



FATHER FIGURE

LEGENDARY PITTSBURGH STEELER MEL BLOUNT HELPS TRANSFORM YOUNG LIVES AT THE MEL BLOUNT YOUTH HOME IN CLAYSVILLE.

BY BROOKE KEANE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEGAN WYLIE

Down a long country road, perched atop of a rolling sea of lush green grass, the Mel Blount Youth Home is nestled peacefully into the Claysville hillside. Curving the bend to the home, a long stone sign memorializes the home's presence, and wood fencing lines the road up to the front gate. A log lodge acts as the youth home office and faces toward the grounds, watching over them like a protective older brother.



Learning about horses is an integral part of the program at the Mel Blount Youth Home.

Complete with a fireplace just inside the double doors, the main office is warm and welcoming, and Blount's wife, TiAnda, greets us with a smile. Just a few minutes later, Blount strides into the hallway. A four-time Pittsburgh Steeler Super Bowl champion, member of five Pro Bowl teams and a Pro Football Hall of Famer with a record as one of the league's hardest-hitting cornerbacks, Blount is impressive. Add to that his six-foot-plus frame, helping to make him one of football history's most impending figures.

Today he is sporting a dark blue tailored suit and a red tie, with his trademark eggshell cowboy hat atop his head, which seems to float at least a good two feet above my own. He smiles broadly, offering me his (huge) hand. When he welcomes me, a calm voice tinged with a southern drawl floats in the air and the austere man I had pictured fades away, replaced with the realty of a gentle humanitarian who has been named a "Point of Light" by President George H. W. Bush, one of the "Ten Most Caring People in America" by the Caring Institute, and has been inducted into the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame.

The Mel Blount Youth Home is a place for boys from the ages of 7 to 17, who are victims of abuse or neglect. These boys are given a nurturing environment at the home, where they learn respect and caring, values they may not have been shown in their home environments. Through therapy, the boys deal with their individual situations one day at a time and are taught to not blame others for their misfortunes. Residents of the home will stay there for varying lengths of time, depending on their treatment paths, with some residents staying for up to two years.

"As far as making a contribution to society and making a difference, I think the boys home is far greater than any interception I've ever made or any Super Bowl I've ever won," he says modestly.

As the youngest of 11 children growing up on a farm in the small southern community of Vidalia, Ga., long days on the farm are what taught Blount his greatest life lessons. These same lessons are now what he is passing on not only to his own three boys, but also to the boys he looks after in the youth home.

"I wanted them to have somewhat of the same kind of experience I had, because in the farm environment, you develop a

strong work ethic and strong moral values — you learn so much responsibility. And, you see life in so many different forms that you start to respect life," he says.

During the peak of Blount's career in the '70s, his pre-teen nieces and nephews would quickly spread the word around their small school of their Uncle Mel's visits to his hometown. Once word had spread that a hometown football hero was visiting, residents would bring their children out to the Blount farm in droves, taking pictures, asking for autographs, and even tossing around the football.

"Seeing these kids, I just felt there was more that could be done than just signing autographs and taking pictures," Blount says.

Driven by his desire to do more, he began researching programs that worked with children, and after discovering the liabilities of having children on your farm, Blount decided to open up his own boys home, where the children could safely and legally stay for extended periods of time. The problem, however, was that there was no physical structure to house the boys, and nowhere to run the business from, prompting the purchase of three trailer homes, marking the start of the original Mel Blount Youth Home in Georgia in 1983 upon his retirement from playing in the National Football League.

When the home first began, Blount's mother, Alice, was the cook and counselor for the boys, and, according to Blount, she still helps out at the original home, now run by Blount's brother Clint. Now at the age of 102, Alice will drive her golf cart down to the pond on the Georgia grounds and go fishing with the boys.

Blount continued to work for the NFL at its New York headquarters, traveling between New York, Pittsburgh, and Georgia until 1989, when he decided to open a second youth home in the Pittsburgh area, the 300-acre farm in Claysville. Blount met TiAnda, a Pittsburgh native, that same year and they married two years later, in 1991, and started their own family several years later.

The staff and residents of the home are a part of their family, too. "I feel like I am the father figure around here for a lot of these young boys, and also for some of the younger staff. I think I play that role to the best of my ability because, when I look at these kids here, I'm looking at my own sons," Blount says.



Khalid Blount, Jibri Blount, Akil Blount, TiAnda & Mel Blount



The Mel Blount Youth home property includes cabins where the boys reside, the Blounts' own home, a guest house, and a barn.

The Mel Blount Youth Home puts the boys in touch with nature at many levels.



Working with the horses on the farm builds respect for life among the boys.



Boys at the home attend public school and also have use of the classroom on campus.

Tom Woods has worked at the home for six years and feels he instills the same life skills and guidance in the boys that a family would, thanks in large part to the organization's small size.

"I just tell [the boys], 'We're all family out here. I'm the big brother, and Mr. Mel and Miss TiAnda say they're the mom and dad out here,'" Woods says.

The Blounts' own sons, Akil, 14, Jibri, 12, and Khalid, 10, also help out with the family business by cutting the grass and helping to taking care of the program's most integral aspect, horses.

While working on his family farm as a boy, Blount developed a strong love for the animal, which continues today. This is a love that his eldest son, Akil, also shares, and the pair often ride together on the weekends in addition to traveling nationwide to participate in riding competitions. The barn on the grounds provides shelter for the seven horses that currently belong to the Blount family.

"He sneaks horses into the barn like I sneak shoes into the house," TiAnda says with a laugh.

Blount personally takes great care with all of the horses, braiding their manes and tails himself. He believes that if it were not for these animals, the program would not have the same dynamic: He says that the horses are the best aid in teaching the boys respect, mainly because the animals' size and strength command it.

Before working directly with the horses, the boys undergo intensive classroom training to learn how to approach and care for the animals. Once they move to the hands-on portion of the training, they first ride in the smallest of several pens. The boys are also given the opportunity to compete in a yearly riding event held at the stadium on the grounds.

After changing out of his suit and into jeans and cowboy boots, we visit the barn, and Blount brings out some of the horses from their stalls, brushing mud from their coats. During our photo shoot, the group of boys at the home have not yet undergone their education to handle the horses, and many of the boys seem wary to approach the animals at first, with only two of them feeling brave enough to climb onto their backs. Their reactions are a mixture of curiosity and physical respect — as a group, they all hang back as two of the horses, calm and oblivious to the children, blithely move where Blount guides them. One boy counts the days until he has to leave to go to another home, and asks Blount if they can start riding before he has to leave. When Blount asks if the boy would like to stay at his youth home instead of transferring, the boy responds yes, shaking his head up and down.

Over the years, the Mel Blount Youth Home has helped more than 1,000 young men at each location grow into successful

adults, including one young man who especially warmed Blount's heart when he walked across the stage to receive his diploma from Morehouse College.

"He was a young man just like these kids here, who you had to keep working with, had to keep convincing him that what we were teaching him was the right thing," Blount says.

In addition to working with horses, the boys also keep busy with schooling, sports, therapy, and strengthening their spirituality. Because the boys come from many different backgrounds, each

Sunday the group visits a church of a different denomination, as well as having Bible classes on Tuesdays. A deeply spiritual family, the Blounts feel religion is an important component.

"I always say God gave me three boys for a reason — because he knew that this would be my calling. I think it's definitely a ministry; we

really do work as a family," TiAnda says.

Though the family often changes size — the home can hold as many as 24 boys at a time — its mission to create a structured environment where there is nurturing, education, and discipline does not. This is a vision that Blount hopes someone in his family will carry on, and it may end up in the hands of his middle son, Jibri, who hopes to also play in the NBA.

"I've always thought it would be nice to come back and help out kids when I get older, because I see how my dad has been helping out the community here and then I would like to take over the barn and keep everything running," he says.

Blount's youngest son, Khalid, hopes to follow in his father's footsteps as well, only as a professional football player, and though the oldest son, Akil, hopes to become a businessman someday, for now, he'll just enjoy beating his dad in basketball.

"Over the years, he is getting older, and I can take advantage of him," Akil jokes.

A football whizzes past my head as the rambunctious boys, wound up after a long day at school, begin playing catch with their father, just like he did during his visits home in the 1970s. As we take a few pictures of the boys and their father, Blount reminds Akil that he has a basketball game that night and I can't help but think that maybe Blount's mother inspired him to have such a large "family."

"I enjoy the kids. You can't help but enjoy them because when you come from a big family you're just used to having a lot of kids around," Blount says. ☺

For more information, or to find out how you can help, contact the Mel Blount Youth Home at 724.948.2311, or visit melblount.com.

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