



Former NFL player urges Hillcrest youth to earn respect through positive actions



Kenny Wheaton, one of the most famous football players in University of Oregon history, recently shared his personal story with Hillcrest youth.

By [Sarah Evans](#), OYA Communications
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Stop. Take a deep breath. Think things through before you react.

These were the main words of advice former Oregon Duck and NFL player Kenny Wheaton offered youth at Hillcrest Youth Correctional Facility during his visit March 24.

They were words he didn't heed one fateful day nearly 20 years ago, and he almost ruined his career and his life as a result.

The key word is "almost." Once he did get the chance to slow down and reflect, he made a much better choice. As a result, the 41-year-old is known today as an Oregon Hall of Famer and one of the most famous football players in University of Oregon history — instead of a murderer in prison.

Wheaton was living his dream at age 22 when his life almost changed course. He'd had a successful football

career at UO. He had made one of the most famous plays in Ducks history — "The Pick" — where he intercepted a pass and ran it back for a touchdown to save the game.

He'd just been drafted by the Dallas Cowboys. It was 1997, and he was going to play alongside some of the team's best-known players, including Emmitt Smith and Deion Sanders.

Then he got some shocking news from his older brother back in their home in south Phoenix, Arizona: Their 19-year-old brother had been gunned down while using a pay phone outside a convenience store. He wasn't a gang member — he'd stopped to get gas and snacks on his way home from a junior college football banquet — yet he became a victim of a group of young men seeking retaliation over an earlier fight.

"In a span of seconds, I went from my highest to my lowest," Wheaton recalled.

He immediately flew home from Dallas, Texas, wondering how to "make things right" — which, in his neighborhood, meant he should seek revenge. Wheaton and his older brother grabbed some guns and prepared to head out to find the men who they heard had committed the crime. Wheaton's mom begged them not to go. "I looked her in the eye and said, 'No way, Mom. We've been disrespected,'" he said.

Wheaton and his brother drove around the area, looking for the guys in question. "Had I found one of them that night, I can promise you I would have killed them," Wheaton said. "I thank God every day that I didn't find them."

Instead, he went back home and thought hard about what he'd just done.

"I thought, 'You can't do this, because who is gonna take care of your mom, your big brother, your dad?' I was the first person in South Phoenix that went pro in

sports. There were a lot of young people in that neighborhood who respected me for that. I realized it was much bigger than me.

“I know that a lot of you, when you’re out on the streets, you probably talk about that word ‘respect.’ I’m telling you that you can get that same respect by doing something positive.”

Today Wheaton is a husband, father of two, and a private coach. Injuries cut his NFL career short, but he went on to play in the Arena Football League and the Canadian Football League before retiring.

None of this would have happened if he hadn’t finally slowed down and considered his actions, he says.

Wheaton shared his story at Hillcrest in hopes of inspiring the youth to make better decisions.

“There’s so much more to life than just hanging out with your homeboys in your neighborhood,” he said. “Anything is possible. If you haven’t seen it done, that doesn’t mean it can’t be done. Why not you?”

“Whether you like roller coasters or not, you’re riding one right now. We all go up and down on the roller coaster of life. The key is to fix your roller coaster so you make decisions where you don’t drop.”

