

Roland Williams' Champion Academy teaches life, not football

By: Kevin Oklobzija July 9, 2018

Through his Champion Academy, Roland Williams is hoping to provide the support, guidance and accountability for Rochester teens in poverty to overcome barriers and achieve their full potential.



Roland Williams greets students as they arrive at East High School for Day 1 of his fourth annual Champion Academy.

Lest any of the kids doubt whether this Super Bowl champion can relate to what they experience in everyday life, they need only look at the mural in the lobby of East High School. His likeness in an East High uniform is prominently featured on the wall.

"I came from poverty, I came from trauma, I experienced the same challenges many of these students are dealing with," Williams said Monday afternoon at the kickoff to the fourth annual Champion Academy at East High. "It's about being authentic and relatable. There can be no question where the message is coming from."

There also can't be a question about the dedication of Williams, a 1993 graduate of East High, a 1998 graduate of Syracuse University and an eight-year veteran at tight

end in the National Football League. He now lives in Los Angeles but returns to his native Rochester for his academy, which provides year-long guidance.

His program is free for students in grades 7-12 who are in critical need of extreme mentorship. Participants are recommended by teachers, administrators, police officers and community stakeholders. There are 340 participants this year.

His staff of 12, plus dozens of volunteers, are on hand for the two-week "incubator" camp for the next two weeks. Williams, who won Super Bowl XXXIV with the St. Louis Rams, said he takes concepts implemented by successful corporate executives and tailors them for Champion Academy.

This isn't a football camp; this is a life camp based on five tenets: ultimate truth, unbreakable belief, conscious courage, intentional teamwork and passionate persuasion.

"The ultimate truth: asking where you are in your life, where you want to go and how you're going to get there," Williams said. "Passionate persuasion: "You don't pack it in when you fail one, two, three, four, five, 22 or 76 times; there will be no surrender."

He's proud of the results through three years:

- 82 percent of active participants saw an increase in grade point average;
- 119 members achieved a 3.0 GPA for the first time;
- 20 members achieved a 4.0 GPA for the first time;
- Members performed 5,713 hours of community service;
- 91 percent improved attitudes toward developing healthy relationships with peers and adults outside of family. The number was 89 percent for developing a healthy relationship with police officers and authority figures;
- 96 percent improved financial literacy skills;
- 91 percent improved social etiquette fundamentals.

"If we change how you think, if we change how you speak, then we will change your actions," Williams said. "The results have been tops in the country when working with this demographic."

As the students arrived on Monday, he asked them all, "Are you ready?"

Ready to change, ready to adapt, ready to conquer life's challenges.

The program received a \$1 million grant from the William and Mildred Levine Foundation last fall and \$400,000 from the Polisseni Foundation. Williams said it costs about \$3,500 to underwrite a student for the year for field trips and extra-curricular activities.

For more information, visit the [Champion Academy website](#).

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