

# Dream Big

## George Koonce shares his improbable journey from growing up poor to making it to the NFL

**G**eorge Koonce spent nine seasons in the NFL and was part of the 1997 Green Bay Packer team that played in Super Bowl XXXII. But, speaking to school board members during the WASB breakfast at the State Education Convention, he said one of his best memories took place after he retired from football.

Koonce showed a photo of himself in cap and gown and remarked on the significance of that moment, “There I am — a kid who flunked the sixth grade and I go on to receive a PhD from Marquette University. That was probably my proudest moment.”

His improbable journey to the NFL began in North Carolina where he grew up poor as the son of a single mother. The odds were stacked against him but he learned that with the right training, education and knowledge, he could reach his dreams.

In the NFL, Koonce said he was lucky to have mentors like Reggie White. Now, as a retired player, Koonce is doing his part to mentor former professional athletes transitioning to life after sports. His PhD dissertation focused on professional athletes’ transition from sports and he wrote a book on the topic — “Is There Life After Football? Surviving the NFL.”

Koonce is thankful for the mentors he’s had in his life and is grateful to be able to return the favor to younger players. He shared a story in which he met with Chris Borland, a former football player for the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Borland excelled in his first year in the NFL but was worried about head trauma and how it might impact the rest of his life.

“I shared with him all the stuff I acquired during my research on the transition of former players,”



**“You never know who you are inspiring to be great.”**

Koonce said. “About three weeks later, Chris decided to retire because of concerns related to head trauma.”

Koonce said he understood Borland’s decision, adding that he had experienced significant head injuries during his playing days.

“I had 17 concussions during my career, but I would do it all over again because I love the game,” Koonce said.

Now an administrator at Marian University in Fond du Lac, Koonce shares his inspirational message with students and school leaders. As a person in a leadership position, Koonce said it’s important for leaders to encourage and support those around them. Koonce emphasized this point by sharing a story in which he was asked by former teammate Charles Woodson to introduce him when Woodson was inducted into the Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame. Koonce was honored. He had been teammates with Woodson but didn’t realize he had made such an impact on his career.

“He told me there wasn’t anyone else who he wanted to introduce him,” Koonce said. “You never know who you are inspiring to be great.” ■

