Commentary | SCF's Isaiah Williams rises from crime-infested environment to earn conference player of year honors

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By ALAN DELL —

BRADENTON — Isaiah Williams looked one way and saw guns, drugs and a chance to make fast money. He turned his head and saw a basketball.

Most kids in his downtrodden Newark, N.J., neighborhood would've taken the risk and gone for the cash.

Williams isn't like every kid.

He picked up his basketball, went to the playground and shot and shot, and dribbled his way out of the streets.

But nothing has come easy for the 20-year-old State College of Florida freshman.

When he graduated from Newark's Shabazz High, nobody wanted him, giving him the perfect excuse to go for the guns and money.

It was tempting, but he didn't.

"Either you follow the crowd or make your own path," Williams says.

A December story in the Newark Star-Ledger described the neighborhood around Shabazz as smothered by police sirens, gunfire and weathered memorials to the dead.

In 2010, when Williams was there, stories reported gang fights in and out of the building, drugs being used openly and teachers getting punched and beaten.

That was his home, but he wouldn't allow it to be his life.

When he didn't have a Division I scholarship offer, Williams went to the playground, a sanctuary he used to get away from his troubles and forget the bloodshed that left friends dead or in prison.
"You walk outside your house and see drug-dealing and shootings, and you think it's normal," Williams says. "My friends wanted me to join them. At one time I did, but when I got a little older I said, 'I have to go shoot baskets.' It was my therapy. It took my mind off everything that was around me."

Three things helped change Williams: His older cousin, John, became a role model; another cousin, who was one of the best high school players in talent-laden Newark, got caught in a robbery and was locked up for a long time; and then there was AAU ball. It exposed him to a different way of life.

"Once you start going on AAU trips, you see a different world, one without the drugs and the shootings. You see there is a different way to live," Williams says.

Still without a scholarship to a Division I school, Williams took out loans and enrolled at Marshall University in Huntington, W.Va. He went there with a belief in himself that nobody else had. But things were rough. Often, he would not have food to eat. Eventually he left.

Williams contacted Brock Erickson, who had just been hired as the SCF head basketball coach. The two had met at a basketball camp, and Erickson immediately offered him a scholarship.

The 6-foot-7 swingman was just named Suncoast Conference Player of The Year in helping the Manatees qualify for this week's state junior college tournament.

It was his way of saying thanks. But he didn't have to. Erickson knows a gem when he sees one.

"Isaiah didn't come from a strong academic background, but works with his teachers, gets extra help and didn't miss a class the whole semester," Erickson says. "The neighborhood he comes from is brutal. It's so hard for kids to get out of there, but he doesn't forget others.

"Isaiah is the first one to volunteer for our community service projects and has done six or seven. He even went to feed the homeless with the softball team and has read to elementary school kids."

Growing up without a father, Williams used his creativity and took advantage of the older cousin he called "Yogi," who passed away recently from cancer.

He adopted his own role models in the Denver Nuggets Kenneth Faried and Randy Foye of the Utah Jazz, Newark high school products who made it to the NBA.

"If they can make it, I tell myself I can," Williams says.

The connection to the 6-8 Faried is intriguing because he was not highly recruited out of Newark Technology High and signed with Morehead State.
Despite his lack of size (for a big man), Faried is the NCAA's career rebound leader in the modern era (post 1973). He was selected in the first round of the 2011 NBA draft and leads the Nuggets in rebounding (9.6 per game).

Williams, who has signed with Iona College for next season, is more versatile. The 191-pounder possesses a deadly long-range shot and has the ability to soar above the rim.

Williams leads the Manatees in rebounding (8.3 per game) and is tied for the scoring lead (17 points per game). He tops the team in 3-point field goals, is shooting 41.8 percent from beyond the arc and is a key reason SCF is the nation's top-scoring junior college team at 98.3 points per game.

"Isaiah is the most complete player I've ever coached and has played all five positions for us," Erickson says. "His length and athleticism set him apart because he is so difficult to guard. He can shoot the three and is athletic, so when he gets in the lane he can finish.

"He is an absolute joy. When your best player is your hardest worker and wants to win to help his teammates get recruited, it makes everything so memorable."

State College of Florida's Isaiah Williams shoots a free throw against St. Petersburg in Wednesday night's Suncoast Conference game at Hal Chasey gymnasium. TIFFANY TOMPKINS-CONDIE/Bradenton Herald ttomkins@bradenton.com