

# Former GPP student encourages AHS group to go after their dreams

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Wille Craddick Jr. delivers one message during his speaking engagements to young people: Overcome obstacles and never give up.

If anyone is qualified to preach that message, it would be Craddick, who overcame a difficult childhood to author two books, go on national signing tours, earn college credit and work two jobs by the time he graduated from high school at 17.

The freshman at Georgia State University spoke to a group of sophomores at Adairsville High School Friday morning about how he didn't let his childhood determine what his adult life would be.

"Growing up was hard for me, dealing with my parents," the 18-year-old said. "My mom, she was an alcoholic, and my dad cheated on her. My dad started cheating on her, and she turned into an alcoholic, and it was just real bad for me growing up."

His mom, he said, wasn't there for him and treated him like outsider.

"I ended up losing my mom," he said. "I just lost the relationship with her. I just stopped talking to her."

In school, Craddick said he "just wanted to fit in with the crowd," and he ended up turning into a bully.

"I had good grades," he said. "I was very smart. I always made honor roll, all A's all through middle school, but I just wanted to fit in, and I wanted to be popular. I just turned into a big ol' bully. I got in fights every day."

After his parents divorced, Craddick said he ended up living with his dad because his mom "got a boyfriend, and she started drinking so much, I just couldn't deal with her anymore."

"It just changed my whole perspective of her," he said. "I couldn't respect her at all."

On his last day of seventh grade, Craddick said he was riding home with his mom, and she "had drunk so much that day."

She started in on him about how she was tired of him acting like he was grown and like he knew what he was doing, "and she hit me three times and told me to get out of her car," he said.

He got out, called his dad and moved in with him. But while that two-year arrangement was great the first year, Craddick said his dad "started focusing on his women," and their relationship "ended up being tarnished because I just felt like he wasn't being there for me."

He said he forgave his mother and thought things had changed so he moved back in with her.

Things were fine for the first month, "but everything changed" after that, he said.

"Things got totally worse," he said, adding he stayed in his room and didn't talk to anyone until he was able to move out.

While dealing with the family drama, Craddick turned to writing as a "way for me to escape from what I was going through with my parents."

He said he was very angry, but he didn't want to end up dead or in jail so he "started asking God to show me a different way, and he showed me the way to write."

The aspiring scribe wrote an autobiographical book titled "The Life of a Boy With Big Dreams" that was published in 2016.

"My first book was about my life when I was growing up with my parents so everybody who did me wrong growing up, I wrote about them in my book," he said, noting it took three months to write it.

His mom learned of the book from a newspaper story and wanted to know why he didn't tell her about it.

"I was like, 'Why would I tell you when we don't have a relationship?'" he said. "There's nothing to talk about. You don't do nothing for me. You don't buy my clothes. You pay the rent and stuff, but you don't fund me. I work hard, and I do everything. I buy all my clothes, shoes, toothpaste, toilet tissue, anything, food in my mouth, I did.' My parents, they didn't really do much."

At his first book signing, Craddick said his dad came and told him he was going to sue him, and the case went to court, but his dad lost because his name didn't appear in the book.

"The judge was like, 'You know, he's 16 years old, and you should be proud of your son for not turning to the streets or for turning his pain into motivation,'" the young author said. "But he really didn't care nothing about that."

During the summer 2017, Craddick financed a 10-city national book tour to promote the book. He also wrote a second book, "They Counted Us Out," and did another tour for it last year.

Knowing he was going to have put himself through college, Craddick decided to participate in the Great Promise Partnership, a three-way partnership between business/industry, education and GPP designed to keep students in school until they graduate, during his last semester.

The program partners students who are from single-parent families, live below poverty level, are on free and reduced lunch or are at-risk in any way with businesses that give them paying jobs and pair them with a mentor who teaches them the life skills they're not being taught at home.

"The program is great," said Craddick, who worked at the Georgia Center for Continuing Education for GPP and also had a second job at Wendy's. "There are so many opportunities in the program. I wish I could've experienced more of it, but I had a short time period, one semester, in it, but the short time period that I got, I learned different opportunities for different jobs and learning from the employers and employees teaching us how to get through life, about finances and stuff."

When the dual-enrolled student graduated from Cedar Shoals High School last spring, none of his family came to the ceremony, and he knew he would have to put himself through college.

"I didn't have no support from my family so I had to use all the money I had," he said.

Craddick enrolled at Georgia State and ended up without a dorm when he moved to Atlanta. He said he had to live in a roach-infested room in a drug dealer's house for a month before he found a better place.

"It was hard to stay there," the business major said. "I just prayed every day."

Now he said he's "doing great" and is working on his third book and hopes to open a store for his clothing line, Bashed, by the end of the year.

"[The name is] basically a motivation for me and for others," he said. "You might really get bashed all through your life, but never stop. You've always got to keep going. No matter what people say, always keep going."

AHS's GPP coordinator, Dr. Alicia Brown, heard Craddick speak at Great Promise Partnership Leadership Day at the State Capitol last month and invited him to speak at Adairsville High.

"I felt like with this age group, a lot of these kids can identify with him and his background, and he's close to their age so it gives them motivation and incentive to improve themselves and be successful in life," she said.

Brown said she thought what the young writer had to say was great.

"That was the quietest I've heard this group," she said. "They were so involved in his speech, and it probably was because they could relate to his story."

Craddick said he enjoyed speaking to the "very well-maintained" group.

"I love inspiring the youth, kids my age, because I know it's hard growing up without parents in your life," he said. "Even if they do have parents, I still inspire them to follow their dreams, no matter what."

Brown called GPP a "wonderful program" that "keeps kids in school."

"We've had several kids in the past that if they didn't have GPP and that support, they would not have graduated high school, I have no doubt," she said. "I even had one that came back to school after he had quit, and I have no doubt GPP helped him."

Janet Queen, northwest regional coordinator for GPP, said 30 Bartow County students from all three high schools are participating in the 6-year-old program.

"We have GPP students in every Shaw plant in Bartow County," she said. "They are such great, great partners for us."