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Ex-Rebel Ware takes different route

Lenny Ware is one of those people who humble us. Who is making the kind of difference most can't comprehend. Who is giving back in a phenomenal way.

Funny. All he wanted to do was coach a little football.

It's a lifetime from a high school field to the fifth floor oncology department of Sunrise Children's Hospital, from where kids fight for extra yards to where they fight for their lives, from where treatment might consist of taped ankles to where it means another round of chemotherapy.

Ware knows the football part. He played at UNLV



Ed Graney
COMMENTARY

from 1996 to 1999 and ranks among the program's top 10 career leaders in receptions, receiving yards, all-purpose yards and kickoff return average. He was something special.

Now, he's doing something extraordinary.

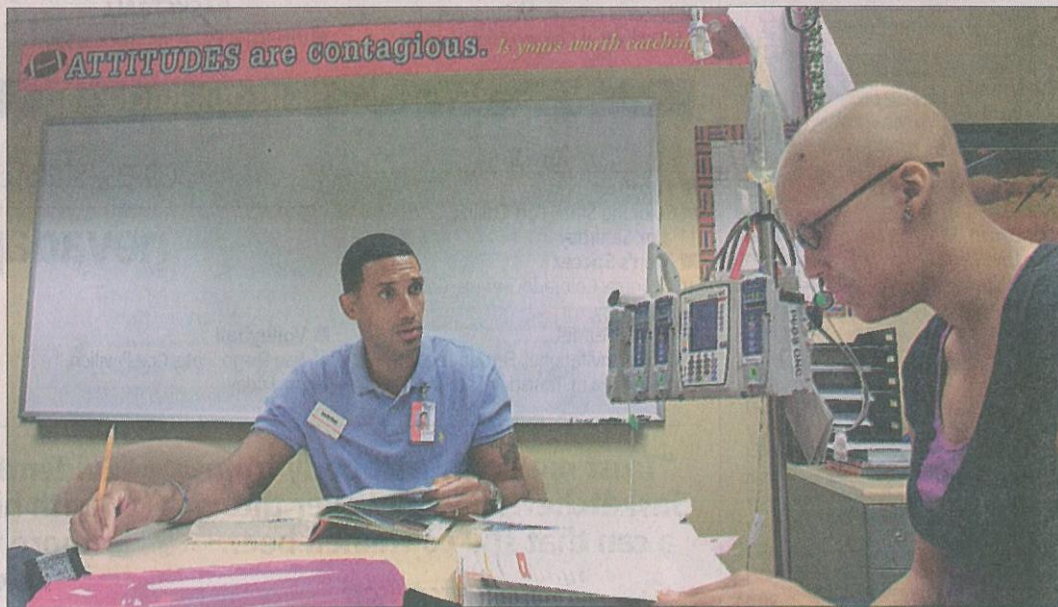
The Torino Classroom is a 340-square-foot diversion for critically ill children battling cancer and sickle cell and HIV/AIDS and hemophilia and other immune-related diseases, a place they can continue their education and keep up with schoolwork during treatment and recovery, a place they can forget about how sick they feel and escape the fears many hold about death.

Lenny Ware is their teacher. Their smile. Their encouragement. Their friend.

"We wanted someone in this position who could be more

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Injury led Ware to another challenge



GARY THOMPSON/REVIEW-JOURNAL

Former UNLV wide receiver Lenny Ware helps 17-year-old leukemia patient Mayra Altamirano with her U.S. history classwork Monday at Sunrise Children's Hospital's Torino Classroom for critically ill children.

► GRANNEY: *Injury made Ware seek another challenge*

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than just an educator," said Dr. Tonie Valesano, director of the Torino Classroom. "We wanted someone who could be a role model to the kids, who could provide them hope. It's not just about teaching the academics. It's about teaching them life and remaining positive through a very trying time.

"Lenny was a unanimous selection and the person we pursued aggressively. We were going to meet all his needs. He is an inspiration to these kids. He will be the last one to believe in each of them. Whatever happened to derail his athletic career, it was a blessing for us and these children and this community."

This is what happened: On his first NFL training camp play as an undrafted free agent with the Tennessee Titans, Ware ran a pattern, caught a ball from Steve McNair and blew out his knee. He tried making it in Canada and spent time in arena ball with the Las Vegas Gladiators, but what his mind wanted to do and what his body no longer could finally convinced him to seek another challenge.

He thought it was as a high school and then ultimately college coach, but then Ware walked into a special education class as a teacher's aid in California, and his view of the future changed. He felt something unique, unlike anything he had known in football.

He was drawn to kids with special needs and disabilities to the point he received a master's degree in education from UNLV in 2006. The last season he coached was as an assistant at Bishop Gorman High School in 2004, but it was his time as the department chair for special ed at Western High that somewhat prepared him for his current role.

Nothing can completely train anyone for tutoring an 11-year-old girl at her bedside one week and receiving a call about her dying the next, from helping her with fifth-grade English to mourning her passing. The

textbook for managing such emotion doesn't exist.

"I knew (death) was potentially going to be part of it, but now here it was, the real-life eye opener," said Ware, who has also lost a high school student to cancer. "I said, 'OK, it's real. It's not a myth, not something that just might happen.' They tell you to separate yourself from the situation, but you can't. I think of all these kids as my own.

"You know, I never had any real aspirations or dreams of becoming a teacher. I just wanted to coach football, and being in a classroom was a required part of it. But teaching changed my life and the (Torino Classroom) has directly influenced the husband and father I am (to his three children). I found my passion."

He is 31 and his wife, Amanda, is a social worker with the Nevada Childhood Cancer Foundation. Ware is as cut and trim as ever, as though he could run that go route with as much grace and skill as when he wore a UNLV jersey.

But instead of reviewing plays, he now researches different diseases and their treatments. He knows as much about blood platelet counts as he does how to beat a cover-2 defense. It's the sign of a terrific teacher, no?

It was this week when Mayra Altamirano, a 17-year-old suffering from leukemia, finished her work in science, and grabbed her teacher's laptop to call up a MySpace page.

"Mr. Lenny, come here," she said. "I want to show you a picture of when I had hair...."

"This (classroom) helps a lot," Altamirano said. "It gives us something to focus on than always on treatment. You wake up and you don't feel well, and you know there is something to occupy the time. Lenny helps us with that. He helps us a lot."

Lenny Ware.

One of those who flat out humbles us.

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