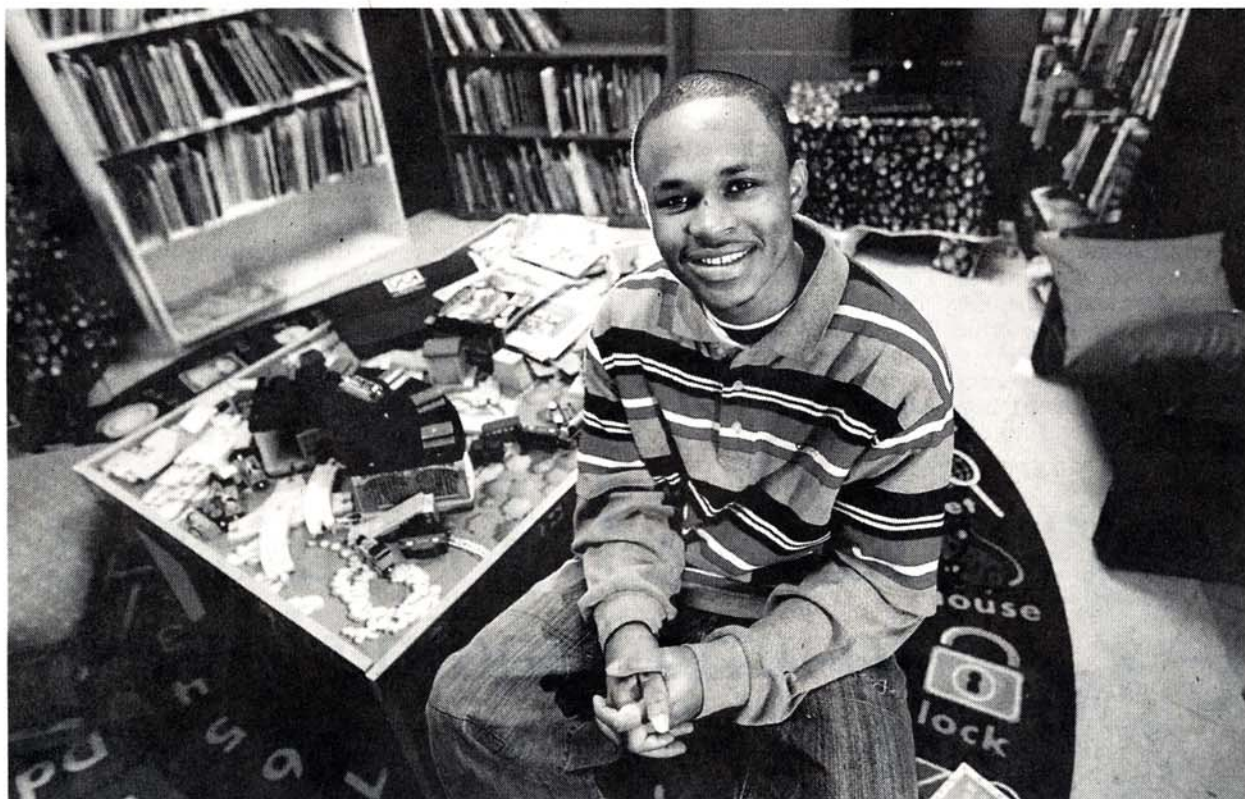


THE TENNESSEAN LOCAL NEWS

December 14, 2008

SEASON TO GIVE PART OF A CONTINUING SERIES



Javerish Williams, 21, works at the Bethlehem Centers. He used to be in a gang, but the center helped him straighten up his life. GEORGE WALKER IV / THE TENNESSEAN

Bethlehem Centers helps break the cycle of poverty

By **Natalia Mielczarek**
THE TENNESSEAN

The nonprofit Bethlehem Centers of Nashville is home away from home to Javerish Williams.

He hangs out there almost every day. That's where he works and mentors teenagers. It's also a place where Williams, 21, talks with a man who he says saved him.

Although still young, Williams has had a turbulent life so far, filled with trauma, danger and wrong choices. By the end of middle school, Williams was in a gang. His high school career ended in 10th grade when he was expelled for fighting. He is a father of two.

But when Williams met

Steve Fleming, the youth programs coordinator, things started to change.

"Nobody has ever expected any good out of me, but he always has," Williams said.

"My dad was more of a punisher than a father. He didn't get me anything for Christmas, but Steve did. He's been a big blessing, my angel. I'd probably be dead or injured if not for this place."

In addition to youth mentoring, Bethlehem Centers of Nashville offers a wide variety of services, including child care, after-school tutoring, alcohol and drug prevention and Meals on Wheels for the elderly. Most of the clients live in poverty.

"We provide lifelong

skills that are going to change lives for generations," said Joyce Searcy, CEO and president of Bethlehem Centers of Nashville.

"We're breaking that cycle of poverty. It starts with education and exposure, teaching people that they can be something. We don't tell them what they have to be; we present choices."

Meanwhile, Williams has enrolled in GED and job-shadowing programs at the center. He has many folks rooting for him.

"I'm glad to be a mentor to him," Fleming said.

"I'm like his father, his brother. He means a lot to me."

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THE SERIES

The Tennessean's Season to Give will run each day through Dec. 25 and features people helped by local charitable groups.

Bethlehem Centers of Nashville is a nonprofit that offers a variety of services, including child care, youth mentoring and Meals on Wheels for the elderly. To learn more or to donate, call 329-3386 or go to www.bethlehemcenters.org.

In need of help?

Dial 211 in the Nashville area from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday-Friday. Referrals are available for about 6,000 agencies and programs.

Missed a story?

Search **CHARITY** at Tennessean.com for previous Season to Give stories.