

We've Had Enough! Have You?
lifeskills 411™ Launch Event at Hogan High School
August 16, 2006

Speech: Michael Parker, Chairman and Founder, lifeskills 411™

I am so thankful to all of you who were willing to come out tonight to support such an important event. We sincerely appreciate the fact that so many of you were willing to take the time to come and participate in what I feel is one of the most important events that Vallejo has ever had. We intentionally designed our marketing campaign in a way that would allow us to develop a creative tension in the community regarding an intense issue surrounding the state of our youth. Before going any further I would like to make it clear that we are merely here because we are concerned about our youth. We have no political agenda and I am here to speak with regard to my personal conviction and what I feel must be done to help our youth. We will not be governed by the gallop poll of popular opinion, instead we will be governed by truth and what we feel is necessary to help our youth. Furthermore, despite the blatant challenges and racially desperate conditions that exist in our country, this movement is not for one race of people or ethnicity. Even though I must acknowledge that we need to pay closer attention to the African and Latino American educational experiences, which has grown very bleak around our nation, Lifeskills 411™ is for all people. Lifeskills 411™ believes that whether you are Caucasian American, African American, Latino American, Asian American, Native American, or any other descent; your needs are just as important and must be focused on. Lifeskills 411™ is a movement for humanity and not for one ethnicity.

Now that I have made some critical things clear, before speaking anymore about what we are trying to do, I would like to tell you a little about myself. I was born in Oakland, CA. and raised in Richmond and Vallejo California. At the age of 5 my parents split up and my childhood took a drastic turn for the worst. I found myself in the heart of Richmond trying to survive my mom's exposure to remarriage and drugs, domestic violence, and my own feelings of confusion and withdrawal.

Over the next 6 or 7 years of my life, I was surrounded by the realization that I was a latch key kid in a low-income household faced with the question, "how will I survive?" I sat alone many nights in dangerous neighborhoods and begin to wonder was this all that life had to offer and what did my future hold. Seeing my mom struggle with the use of *drugs and alcohol*, while at the same time dealing with an *extremely abusive relationship* that often left her battered and bruised, I begin to develop an overwhelming sense of anxiety and hopelessness.

I am sure you can understand that it was hard for me to focus on achieving academically or controlling my behavior at school. For it is hard to focus on math, reading and writing when the night before you had to creatively discover that your mom had been abused when during a visit to the movie theatre you noticed she refused to take off her sunglasses despite being indoors in a dark room. As I drove with my mother to a shelter for battered women and was told that I would have to switch elementary schools yet again, I was in grave danger of not receiving an education and more importantly seeing no positive example of how to become a man or just a decent citizen.

For many years I endured this type of life and wondered if I could ever achieve anything. Nevertheless, throughout this experience I was exposed to some positive examples that gave me an opportunity to think different. This was critical because it created a crossroad in my life that I never had. Without a crossroad there is no opportunity for choice, and without choice destiny is predetermined.

I humbly stand before you today thankful that first of all, I had a crossroad. Secondly, that when arriving at a crossroad I chose the right road. My personal life experience was the womb that produced Lifeskills 411™. As I begin to look back over my life I witnessed the cultivation of several skills that without I would not be here today. Lifeskills 411™ is my plea to all the communities in our nation and especially the Vallejo community to assist us in trying to get our youth the information that they need to lead a successful life.

Personally, I can tell you with great certainty that I am not supposed to be standing here today. According to the odds, according to the statistics, according to the obstacles, according to the bleak conditions I found myself in at times and according to myself not seeing a way out, there was no way that I was supposed to achieve any measure of success. With great humbleness I would like to announce to you that I made it through. As a result, I have a strong burning desire to see other youth make it through. I would like youth to see that the main thing that stands between them and success is the wrong frame of mind and being destitute of the appropriate skills necessary to grapple with the curves that life will throw at them. From 1990 to 1993, I walked through hallways and sat in the classrooms of this very facility that we are in today. Not knowing that 13 years after my graduation I would be coming back to this very place to bring back a message of hope an opportunity to youth who are in great need of support.

WHY LIFE SKILLS?

At this time I would like to briefly address the question, why are we focusing on life skills? Before addressing this I would like to define what Life Skills means to us, which is: “the essential characteristics and strategies one must learn and develop to have the best opportunity to experience success in primary, secondary, college, and/or trade schools and the necessary tools that will properly equip and prepare them for life after their education.” To us this is what it is all about. When we say life skills we are not talking about what this has traditionally meant in our society. This is not another “just say no” to drugs campaign, instead this is a movement that will persuade all youth who touch it to “say yes to the skills needed for success.” Most youth already no that drugs, violence, and teen pregnancy are not healthy. However, you could have never done drugs in your life and still lack discipline, or maybe you do find yourself with a child before the time, but what skills will you use to get your life on course and position yourself for success. Our youth are in desperate need of life skills in addition to the survival skills being taught by most programs today. It is important to distinguish that survival skills teaches our youth how to protect their life, but life skills teaches them the skills necessary to do something with their life. This is a big distinction and one of the main reasons that are life skills program is not the same as other programs wearing the life skills title.

Today we find it extremely challenging to create the home atmosphere produced by June and Ward Cleaver, The Brady’s, and even Claire and Cliff Huxtable. With the rising cost

of housing, transportation, and the overwhelming stress of things happening in the world at large, we are in danger of neglecting our youth. Many of our youth are being lost during the time frame of 3p to 7p when choices are being made of what to do with their time and needs are surfacing that are being underserved. Sitting together as a family at the dinner table to discuss the pertinent issues of life has become a thing of the past. Nevertheless, we need not waste time solving blame instead of solving the problem. It would be a great mistake to focus our efforts on blaming administrators, teachers, or parents for any hardships we are facing. Instead, we must all sincerely pitch in and do our part. If we do, we will develop a powerful generation of young men and women that will become great assets within our local communities.

I would like to make it clear that we are well aware that there are numerous positive organizations in are community that are working hard every day to support our youth. We are extremely thankful for the strides being made by organizations like the Continental's of Omega Boys and Girls Club and Vallejo's Fighting Back Partnership organizations. We are also thankful for the five goals set forth by the school district to attempt to assist our youth in getting to higher heights. We would like to also acknowledge and thank all of the other efforts being made similar to these throughout the community to help our youth. We want you to know that we are merely trying to join with you in the fight towards arriving at ultimate success for our youth. We come in peace, and would like you to understand that we are on the same team. The Lifeskills 411™ movement is by no means a vehicle meant to diminish what so many of you are already doing, however it is our earnest conviction that this is the contribution that we must make to do our part. Hence the personal cry you have heard coming from our billboard, "WE'VE had enough":

- We've had enough of standing by and watching some of our youth's needs go unfulfilled.
- We've had enough of seeing our youth caught in the middle of intense political issues while still not receiving the support that they need.
- We've had enough of seeing many of our youth not realize their full potential because of lack of knowledge and exposure to the right information at the right time.
- We've had enough of a school structure throughout our state that has built in "lower standards" for schools located in certain areas and for youth of specific ethnicities. As a result, instead of addressing the real issue, which is how to get our children to the same level, we are segregating our children and sending a message that some are not capable of certain levels of achievement.
- We've had enough of the fact that children are leaving our public school system and going to private schools.
- We've had enough of watching some of our "good hard working teachers" who care about our youth; leave the school system in 5 years because of low pay, long hours, and limited resources to reach our youth.

- We've had enough of the fact that research shows that 1 out of 3 public high school students won't graduate and for Latinos and African Americans, the rate is approaching a staggering 50% who will not graduate.
- We've had enough of the fact that of the youth that are going to college, more than 40 percent are doing remedial work due to receiving an inefficient education.
- We've had enough of the fact that children from the lowest income areas are more than six times as likely to drop out of high school as kids from the highest income areas.
- We've had enough of the fact that half of all dropouts ages 16 to 24 are unemployed.
- We've had enough of our youth dropping out of school because they see no connection between what is happening in the schools today and where their life will be in the future.
- We've had enough of our youth telling us that they plan to dropout by the increased popularity of them skipping classes resulting in heightened truancy and poor attendance.
- We've had enough of the fact that a high school dropout is eight times more likely to end up in jail than a high school graduate.
- We've had enough of the fact that here in California we spend more than \$34,000 per year to keep one prisoner behind bars which is three times more than the state spends on each student enrolled in our public school system.
- We've had enough of the fact that many of our youth are entering society financially illiterate and have become prey to credit card companies who are not focusing on what is happening to our youth's credit scores.
- Finally, we've had enough of the fact that though I stand before you today a 31 year old CEO, I am sure if I came through school under the current conditions and standards we have today, I would have been one of the children society would have given up on and forgotten.

As you can see, we have numerous concerns and if you are an honest, concerned citizen in this community, I am sure you have some of the same concerns. However, we are confident that despite these growing issues, if students learn effective life skills they will have a greater opportunity to enjoy a positive academic experience and a brighter future for themselves and their families. I have been voluntarily working with hundreds of youth throughout the nation for over 16 years now and I know without a doubt that our approach to teaching and executing our life skills program correctly is the answer to ensuring our youth succeed.

LIFESKILLS 411™ VISION

Before I close I would like to give you a glimpse of my vision for Lifeskills 411™. It is my goal to utilize lifeskills 411™ to impact the nation one city at a time. Parent by parent, teacher by teacher, student by student, and supporter by supporter we will ensure that this movement of hope and opportunity touches many lives. It is my vision that we will through the support of the business community, school districts, grants, parental support, and citizen donations we will raise the capital necessary to make this program effective, affordable, and long lasting. Utilizing the Robin Hood effect we would like to petition capital from those who are able to support so that we can ensure that the youth who are in need of these services can receive them without interruption. It is our hope that we will receive overwhelming support from many of our large corporations in this country and from concerned citizens who have an overwhelming care for the community and our youth. Our target is mainly youth in Junior High, High School, and College. This is our target because I remember how critical it was for me between Junior High and College, in terms of defining what type of adult and person I would be.

We will access youth in these categories utilizing two diverse vehicles. One vehicle is when Lifeskills 411™ finds school districts and/or schools that are willing to allow us to partner with them to incorporate our Life Skills curriculum and culture into their school. However, we will not work with schools that are unwilling to meet certain criteria with respect to support of the life skills vision. This is because we would like to control our ability to get the ultimate results for the youth based on proving approaches we have developed through numerous pilot programs we have run over the last several years. Another vehicle utilized to get our information to the youth is through our own off-site academies that we will set up in local cities. These youth will be able to apply for enrollment into these academies and attend classes after school once a week for 12 to 15 weeks at a time.

All students will receive knowledge, a chance to apply that knowledge, and then experience demonstrating the application of this knowledge over time. Youth involved in our program will be measured in a variety of ways to show the results of our program on the whole person and not on one isolated area.

In addition to ensuring that youth get a foundation of life skills knowledge, we will track these students and their achievements to try and assist them in achieving future success. By leveraging our strong business and educational background and contacts in the community, we would like to create a lifeskills 411™ network that will assist youth in finding meaningful employment as well as assisting them in obtaining additional education. We will be working extremely hard to ensure when a business, university, certification program, or trade school observes a potential candidate that has connections to lifeskills 411™ they will hold them in high regard and greatly consider them for selection. Being a CEO who has hired scores of youth and other professionals, I can tell you that having an option to hire youth whom I can be sure have at least been taught fundamental life skills would be extremely promising and highly desired.

In essence, a program that will have the quality that I expect for our youth will cost about \$1000 per class, per student. However, keep in mind I don't want to build anything that could not have helped me when I was a hopeless kid on the streets of Richmond. I am determined to understand the true cost necessary to provide a thorough and effective

program for our youth. While at the same time staying dedicated to gaining support from all those who care to ensure we can make this program affordable and even free to some who can't afford anything. As we evaluate the cost for giving our youth the tools they deserve, we cannot forget that we are all still spending \$34k for one person to live in prison each year. Our cost per student will also consider the income levels of the parents/guardians along with evaluating other vehicles of financial support the young person may qualify for to subsidize this cost. We know there are many companies and concerned citizens out there who need tax write offs and we would like to encourage them to invest in a non-profit with a vision such as ours so that we can effectively reach as many youth as possible.

Now that I have given you a glimpse into the future I would like to thank you for your attention this evening and request that you support the lifeskills 411™ movement. As I turn things over to our Program Director, Mr. Terry Fulton, I would like to leave you with a statement and a question. "We've had enough, have you? Thank you.

CLOSING REMARKS