



# BECAUSE *we are* CATHOLIC

## Van Brooks' keys to success are education and faith after life-changing injury

On daily trips from their west Baltimore home to Loyola High School in Towson, Van Brooks, Sr. reiterated to his son, Van, Jr., to "never put your eggs in one basket".

"I heard this for years," the younger Brooks told the Catholic Business Network of Baltimore at a Feb. 26 breakfast event. "It got to a point where I would try to fall asleep because I didn't want to hear it."

Brooks was a star football player at Loyola, on a fast track to an athletic scholarship when early in his junior year, his life changed. While making a routine tackle, he suffered a severed spinal cord injury that left him paralyzed from the neck down.

"When I was laying on my back in a hospital bed I realized I had put all my eggs in one basket," Brooks said. "Having a doctor tell you that you'll be like this for the rest of your life. That was one of the toughest things I have ever had to deal with but I soon realized if I was going to have any kind of success, it was going to come down to my education."

Brooks graduated from high school on time, earned a degree from Towson University and started a foundation with the hope that his incredible story will inspire others. But it did not come easy.

"This September it will be 12 years (since the day of the injury) but my faith was not restored until about three, four years ago," added Brooks, now 27. "I went through things, but there was always something missing. All I ever wondered was why me? Often times I went out to prove people wrong but once my faith came back it was no longer to prove others wrong, it was for myself."

During the past 11<sup>1/2</sup> years, Brooks has accomplished many things but none more inspirational than when he took his first steps in eight years in September 2012. Days later, he was struck with an idea.

"When I was injured there was an event for me where 1,300 people attended," Brooks added. "I didn't know 1,300 people and still don't. There is no way I could pay every one of those folks back. But I could definitely pay it forward."

Brooks founded Safe Alternative Foundation for Education (S.A.F.E), a non-profit whose mission is to raise awareness about the importance of an education, and having a Plan B ready if Plan A does not happen. The SAFE Center, which opened in October 2015, is a free youth facility that provides after-school and summer learning



*Van Brooks, Jr.*

opportunities for students at Franklin Square Elementary and Middle Schools.

"I work with the kids in the same west Baltimore community where I grew up," Brooks said. "We have a great group of kids who come in every Monday through Friday after school. They need a place where they feel safe and know they will receive a hot meal before going home. Often times I feel like my father because I am drilling them about the same things he did. It sounds weird but I was paralyzed so I could take a seat and understand things weren't going to work out the way I wanted them to work out but they are going to work out the way they are supposed to. It was to give back to my community with knowledge, resources and support."

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