "He's so excited. He's in awe of what we're doing." ■



AHWATUKEE
FOOTHILLS
NEWS

The latest breaking news and top local stories in Ahwatukee!
www.Ahwatukee.com

