

FAMILY

NATIONAL FAMILY MONTH

Learning from life

Former bank robber now a motivational speaker

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On Monday, Hancock County high school students were exposed to a convicted felon — but in a good way.

As part of National Family Month, Troy Evans, a former bank robber and now a professional speaker, told his story to about 800 juniors and seniors from Hancock County schools on Monday morning and to the students at Findlay High School in the afternoon.

Evans' path toward armed robbery began with a teen age experiment in drug use that became a violent and dangerous addiction. After barely graduating from high school, Evans financed his life by dealing drugs.

"I tried every drug out there. There was literally not a moment in the day that I wasn't high," Evans said. "Drugs became the most important thing in my life."

To support his habit, Evans embarked on a six month crime spree across three states. In five different banks, Evans gave his deposit slip to a bank teller with four words scrawled across it: "This is a holdup."

On Nov. 12, 1992 Evans became prisoner 474291-013 and a resident of the Federal Correctional Complex in Florence, Colo.

"But I can say that the worst thing that ever happened to me, going to prison, was the best thing."

Today, Evans is very different from the disheveled and desperate man who shared prison space with the likes of Terry Nichols, Timo-



Provided to The Courier
BEFORE AND AFTER pictures of Troy Evans show the former bank robber as he posed for a mug shot (left) and today as a motivational speaker.

thy McVeigh and John Gotti.

Clean shaven, friendly and dressed in jeans and a plaid button up shirt, the husband, father and professional speaker issued words of warning and inspiration.

"The decisions you make in your teen years are going to affect the rest of your lives," Evans said. "My dad always said that anything worthwhile is never easy. I picked easy things — drugs, lying, stealing, cheating — anyone can do those. But self-respect, dignity, those are difficult, and that is the road to success."

In prison, he witnessed a close friend — just three weeks away from release — beaten to death for allegedly stealing a 69 cent pen. His life almost ended when three gang members brandishing a sharpened toothbrush and other contraband weapons tried to force him to use his family to smuggle drugs into the prison. Evans and other inmates slept in shifts and hid in their cells during three prison race riots.

An awakening finally came from the mouth of his seven year old son. At Evans' first visit with

his son, the child asked if he could spend the night in prison with his father.

"I dropped to my knees and thanked him for loving me. I knew in that moment that I had a responsibility to be a positive influence on my son," Evans said. During the "dead time" of cards, dominos and other time fillers, he turned to education.

However, Congress eliminated funding for college educations in prison.

Not discouraged, Evans filled out dozens of applications, writing essays, begging, pleading and selling to find a way into college. After six months, Evans landed his first scholarship for one class.

When he got his first report card, he sent it to the organization and they sent him a check for two classes. With the next report card, they sent money for three classes.

He continued this pattern and earned his first bachelor's degree.

When Evans walked out the prison door a free man, he carried with him two degrees, both earned with a 4.0 GPA and designation on the dean's and president's lists.

"You can be anybody you want to be," Evans instructed. "It's not important how you came to the events in your life, what's important is how you deal with them."

His transformation did not come without cost. A new warden disliked the extra privileges Evans received — such as viewing videos of classes and computer time — in order to get his education. As a result, the prison official deemed him a security risk and threw him into "the hole," a small, bare cell shared with the worst prison troublemakers.

The warden then transferred him to a prison with yet worse conditions, a place in which Evans believed there was no way

to succeed.

"It was horrible. But I was in the hole for a reason, I was transferred for a reason. The prison I went to is the only institution in the country that automatically reviews sentencing computations," Evans recalled. "I should have only been sentenced to eight years. If I hadn't gone there, I wouldn't have found out. Things happen to you for a reason."

Three weeks later, right before Christmas Evans left the prison a free man and reunited with his parents and son.

"Nothing is more important than your loved ones. Let them know that you love them," Evans advised. He attributed the catalyst of his success to the love of his family, particularly his son. "It's not what you have in life, it's who you have."

When he got out of prison, Evans worked in the office of Dr. Carl Hammerschlag, a national motivational speaker. Hammerschlag began sending him out to local speaking engagements and honing Evans' speaking skills.

Eventually, Evans fine-tuned his presentation skills and struck out on his own.

Since then, he has traveled the country to share his lessons learned with students, social workers, educators, bankers and others.

"I love talking to young people," the former bank robber said. He freely gives out his e-mail address and reports receiving as many as 85 messages after his school speaking engagements. "Some of them, even the ones who sit and yawn through the whole thing, take a lot from this. They hear what I have to say and change their behavior. They can learn from my life."

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