

## Lifelong Educator Helps Kids Find Homes and Education

Written by Rachel Friedman  
Tuesday, 27 July 2010 10:06

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One Hero Grasps For Hope

*Lifelong Educator Wants to Help Kids Find Homes, Get Diplomas*

Two things that are getting tougher for kids to get in America: A place to live and an education.

According to a study by the Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, an average of 3 in 10 high school students don't reach graduation, with that rate reaching half in some areas of the country. Combine that with the report by the National Center on Family Homelessness that found more than 1.5 million children were without a home, and it's not difficult to see a stark trend.

But Leon McKinney, a lifelong educator from a rural area of Washington, wants to do something about that. He has taken stories from his three decades of teaching kids and turned them into a book -- Heroes and Hope ( [www.heroesandhopebook.com](http://www.heroesandhopebook.com) ) -- that he is now selling, with 90 percent of the proceeds going toward education funding for kids, and the other 10 percent going to Habitat for Humanity.

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“I want to help people live better lives in the midst of difficult times,” he said. “Throughout my more than two decades as a teacher, I have tried to make a difference for kids and families through some principles that have stood the test of time. Over the years, I’ve amassed a wealth of stories that seem to resonate with people, and so I wanted to share these stories with others to help them find vision and inspiration, but I didn’t want it to be some kind of vanity exercise. I wanted it to mean something. So, I’m passing down these values and lessons from my experience as an educator, parent, and counselor to people over the last forty years in a way that not only tells them what I’ve seen, but shows them what I’ve learned.”

McKinney has already raised more than \$100,000 for his cause, just through \$5 gifts from other teachers he has come into contact with over time. He’s not sure how much his book will raise, but he’s hoping the value of awareness will mean more than the dollar signs involved.

“It’s tough to admit that we’re struggling, as a country,” he said. “In 1996, the high school graduation rate was 66.4 percent, and nearly 14 years later, we’ve edged it up to 69.2 percent. That’s 14 years, and not even three full percentage points. We can do better. I know we can, because I’ve seen kids with some of the toughest challenges you can imagine overcome them to get that diploma. The missing ingredient is hope. It’s my intention to tell the stories of the heroes I’ve encountered as an educator, and of the hope they’ve inspired in me and in others. By raising our hopes, and the means to make good on those dreams, I think we can beat the expectations of the experts. When I have looked into the hearts of the students and teachers I have known, I have seen that the power of the human spirit is endless. This project is about tapping into that spirit on a grander scale, and setting our sights on nothing less than making dreams come true for those who have no hope left.”

### About Leon McKinney

Leon McKinney earned a BA in Education and a Masters in Music Education from Central Washington State University. After teaching music for four years at Pateros schools, he taught for 21 Years at Eastmont High School and served as the Director of Music for the Eastmont Schools. Leon was honored in 2006 as the Friend of the Year of Wenatchee Valley College. Leon is married to Bonnie McKinney and they have four children: Jeff, Brent, Christy and Brian.