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PAY IT FORWARD: MEFIYI FOUNDATION

Former New York Jets wide receiver JoJo Townsell and his wife, Suzi, have indeed proven that you can go home again. And the youth in Douglas County, Nevada are better off because of it.

Aug. 14, 2018 **PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES FOUNDATION**

by Jim Gehman

“Our state has always been one of the leading per capita states in regards to high school dropouts, and I knew growing up here that there were peers that had the same opportunities that I did. I did not understand why they did not take advantage of those opportunities, and it just left a bad taste in my mouth,” said Townsell, who went to UCLA and played seven years with the Jets following three seasons with the USFL’s Los Angeles Express.

“When my wife and I moved back in the area, we wanted to do something about that, to make sure that any youth that we were able to become

involved with, that we could help them understand the importance of getting an education and how valuable sports was.”

With the goal to teach the importance of education and career life skills through sports, the Townsells founded the MEFIYI Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, in 1997. Standing for Me-For-Incredible-Youth, Inc., its mission is to promote, encourage and support amateur athletics, recreation programs and physical fitness for students in Nevada.

“As a whole, we normally work with (250 to 300) from our different programs, but our main dynamic is probably around 80 to 90 kids,” Townsell said. “We start on all three phases. Some of our kids are just interested in the sports. There’s some that are interested in the education. Some are interested in their career. Those who are interested in all three, that usually runs around 90 kids a year on average. But our mission is to reach as many Nevada youth as possible, so we do reach out to the Reno/ Sparks area and we’ve reached out to some of the rural communities.”

MEFIYI’s principal program is the Reward Club.

“The Reward Club is a program where we mentor our youth and teens in regards to their sport, their education and their career goals,” Townsell said. “We start at middle school age and get them to understand the importance of planning for their future. We feel that early preparation helps them prioritize their life. It gets them to understand what things that they need to do as they go from the grade level to high school graduation. And then, also, how their career can be established by the time that they do graduate from high school.

“Our motto of the Reward Club is ‘Your Success is Our Reward.’ And that’s why we called it the Reward Club, because it’s a rewarding experience to be able to see the kids that we work with grow, see them achieve their goals, see them even reach for more. We celebrate that and let them know how important their accomplishments mean to the overall scope of our community.”

And when Townsell sees that he’s making a difference in someone’s life...

“It’s a Super Bowl. It’s just a crowning achievement of knowing that we’re putting someone in the right career path, that they’ll make a difference in our community. And usually when they make a difference in our community, that means it’s going to be a positive impact for a lot more people to either follow that lead or at least be able to create something that will be beneficial for all concerned.”

About the same time the foundation created the Reward Club in 2010, was when it began to benefit from PAF's assistance.

"They were at the start in giving us the operational support to be able to have the time, the resources, to reach out to our youth and teens. So, in a sense, they've kind of been a founding sponsor of our Reward Club," Townsell said. "We started this because of the high school dropout issues. And we felt that whether or not we as a state have improved those numbers, our No. 1 goal was anyone that we came in touch with, we're going to assure that they, if nothing else, become high school graduates. "The PAF support was there at the start and we're just very fortunate that they saw what we were trying to achieve. We've been able to report our results and we're still going strong and it seems like we keep on growing. So, we're very thankful."

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