

Eagles' K'Von Wallace goes home to Creighton Court one last time

K'Von Wallace stepped out of his black Chrysler 300, crossed North 29th Street and took a long look at his first home, a two-story apartment in Richmond's Creighton Court, an East End public housing complex. It was his first visit in years, and it might be his last.

"I thought we lived on the other side," he said to his mother, Roxanne Barnes.

Wallace, a Highland Springs High School graduate who plays football for the Philadelphia Eagles, moved out of this unit when he was 4 years old and doesn't have many memories from it. Except for the time the power went out, the room went dark, and he dropped a glass of water, cutting his left forearm. He still has the scar.

In a few years, the city will tear down the two-story brick building to make way for revitalized mixed-income housing. A large swath of the neighborhood has already been reduced to 10-foot-high piles of rubble.

At Creighton Court, Wallace, 24, grew up with a single mother in the midst of drugs and gunshots. As a teenager, he lived in a small house in Highland Springs, where he reused clothes and shoes to stretch every dollar.

Although he eventually became a high school football star, a national champion at Clemson and a professional football player in the NFL, Creighton Court is still a part of him. It's why he still saves old shoes, and it's why he hosted a free camp at Highland Springs on Saturday for 200 youngsters. It's why he visited Creighton Court one last time.

“Not too many people in that area even make it to 21,” Wallace said. “For me to still be alive at 24, to do what I love, to do what I dreamed, it’s a huge, huge blessing.”

‘I knew I had to get out’

Wallace’s mother, Roxanne Barnes, was determined to get out of Creighton Court. It was common to hear gunshots ring out nearby, and drug deals would occur feet from her yard. When a buyer would approach a seller, they called it “getting served.” It happened so often, Barnes started becoming numb to it.

“I knew I had to get out because of K’Von,” she said.

So Barnes went back to school and earned her associate’s degree in human services at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College. While she took classes at night, Wallace stayed with his grandmother, Cheryl, who lived on the Creighton Road side of the neighborhood.

After she graduated, Barnes continued working in the public housing complex, giving mental health support to its residents.

When Wallace was 12, he moved with his mother and sister, QuaMeisha, to a small three-bedroom house in Highland Springs, blocks from the high school.

Finally, they were somewhere safe. The kids could play in the yard without Barnes worrying. Wallace could walk to the store with his friends.

But money was still tight. Wallace reused clothing and wore the same pair of shoes from eighth grade to 11th grade.

Each year, he'd take two brushes and a cup full of soapy water and wash the shoes to keep them fresh.

"When you don't have a lot, you don't throw it all away and get reckless with it," said Highland Springs coach Loren Johnson. "Cleaning his shoes is a symbol of somebody working extremely hard to keep what he has."

At Highland Springs, Wallace's football career blossomed. A matchup against Atlee on Halloween of his junior year proved to be his coming-out night.

It was a track meet kind of football game that Highland Springs won, 65-37. Wallace, unheard of at the time, caught three passes for 201 yards and two touchdowns.

Nothing would ever be the same. A year later, a Highland Springs team armed with two other future NFL players — Mekhi Becton and Greg Dortch — went 14-1, blitzed the Virginia high school football scene and won the first of four consecutive state championships.

College coaches didn't realize Wallace's potential until after his senior season had ended. For the entirety of the fall, he had only two offers — the University of Cincinnati and James Madison University. By January, colleges had finally gotten the message. Clemson, Ohio State and Virginia Tech all offered.

On signing day, he chose Clemson. Had Wallace been a high school student today, probably none of it would have happened. Colleges sign their players almost two months earlier and are forced to set their recruiting classes before the season begins, meaning there's practically no chance for a player to earn a spot during his senior season.

But, in this case, like other pivotal moments in Wallace's life, things worked out in his favor.

His first big payday

On July 25, 2020, Wallace turned 23 years old. The next day, he signed a million-dollar contract.

After the Philadelphia Eagles took him in the fourth round of the draft, Wallace signed a four-year contract reportedly worth \$3.3 million. That doesn't include the performance bonuses he gets the more action he sees on the field.

"Each play is worth like \$400," he said.

Two or three weeks later, the first paycheck landed in his checking account. Besides the fact that taxes had eaten what felt like half his money, it was amazing to achieve financial independence.

In two seasons, Wallace has played in 30 games, starting six. He's made 36 career tackles. He feels like his career is just warming up.

Sometimes Johnson, the Springers coach, worries about players who in an instant go from having so little to having so much. But Wallace has always been a great listener, and he always understood the importance of watching your money. That's why Wallace still wears old shoes and immediately began investing his earnings.

A few purchases were necessary, so the first thing he bought was a Chrysler 300 sedan with a specialty paint job — black with a camouflage pattern.

“It looks like the Batmobile,” he said.

He had Chrysler 300s growing up, and driving one meant the person had found a way out of Creighton Court. Some sold drugs to do so. Wallace was determined to get his by playing football.

On Mother’s Day, he made one more purchase — he bought his mother a house. Barnes had started writing on sticky notes all the things she hoped to find in a new house — a mud room, driveway large enough to hold several cars, big front and back yards, long windows to let the sunlight in.

After looking at 30 houses, she found everything she was looking for in Chesterfield County. The sale closes Monday, and soon Barnes will move there with her 11-year-old daughter, Keoni, and her husband, Terrynce.

“It’s not a mansion, but it’s beautiful,” she said. “It’s what I asked for. It’s home.”

Coming home

The youngsters came out in full force. Close to 200 of them attended a free camp Saturday held by Wallace. They sprinted from side to side and caught footballs with their outstretched hands, all wearing white T-shirts adorned with Wallace’s image.

When it was over, he autographed small plastic footballs and posed for selfies, flashing a big smile.

The best part, said Cayden Brown, 9, was when Wallace tried to swat the ball out of Cayden’s hands and missed.

Cayden's mother, Cherie Smith-Brown, used to teach at Highland Springs. To see a former student come back and become a role model was a "beautiful thing."

"He's makes it real," Smith-Brown said. "He's not just someone they see on TV."

The kids got the opportunity to see someone who started in the same recreational leagues they did, and he's made it. If Wallace can make it, they can, too, Smith-Brown said.

Saturday was Wallace's first effort to give back to the community. There's more to come, he said. He wants to build a Boys and Girls Club, which was instrumental in his youth.

Before Creighton Court gets torn down, Barnes wanted a photo in front of their old home. So after the camp ended, they drove there, and Barnes knocked on the door to ask permission. She explained the young man who used to live there now plays for the Philadelphia Eagles. The man inside knew the name K'Von Wallace and shook his hand.

Kids ran in the grass. The buildings, which were put up in the 1950s, are falling apart, the city has said, necessitating their removal.

While he's glad something better will be built in this place, Wallace is wistful that his home will be bulldozed. He stepped onto the concrete landing and put his hand on the paint-chipped column. He gazed at the giant oak trees that dot the sidewalk, held up his phone and filmed himself, spinning 360 degrees.

Coming back was a chance to see the paths he didn't take, and what life would look like had he never left. More than anything, going home was an opportunity to remember.

“It still feels surreal, truly,” Wallace said.