

Tony Dungy offers wisdom, a message of hope

By Mike Bush / Journal Staff Writer



There was no soaring rhetoric, no lofty pronouncements. Just vintage Tony Dungy: cool, calm words of wisdom, a message of hope.

The former Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Indianapolis Colts head coach was the keynote speaker Thursday at a luncheon at the Albuquerque Convention Center attended by some 1,200 urban school superintendents, school board members and school district administrators from around the country.

Dungy received a standing ovation from those at the 57th annual fall conference of the Council of Great City Schools.

He credited several people for his own success, first and foremost his parents, both of whom were school teachers. "My parents loved what they did," he said, adding that that awareness helped guide him through life.

Tony Dungy Tony Dungy, former NFL player and head coach, was the first African-American coach to win one of the world's biggest sports events when he led the Indianapolis Colts to victory in Super Bowl XLI in 2007. He is also the author of the bestselling book, "Quiet Strength." Dungy established another NFL first by leading his teams to the playoffs for 10 consecutive years. Since retiring from coaching in 2008, Dungy has been an analyst on NBC's Football Night in America. He also serves as national spokesman for the fatherhood program "All Pro Dad" and Comcast's "Internet Essentials." He is involved in many charitable organizations, including the

Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Mentors for Life, Boys & Girls Clubs and the Prison Crusade Ministry.

Today, his job – and that of all the educators in the audience – “is to help every child earn an A,” he said. “Not give them an A, but earn an A.”

Another important Dungy mentor was a man named Mr. Rockmore, his middle school assistant principal when he was growing up in Michigan. When Mr. Rockmore first came to the school, he began sitting with the kids at lunch every day and, at first, they were suspicious of his motives. But as they got to know him, they realized his true intent: “He just wants to get to know us and be our friend,” they said.

At the time, Dungy was on the school’s football team. One day, he and the football coach got into a dispute and Dungy reacted by quitting the team. The adults around him, including his parents, were disappointed. But it was Mr. Rockmore who, after listening to Dungy’s version of the dispute, asked, “Even if all of that is true, why would you let someone take something from you that you enjoy?”

The question forced Dungy to confront reality and he rejoined the team. The message he had learned was “don’t be a quitter.”

Mr. Rockmore, he said, “had a tremendous impact on me.”

Years later, after playing football in college and in the National Football League, the team he coached, the Indianapolis Colts, was down 21-6 at halftime in a championship game at home against the New England Patriots. If the Colts won, they would go on to the Super Bowl; if they lost, they would go home.

After taking care of a head coach’s myriad responsibilities during the brief, 12-minute intermission, Dungy said he gave the shortest halftime pep talk of his career: “Guys, we’re playing terrible, and if we don’t start playing better, we’re going to lose.”

The Colts rallied in what was one of the greatest comebacks in NFL history and won the game. A few weeks later, they went on to win Super Bowl XLI.

Thank you, Mr. Rockmore.

That year, 2007, Dungy went down in history as the first black head coach to win a Super Bowl.

Most of his message on Thursday, however, focused on education and giving children hope, the incentive to succeed. “We do want to create more success stories as we go along,” he reminded his audience. “Thank you for all you do.”

Earlier in the day, Dungy and Albuquerque Public Schools Superintendent Winston Brooks attended a pre-game pep rally at Albuquerque High School. In response to a question from the lunchtime audience, he noted that although the Bulldogs were on a three-year losing streak, their spirit was tremendous.

“We talked to them about being a winner off the field,” he recalled, “a winner in life.”

Also this week, Dungy, Gov. Susana Martinez and Comcast “relaunched” a program called Internet Essentials that provides low-income families with broadband Internet connections. In its first two years, it delivered broadband to 4,000 New Mexico homes, including 2,500 in Albuquerque. Internet Essentials is “giving our kids some hope,” Dungy said, adding he was proud to be a part of it.

During lunch at the Convention Center, just before he spoke, the crowd was entertained by the Desert Ridge Middle School jazz band, led by Donna Schmidt.

In classic Dungy style, he stood up from the VIP table to chat with the 18 band members for a few minutes.

That simple gesture made their day, an unexpected reward for a stellar performance.