Publication: The Columbian;**Date:**Jun 14, 2009;**Section:**Front Page;**Page Number:**A1

Walter says: STAY FOCUSED. FIND A WAY. TELL YOUR PARENTS YOU LOVE THEM.

Walter Chase's school of hard knocks

Are these kids a lost cause? Life skills teacher Walter Chase doesn't think so

By KATHIE DURBIN Columbian staff writer

It's 8:30 a.m. on a Friday in early May. Rap music thumps inside a gray-painted portable classroom in Evergreen High School's back lot as nine male teenagers, black, Latino and white, in baggy shorts and sagging pants and hoodies, get ready for their 90 minutes a week with Walter.

Up in front, Walter Chase asks each student for a status report. Are they making up their work? Are they on track with their community service? "I went to court over the iPod thing," says Mike Mason, the class clown. "I got eight hours of community service and $150 restitution." Walter: "What did you learn?" Mike: "Think. You got to use your brain." Nehemiah "Nemo" Beavers forgot about his community service. Walter cuts him no slack. "What part of The Poem are you representing now? What line?" he asks. Nemo doesn't know.

The consequences from his classmates are swift: They order him to stand, knees bent, holding his chair in front of him while he recites The Poem.

"This is about showing up," Walter says.

Tory "Malcolm" Blake is struggling with math, but says he isn't getting the help he needs from his teacher.

"What line of The Poem is this?" Walter says. "Find a way. That's what I expect you to do. If you need a tutor, ask for one."

Each student in turn is called to the front to recite The Poem. Most of them rush through it, mumbling the words they've memorized. Mike gets rattled when his classmates shout, trying to distract him. But he makes it to the finish line.

Walter recalls the time during his Army Special Forces training when he had wasps put down his back while he was completing a complex training maneuver.

"Don't give your circumstances that much power," he says. "Stay focused."

Walter gives his students his cell phone number and is available to them around the clock. He does his best to respond to the crises that erupt regularly in their lives. In the last week of April,

one of his students tried to commit suicide; another stole his dad's car.

Some of his kids are involved in street gangs, but Walter doesn't focus on that. "What's important is what they do with their lives," he says. "If someone is getting in trouble, you say, 'See you later.'"

He was a gang member once back on the East Coast, before he joined the Army, before he became a Green Beret and earned a college degree and moved to the Northwest, where he earned a black belt in the martial arts.

Now he's teaching high school kids — mostly boys, but a few girls — who were on the path to dropping out or flunking out, getting suspended or going to jail.

He sees the hand of fate at work.

"I get to see myself in all these students," he says. "I'm 50 years old, they're 14 or 15. We start building relationships right away."

The only text Walter Chase uses in his classes is The Poem.

"See It Through," by Edgar Guest, is about endurance, stoicism, perseverance. Walter memorized the poem as part of his initiation into his college fraternity, Omega Psi Phi. Its message is etched in his mind as surely as those Greek letters are burned into his biceps.

"It's my life, every day," he says.

He requires his students to memorize The Poem so they will always be able to call on it, as he does, when their lives run off the track.

Born in Wilmington, Del., Walter never knew his father. His mother was an alcoholic. At 5, he went to live with his grandparents on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

His grandmother made him go to church and sing in the choir. Once, she took down his pants in full view of his classmates and whipped him with an extension cord for stealing coins from the March of Dimes.

He left home at 14, got involved in gangs, hustled and sold drugs to get food. He managed to graduate from high school and enroll in community college, where a teacher took an interest in him and tutored him in reading.

He won a football scholarship to Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he was named athlete of the year. But a drug bust ended his athletic career. "The judge said, 'I know your record. Here's the deal. Enlist or go to jail.'"

Walter joined the Army. He'd never flown, and he experienced real, gut-wrenching fear for the first time in his life when he had to attend airborne school as part of his Army Special Forces paratrooper training.

"I was always looking for a way to get over," he says. "But you can't fake jumping out of a plane."

After his discharge, he joined the Army Reserve and finished his education, earning a degree in recreation therapy and behavior modification from the University of Maryland.

In 1995, Walter visited the Pacific Northwest for a conference. The following January, restless for a change, he left Baltimore and drove cross-country through Midwest snowstorms and

Columbia Gorge mudslides to Portland, which was immobilized by record ice storms.

He worked his contacts, found clients as a personal defense coach, and developed a speciality in conflict resolution. His work with clients, including administrators, counselors and social workers in the Evergreen school district, won glowing reviews.

In 2008, Walter approached Evergreen Public Schools Superintendent John Deeder. He thought he might have something to offer to kids in trouble.

Deeder saw a way to reach disruptive kids who weren't engaged in school.

"Walter had a tough childhood and young adulthood," Deeder said. "He can talk about these things because he has been there. The fact that he looks you square in the eye and is so upfront and honest, but he will stand beside you and go to war for you if he has to, is pretty incredible. Most of these students haven't had that."

Sitting down one-on-one with Walter and hearing him talk about the kind of commitment he would make to these kids is what sealed the deal, Deeder said.

He's pleased with the changes he's observed already and plans to renew Walter Chase's contract next year. He's also working to get Walter's "See It Through" program accredited by the state.

"We aren't seeing the fighting, the explosions when things go wrong in their lives outside of school," Deeder said.

Walter writes the word " bad" on asks for definitions. He gets back "wrong," "harm," "not good."

"When you start putting attachments to words, you give them power," he says. "All this here is, is a word, BAD. You give it power. In the street it's a good thing, It means power. 'Don't f --- with him, he's bad.' But there's really no good, there's really no bad. Someone eyes you down, it doesn't necessarily mean you can whup his ass."

He gives an example from his own observation: Two white kids walk by a black kid and one uses the "n" word to address his white friend. "The black guy just went off on him. They weren't even talking to him."

It's the old sticks-and-stones lesson, and Malcolm gets it: "My uncle said, 'It's not what you're called, it's what you answer to.'"

Walter learned to control his hair-trigger temper with steely discipline. You can see it in his bearing and hear it in his blunt questioning, his zero tolerance for excuses.

He runs his classes with a military chain-of-command approach. He designates mentors — students who have graduated from the eight-week program — and team leaders, who are expected to know where each of their team members is at all times.

When someone breaks the rules, the group decides the penalty: A series of half-diamond push-ups or the bentknees war stance Walter calls "making friends with the chair."

Though he is an educated, well-spoken man, Walter tolerates — and uses — street language that would be cause for suspension in most high school classrooms.

"I want to be in their environment," he says. "I want these kids to have no reason not to express themselves."

Most kids respond.

“We get to speak out loud, share our feelings,” said freshman Marcos Cazares. “It’s like someone you’re able to talk to if you have something on your mind.”

Walter’s approach is not for everyone.

Attrition was high in his classes at some schools this term, though at Evergreen High, nearly all students completed the eight-week program. “Often parents aren’t as supportive as I’d like,” he says. “Sometimes it’s denial.”

Nemo was one who bailed out. After that early May class, where Walter called him out for rummaging through his backpack and reading a text message on his cell phone, Nemo was ordered to the floor for push-ups and then into the war stance with his heavy book bag weighing down his chair.

He was steamed, and he didn’t get over it.

Despite Walter’s calls to his home, Nemo never returned to class.

Tiffany Schumacher, who teaches 10th-grade English at Mountain View High, is still amazed at the changes she saw in one of her students, Luis Sampredo, after he took Walter’s class this year.

Luis failed English his first semester. “He sat in back with his buddies, didn’t do anything, didn’t engage, and was kind of a bully,” she said.

Second semester brought “a complete turnaround,” she said. He sits in the front row now. “He has good conversations, he does the work. I don’t think he has any missing assignments in the grade book at this point in time. He is not the same kid I had first term.”

When she assigned her students to write a paper about someone who inspired them, Luis wrote about Walter, about how he “came from a difficult background, started his own company, and is giving back to the community.”

“I attribute most of Luis’s success and buy-in to Walter,” Schumacher said. “Luis is a cool kid. If he can stay focused, he is going to graduate from high school and do whatever he wants to do.”

Walter’s students call him a “hard ass,” and admit they were scared of him when they first met him, but they soon learn that he has another side. He weaves snippets of his harrowing life story into his classes to show them he’s been where they are. He tries to show them a path to success, assigning them to think up a company they’d like to start and give it a catchy name.

And he’s not afraid to show his vulnerability.

“You’re tough in a lot of ways but sometimes the best way to be tough is to give back from the heart,” he tells his students. “Tell your parents you love them and thank them for what they did for you.”

After he ran away from home, Walter said, he never went to church again, never sang.

Then, eight years ago, his 6-month-old son fell down the stairs. Walter thought his boy was dead. But the baby bounced down the stairs and landed with a laugh.

“When I saw he was OK, I got a pen and started writing,” he says. He wrote a song for his son.

He shows the class a video, and there is Walter, singing the song to his son and cradling him in his arms. The young toughs crowd around the laptop, serious and attentive. There is not a wisecrack, not a sound.

Walter is late this morning. His Evergreen High kids wait for him in a patch of grass behind the portables. He's been meeting with the distraught parent of a kid from another school who got in a bad fight with his stepfather.

Increasingly, he's called on to mediate family crises. "In the last five days I've gotten 15 calls from parents asking for my help," he says.

It's the last day of class, the day his students move up to become mentors — or not.

He calls 14-year-old Keandre Staggs to the front of the room and asks if he has anything he wants to share with the class. Keandre admits that he shoplifted and got caught. He's been sentenced to pay a $150 fine and do community service.

"Do you think you're going to be a mentor?" Walter asks.

Keandre shakes his head no.

Walter asks for a show of hands then: How many in the group have stolen something? Every hand goes up. He tells a story about stealing a cap when he was 13, about how his grandmother whipped him every day for weeks. "Did it stop me from stealing? No, it stopped me from stealing around my grandmother."

Keandre will become a mentor, he says. "I'm not going to hold it against you. But I'll be on your ass every minute."

Walter peppers his students with questions. What was the best thing about the class? The worst? What did you think the first time you met me?

"I thought you was crazy," Richie Townsend admits. "I didn't know why I was in the class. I still don't."

Walter laughs, thanks him for his honesty.

Dalvin Hale says the class "probably kept me in this school."

Walter has big plans for these fresh-minted mentors, and for his program. He hopes to introduce "See It Through" in the middle schools. Eventually, he hopes to take the program nationwide.

At the end of class, each kid gets one of the class's official black T-shirts with the white stenciled emblem and the message on the back: "REEP the Benefits: Respect, Educate, Encourage, Persevere."

It's a badge of honor, Walter tells them. Treat it that way.

"If you see someone wearing the shirt, walk up to them and say, 'I'll trade you the first verse for the third verse.'"

Something changes when the kids put on the shirts. They shake hands, congratulate each other, and march together to the school lobby, where Walter takes a class picture.

"You're now part of a family," he says.

Keandre Staggs, 14, foreground, and Tory “Malcolm” Blake, 17, laugh during a light moment in Walter Chase’s class.

Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian Walter Chase, who taught a military-style life skills class to high-schoolers in the Evergreen district this year, directs 14-year-old Keandre Staggs to recite the class poem while holding a chair and bending his knees in a war stance. In his class, Chase combines discipline and accountability with teamwork and support.

Walter looks on as Evergreen High student Jesus Cotero strains to hold himself in a push-up position after speaking out of turn during class.

Photos by TROY WAYRYNEN/The Columbian Walter Chase congratulates Mike Mason, 16, for scoring well on a test. Students are expected to make up the work they miss by spending 90 minutes a week in Walter's class.