

# HEROES NIGHT

## Committed to Community

### *The Driving Nature of Todd and Ted Duckett's Work with Kids and Families*

While he once epitomized the game of football for his toughness and grit, former NFL Running Back Todd Duckett has made a remarkable transformation and earned the respect of a new cadre of spectators. On this particular October afternoon, Todd Duckett - no longer T.J. as he was called in his pro career and at Michigan State University - is organizing friends and volunteers around the annual assembly of Thanksgiving dinners for families in need, while also finalizing details for an essay writing contest – a literacy exercise on the value of volunteerism – for community youths.



Todd Duckett

Serving families and engaging youths – these are now the driving plays at the heart of a different game for Duckett, 38, as the Lansing-based philanthropist leads New World Flood, a nonprofit he launched after he retired from football in 2009. Named for an Old Testament biblical story, it started as a way for the Michigan Sports Hall of Famer to go into schools to teach kids how their actions could start a flood of community service and kind acts. All-consuming, the work has evolved and deepened since Duckett left professional sports and began searching his soul over where to position his talents next.



Ted Duckett

**“I’ve been able to achieve** many great things,” he told Michigan’s Children. “When I got done with football, those accomplishments allowed me a platform to utilize giving and being of service. Out of that, I could see how one person, one single raindrop, could make a difference. I learned early that when you see someone in need, understanding what compassion means, you go out and help.”

Todd’s father, Ted Duckett, “a seasoned 73,” has been an educator and athletic coach for over 50 years, all of them at Loy Norrix High School in Kalamazoo, where Todd and his older brother, Tico, also attended school and participated in school sports. The senior Duckett is a man who exudes the power of character education, old school ways and commitment to basic values, including caring for others as if it was no big deal. In a world where more children could benefit from the attentions of their parents, families and educators, teaching community service is more important than ever, he said.

“I have had kids who are adults, students of mine and those who aren’t students of mine, adopt me and my wife and call us mom and dad. And it’s simply because we care,” said Ted Duckett, whose wife,

Jacquelyn Barham, died of cancer in 2000. “We’re only here for a short time. If you can have an impact with some people, and they have impact on you, that’s a good thing. Isolation is not.”

**For their actions as change-agents**, and efforts building up community supports for the most vulnerable families and children, the Ducketts are being honored by Michigan’s Children at its Heroes Night on November 11th in Detroit. Other honorees include former “Fab Five” and NBA basketball player Jalen Rose, now an ESPN announcer and founder of the Jalen Rose Leadership Academy in Detroit, and former Michigan State University basketball player Anthony Ianni, who utilizes his challenges as a differently-abled athlete to motivate others and help to level the playing field with his work at the Michigan Department of Civil Rights. The annual event takes place at the Corner Ballpark, a facility operated by the Detroit PAL (Police Athletic League) on the grounds of the former Tiger Stadium in Detroit. In recent interviews, the Ducketts talked about a teamwork approach to helping kids and families and the importance to build systems to support them.

***Ted Duckett: ‘Kids love discipline because it means you care.’***

“The first thing you have to understand about kids is that when they’re having problems they want to become invisible,” said Ted Duckett, a track star at Western Michigan University who went to work as a student teacher at Kalamazoo’s Loy Norrix High School in 1969. And when they act out inappropriately in class, ask them what’s bothering them, he said. Over the years, his teaching style has focused on consistency and setting expectations. “Kids love discipline because it means you care,” he said.

**In Ted Duckett’s view**, children need structure in their lives, and more to do in the after-school hours. Years ago, many kids had after-school jobs, or were part of organized groups and clubs, he said. “When you look at it, if a kid is not involved in athletics, what’s a kid to do?” After-school programs that tap into a youth’s interests and offer opportunities to explore those interests are essential today, he added.

“When’s the last time you sat down with 25 kids you didn’t know, picked their brains, and said, what’s keeping you from where you want to go? Usually, it’s the lack of access to what it is they need,” he said. “There have to be outlets for kids to understand what their creativity can produce. Afterschool programs and summer programs – it’s what to do with that energy of theirs, other than thinking up crazy things to do.”

In addition, kids need adults to encourage them to look to the future. “If you’ve got a dream then you’ve got a shot.”

Dreaming big paid off for son Todd, who spent years in the national spotlight, starting as a first-round draft pick with the Atlanta Falcons in 2002, and later with the Washington Redskins, the Detroit Lions and the Seattle Seahawks. “Oh, I’m proud of all my kids,” he said. “They achieved despite the system and what’s going on in the world and they’re enjoying themselves. My son, Todd, was an elite athlete. He was raised by this community. All along his journey, people were there to assist him and now he feels the desire to give back.”

***Todd Duckett: ‘Sometimes it takes the sting out of what you’re going through when you can look around and be of service to others.’***

While being of service to others was part of his family DNA, “like breathing,” it became even more important after Todd Duckett’s pro sports career ended. After football, he found himself in a dark place

that worried his family. He was deeply depressed, and searching for purpose. Then 10 years ago he discovered new meaning in his life from helping others. Sitting around with a few pals, including Justin Caine, owner of the production company, Good Fruit Video, they drafted a plan to collectively donate a lunch hour a week to a local volunteer-run nonprofit. They called it “lunch with a purpose” and created a Facebook page to engage others. Before long, up to 50 people were part of the lunch crowd and it ran for 82 weeks. They gave blood, helped put up the newsletter at Lansing’s Allen Street Neighborhood Center, folded laundry for the Haven House temporary shelter, and performed yard work. Meanwhile, Duckett learned what make some nonprofits more impactful than others.

**The information was valuable** when he started New World Flood, a nonprofit with the mission to promote education and volunteerism, and inspire others to become more active in their communities through giving and service. Through fundraisers like the Raindrop Gala, golf outings, and the annual Battlefield Brawl, a celebrity flag football tournament with celebrity athletes and past MSU football and basketball players, they raise money to pay for Thanksgiving meals, school backpacks for kids and much more.

Todd Duckett takes a philosophical approach to the power of creating change. “The most important system is the human system. It’s changing a person and how they look at themselves and carry themselves. If they can start looking inside to see how they can be an asset outwardly than that changes everything,” he said. “Working as a cohesive unit is the only way.”

“Teamwork makes the dream work,” he added. “I know with faith and hard work you can do anything you want.”