

Sharing his success at home is Key

BY PAUL HALLORAN

Achieving professional success is pleasing; having the opportunity to share your prosperity and expertise with those who watched you grow up is even more personally gratifying.

Keith Key knows that feeling, having gone from Pittsburgh Peabody Athlete of the Year in 1983 to Ohio State Buckeye to entrepreneur extraordinaire. And

while Key's company, KBK Enterprises, operates in a half-dozen cities, it is the work he has done in Pittsburgh that gives him the greatest satisfaction.

Four years ago, KBK answered an RFP from the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh to redevelop the Garfield Heights public housing project. Key was born into public housing in the Hill District and moved to the Garfield

Heights neighborhood when he was in middle school, so he was very interested in the project.

While attending the meeting at which the winning bid was chosen, Key was touched by the fact that people who remembered him as a youth had come to speak on his behalf and celebrate his success.

See KEY Page 16



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KEY: from Page 1

"That made me understand that this project was far greater than I realized," Key said. "It showed that a public housing kid had come pretty far. I grew up with a lot of the families who live there."

The \$60 million redevelopment of Garfield Heights – which Key said marked the largest contract ever awarded to a minority-owned business in Pittsburgh — is now in phase 3 and has already won awards for phase 1. Key had the great pleasure of showing his mother, Amerine Key-Hall, the work that he has done in the neighborhood she lived in for 30 years.

"It's been a unique experience to be back home," said Key. "When I came back to Pittsburgh, I wanted to make a difference in the community."

As it turns out, his timing was perfect.

Key met with John Vater, then principal of Pittsburgh Peabody High School, and offered money and resources to support the school. Right around that time, The Challenge Program (TCP) – an organization that partners with businesses and school districts to motivate high school

students by offering cash incentives for achievement in and out of the classroom – was trying to get started in one Pittsburgh school. Vater asked Key to sponsor TCP at Pittsburgh Peabody and he readily agreed.

TCP recognizes four students from each of the sophomore, junior and senior classes in the following categories: academic excellence, academic improvement, community service and attendance. Each of the 12 award winners receives a \$250 check.

This is the fourth year of TCP at Pittsburgh Peabody. The program expanded to five other schools last year – Pittsburgh Allderdice, Pittsburgh CAPA, Pittsburgh Obama, Pittsburgh Perry, Pittsburgh Westinghouse – thanks in large part to Key, who contributed an additional \$10,000, according to Barbara Grandinetti, executive director of TCP. This year, TCP is also in Pittsburgh Brashear, Pittsburgh Carrick, Pittsburgh Langley and Pittsburgh Oliver.

"Keith was a catalyst for the success of TCP in Pittsburgh," Grandinetti said. "Our program has made a difference in the schools.

We had to prove we are a 'Pathway to the Promise.' We reward students for attendance and improved grades, and you can't get a Promise scholarship unless you have good grades and you are in school at least 80 percent of the time."

That was certainly no problem for Key, an honor student at Pittsburgh Peabody who never missed a day of school in four years. He starred in football, basketball and track and played in the marching band as a freshman. Serving as captain of the basketball and track teams taught him a lot about leadership at a relatively young age.

He will always be grateful for the role his basketball coach, Norman Frye, played in his life. "He was more than a coach; he was almost like another parent," Key said. "He was involved in my athletic life, academic life and social life. I didn't have a father, so his place in my life was very valuable. He taught me to never be ashamed of who you are."

Key lives in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife, Donica, and their children, Danielle, Darienne and Keith.