

LEAPS AND BOUNDS

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Tonight will be different -- much different.

Jamario Taylor has vivid memories of his last chance to take part in a graduation ceremony. It came four years ago, following eighth grade at Waldo Middle School.

"I had to attend summer school after seventh and eighth grade," he said, somewhat sheepishly. "My eighth-grade graduation? I couldn't be there.

"I rode up to the school on my bike and got to see everybody celebrating. I'm outside, sitting on a bike in basketball shorts and a T-shirt."

It seems an unlikely scenario for the bright, articulate young man who will step to the podium at Roy Davis Field tonight shortly after 7 p.m. and address fellow graduates, friends and

family as president of East High's class of 2009.

That will literally be moments after he rushes back from the Class 3A Plainfield Central Boys Track and Field Sectional, where he will try to qualify for a return trip to next week's state meet in the high jump and long jump.

"It's a real big deal," Taylor said of his graduation. "My sisters, my mom and brothers will be there. ... This is a big step, but just another step and one of many I'll take."

Multiple 'powers'

Welcome to the world of Jamario Taylor, young man with a bright future.

Check out his high school resume and it's little wonder he's known in some circles as "Superman," a moniker started last summer by elementary school kids impressed by all he did as he supervised them working for Playgrounds, a Fox Valley Park District summer camp at Phillips Park.

He was captain of the basketball team. Class president. Junior ROTC participant. Drummer in the school band. Member of local hip-hop dance group. Varsity football player. Captain, team that handles morning public-address announcements at the school.

He's also a regular at the weekly God's Gym program offered at a local church by school social worker Jackie Walters. Co-president of Boys To Men, a fraternal group for young men run by District 131 spokesman Clayton Muhammad, who is a cousin and mentor to young Taylor.

Superman? With a schedule that would make many heads spin, he could be Superman, Batman and the Flash all rolled into one.

Taylor remembers that middle school experience as a turning point in his life, which has had more than its share of unusual twists over the last 18 years.

But maybe none more so than the curve he was thrown at its start.

A 'miracle baby'

The response caught both this reporter and East hoops coach Wendell Jeffries completely off guard last fall. Taylor was providing answers for a Beacon News basketball feature and was asked to fill in the blank: People would be surprised to learn ... "I was a crack baby," he said, matter-of-factly.

It's little wonder Mary Taylor calls the two youngest of her six children, Jamario and his brother Jermaine (9 months older) her "miracle babies."

Hence his other nickname, "Six, because he's the youngest. I numbered them," she said.

Both were born prematurely, and both while she was addicted to crack cocaine.

A remarkable comeback story in her own right, Mary admits to having a \$500 a week habit while pregnant with Jermaine (now a student at Waubensee Community College) that escalated to \$800 a week when she was pregnant with Jamario.

Phillip Griffin, with whom she had a 13-year relationship and who fathered her youngest three children, has been in and out of jail and not much of a presence in the kids' lives.

"I was selling (crack), then I became my own best customer," said Mary, who for a long time considered herself a "functioning addict. It was only by the grace of God I didn't get caught up in the legal system. The kids still say, 'We don't remember you seeing you getting high.'"

By the time Jamario was nearly 3, it had gotten the best of her. Relatives were able to take in her older children, but Jermaine and Jamario went to foster care for nearly two years while she went through rehab and got her life in order.

"Dropping us off at the (Department of Children and Family Services) place was one of the hardest days in her life," Jamario said.

The family eventually got back together and scraped by, despite some tough times that included eviction from the public housing apartment in the South Wind complex where Jeffries and Muhammad grew up. They lived in several temporary homes before settling in an apartment on High Street the last few years.

"Me and my mom have the closest bond ever. I don't hold anything against her," Jamario said. "I'm blessed. I can walk. I can talk. I can do athletics.

"That situation made us stronger as we got older. We made it through the hardships. Now, it's just cruisin' on down the road."

Mary works as a dean's assistant at East High, helps Walters with God's Gym and does other volunteer work and takes classes at WCC with hopes of becoming a counselor.

"I call her 'walkie-talkie cop,'" Jamario said. "She's always in the halls, saying, 'Keep it moving, young people.'"

Tonight in Plainfield, he hopes to keep climbing the ladder.

Eyeing new heights

After missing nearly a month with a sprained knee, he won last week's Upstate Eight Conference high jump by clearing a personal-best 6 feet, 8 inches. It was 2 inches higher than his previous best and 4 inches above the state qualifying standard.

Track coach Shane Gillespie thinks Jamario can go even higher this year.

"Hopefully, 6-10," Gillespie said. "That would be a new school record. He had three tries at it at conference and on two of them was real close."

The sectional will be challenging with two other jumpers, including West Aurora's Aviance King, having cleared 6-8 this season like Taylor.

"High jump is the event at the sectional," said Gillespie, who appreciates what Taylor brings to his team. "He's a tremendous leader by example and voice. The kids look up to him. His personality and attitude is incredible. He's definitely dedicated to anything he starts."

Jeffries, who couldn't argue when Jamario needed to miss two basketball games this season, agrees.

"Even though he wasn't the star of the team, he was the leader," Jeffries said. "He defused a lot of situations that could have been bad by cracking a joke or taking a lighter approach.

"As far as discipline issues. If every kid could have his dedication, positive attitude and effort, life (for Jeffries) would be great."

Taylor told East football coach Bill Bryant he had one condition.

"I told him I'd play if he let me leave for halftime to play in the band," Jamario said. "The team would go to the locker room and I'd run to the sideline, take off my shoulder pads, put on my band jacket and march with my football pants.

"People would say, 'Superman's at it again.' It was like I was going to the phone booth to change."

He sports a tattoo on his arm featuring a Superman logo, a track shoe, drum, the number 6 and the phrase "God Given Talent."

Maybe, but he's done his best to maximize it.

He's been invited to Australia by Down Under Sports to represent in Illinois this summer in an international track competition.

A recipient of Mayor Tom Weisner's Hometown Youth Hero Award and the DAR Community Service Award, Jamario is headed to Western Illinois University in the fall on a partial track and partial academic scholarship. He will likely major in elementary education or business.

Jackie Walters, who didn't meet Jamario until he was in high school, found it hard to believe he had troubles in school before.

"I couldn't believe it," she said. "He is just such an amazing kid. To know what he's come from and for him not to be angry about it is pretty amazing. He's a total success story."