

# Looking Back At Broken 'Dreams'

Film's Key Players Have Moved On

By Mike Wise  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Monday, July 5, 2004; Page D01

*"People say, 'When you make it to the NBA, don't forget about me.' I feel like telling them, 'Well, if I don't make it, make sure you don't forget about me.' "*  
*-- William Gates, in the final scene of "Hoop Dreams"*

CHICAGO -- The asphalt is still cracked and dried, just as the neighborhood is still cracked and dried. Weeds sprouting from the concrete, muscling up to breathe in the heat of another Cabrini Green summer.

Ten years have passed, 10 years since one of America's most dangerous public housing projects became a laboratory for a documentary film director and his crew, who set out to find the essence of athletic hope among black children hypnotized by basketball in the inner city.

"Hoop Dreams" chronicled the NBA aspirations of two adolescent boys and their families. Their pursuit unveiled broader themes of struggle and adversity -- in a world constantly telling young William Gates and Arthur Agee they were not supposed to make it.

"If you think about it, we were the first reality series," William Gates, a pastor, said. "We just didn't bank in like everybody else. Nowadays, even the 'Survivor' losers go on TV and get paid."

The film's \$8 million box-office take made it the highest grossing documentary of all time. Since its theatrical release in October 1994, the only documentaries more successful have been Michael Moore's most recent film, "Fahrenheit 9/11," Moore's "Bowling for Columbine," and the IMax movie-like "Winged Migration."

Viewers first meet Arthur as a doe-eyed 14-year-old on his way to see NBA star Isiah Thomas at a prestigious basketball camp, hosted by a private Catholic high school his parents cannot afford. William soon fills the screen, emerging as his family's last beacon for pro basketball stardom. Their disparate journeys play out over three unsparing hours. Two teenaged protagonists use their skills and desire to try and vault them over every hurdle of urban blight: teen pregnancy, poverty, crime, crumbling public schools, parental drug use and abandonment.

After the credits rolled, their lives moved on.

William is 32 now. Arthur is 31. They have eight children between them, closets full of

sneakers and trophies, unresolved issues about why they didn't make it and how close they came, and a deep friendship, rekindled at least once a year.

Gates, still self-aware and socially conscious, is a senior pastor at the Living Faith Community Center in Cabrini Green, where he works at the Kids' Club, sometimes nurturing third-graders who cannot yet read and other times telling a young genius she tested in the top 3 percent nationally.

He came back to the neighborhood begrudgingly, after he was out of work for a time and his brother was gunned down in the street.

Remember Curtis Gates? He was the former playground king who gained weight, lost self-esteem and lived vicariously through his younger brother -- "All my dreams are in him now," he said in the film. He was murdered almost three years ago at age 36.

Arthur is still an infectious dreamer. His sole income now is derived from launching a "Hoop Dreams" clothing line (slogan: Control Your Destiny). He has partnered with MTV's Rock the Vote for a 50-city tour that he hopes will help promote the line.

"We're talking about writing \$60 million in orders," said Agee.

### **Family Development**

In one of the film's most powerful scenes, Arthur's father, Bo, wandered off the court to complete a drug deal, steps from where his son played. Viewers peer inside the Agees' darkened apartment after the electric bill could not be paid.

The maternal struggle of two women trying to keep their families together is another central theme.

You can almost smell Emma Gates's battered chicken crackle and pop in her fryer, and feel the empathy in William's mother when she says: "I really thought Curtis was going to make it, so I just wanted this one to make it. I want him to make it so bad, I don't know what I'm going to do."

And the suburban Catholic high school, plucking talented children from the playground and then playing God with their lives -- keeping one enrolled, discarding the other.

You see Sheila Agee as she extricates herself from welfare and enrolls in a nursing class. She finishes with the highest grade-point average and graduates quietly in a large room with a few other classmates. "I didn't think I could do it," she says, crying. "And people told me I wasn't going to be anything."

"You thought everybody else was crying when they saw that scene, I 'bout lost it," Arthur said. "To this day, everybody that comes up to me, asks, 'How's your Mom doing?'"

The filmmakers also captured the day when Arthur plays his father in a game of one-on-

one. By then, Bo Agee's crack addiction had put the family through hell. He had spent seven months in jail for burglary. He had physically abused his wife, Sheila.

Bo got religion and asked for forgiveness, and his family took him back. But his son never forgot.

They dueled shirtless on the asphalt, in the humidity of a Chicago summer, until Arthur began taking it to his father, who at one point tried to rearrange the score to his liking. Bo was laughing. His son was not.

"Ain't no con game going on anymore, Dad," he says before he reels off a string of moves and shots to beat his father. "I'm older now."

"We called it 'The Great Santini' scene," Steve James, the director, said over lunch at a Guatemalan restaurant a few blocks from where the film was edited. "We thought it was going to be poignant -- boy plays dad before he goes off to college. And then it suddenly exploded into this thing about Arthur's anger and resentment."

After James and his partners had paid their bills, he split the profits with the families, which he estimates totaled between \$175,000 and \$200,000.

Arthur's family pooled their shares, and eventually moved out of the West Garfield Park housing projects and into the neighboring Chicago suburb of Berwyn, where they now reside. William estimated he received about \$150,000, but concedes he "wasted some, gave a lot of money away and gave above and beyond to the church."

"I wish I would have known what a 41 percent tax bracket was back then," he said, ruefully. William married Catherine Mines, the mother of his infant daughter, Alicia, in the movie. Alicia is now 15. They had three more children -- William Jr. 9, Jalon, 6, and 7-month-old Marques -- and live in the Austin Community on Chicago's West Side.

"Oh, it's still the 'hood," he said, laughing. "But it's a lot safer than Cabrini."

Bo Agee, Arthur's father, is now a pastor at the Upper Room Outreach Ministry on Madison and Pulasky, where the movie was partly filmed. He celebrated the church's third anniversary two weeks ago with Steve James in attendance. Sheila is a private nurse who mostly works with well-to-do families, and William's mother, Emma, is still at the same job, working as a nurse's assistant. She was able to move out of Cabrini Green two years ago and now lives five minutes from William, Catherine and their children.

Arthur has four children, too -- two boys and two girls from four mothers, ranging in age from 13 to 7.

"They weren't planned kids, that's why I know they're here for a reason," he said. "They're here to teach me a lesson about responsibility."

"Where would I be if 'Hoop Dreams' never happened?" he asked. "I don't know. I'm very, very happy. It helped my family out. Not only financially, but emotionally. It put that love back -- it put what was important first."

Said Gates: "What would have been ideal was for me and Arthur's family to live happily and that we have enough money to do whatever we need to do. But it didn't pan out that way. We never caught that next wave."

### **Lost Opportunities**

Agee starred in junior college and played two years at Arkansas State. He said his dream flickered when he turned down playing for the CBA's Connecticut Pride in 1996. Agee had worked out with the team and felt ready but instead decided to take a small speaking role offered by James in "Passing Glory," a TNT film about Louisiana's first interracial basketball game.

"I was going to put another two- or three-year run into trying to get to the NBA, like these guys," Agee said last month, amid the squeak of sneakers at the league's annual pre-draft camp in Chicago. "Instead, I made \$17,000 for what? Seven weeks. I look at that now and I know I didn't make a real, 100 percent run. Outside, other social things intrigued me. I lost a little bit of the hunger.

"But it also opened my eyes up to reality: That ball is going to stop bouncing. That knee is going to give out."

He formed the Arthur Agee Role Model Foundation, which helps inner-city youths strive for a higher education, and visits Washington annually for a local Hoop Dreams scholarship fund's three-on-three tournament.

Gates committed to giving the game one more try at the outset of 2001. He put his ministry on hold and began working out with Michael Jordan during early preparation for Jordan's second comeback.

When Jordan began inviting NBA players to ratchet up the level of competition, Gates stayed home. Until Jordan called and insisted he come down.

"Will, we got your spot," Jordan told him. "I didn't give it away just because these guys showed up."

Gates held his own against NBA players, and Jordan promised him a tryout with the Wizards. He was all set to play in the team's summer league when he fractured a bone in his foot. The youngster in the film whose knee betrayed him was suddenly cursed again.

"That was my NBA dream," he said. "I never put that uniform on, but I knew I was good enough to play."

Curtis was murdered on Sept. 10, 2001, caught in an apparent love triangle. The family

was later told by police that he had been kidnapped by a man who was seeing the same woman. According to police reports at the time, he had run through the rear door of a home and actually telephoned police that he had been shot in the arm.

The assailant followed the trail of blood and fired three shots with a rifle as Curtis lay on the ground. William was in so much denial, he asked to see Curtis's lifeless body at the hospital the night of the murder.

Curtis's funeral was on a Saturday and William's workout with the Bulls came the following Tuesday. He performed well, but with so many guaranteed contracts the Bulls said only that they wanted to keep him on the reserve team and promised nothing.

"Curtis was the only one who knew about my comeback," William said. "He met Michael. He told me, 'If you make it, I'm quitting my job and travel where you travel.' "

The man police charged spent 2 1/2 years in jail, but circumstantial evidence led to an acquittal.

Gates played at Marquette and graduated with a communications degree. He scored well on the LSAT exam, before deciding he did not want to go to law school. He lost his counseling job and was unemployed for much of 2002.

"I was installing bathrooms, doing odd jobs," he said. "It got so bad at one point I was trying to go to grocery stores and, like, 'I'll bag.' "

He went back to the ministry, and between the Kids' Club and his own parish, Gates now pulls in about \$40,000 a year -- "Or \$30,000 less than what you're supposed to for a family of six," he said, half-smiling.

Will Jr., now 9, wants to see the entire movie, but for now Gates has only shown him the first two years of his high school career, before the knee injury and disenchantment creeps in.

"I'll show him the rest when he gets into high school," he said. "Psychologically, he has this image of his dad being successful right now. If he sees the adversity now, I think that could play heavy in his perception of himself. Any time stuff start going wrong, he could think, 'Well, it's supposed to be this way.' It happened to my dad. When he starts facing a little adversity, then I can work that in, to show him that I faced it, too."

### **Together Again**

"Hoop Dreams" still brings them celebrity. An intrepid student doing a term paper on the movie -- Northeastern University actually had a "Hoop Dreams" class as part of its curriculum -- got Arthur on the phone a few weeks ago and nearly fainted. "I said, 'Dude, calm down. I'll help you out,' " Agee said. He got an A-plus.

Last week, William spoke at St. Joseph's summer basketball camp -- just like Isiah

Thomas did when he and Arthur attended. One of the campers this year was Will Jr.

At the Kids' Club in Cabrini Green, Gates arrived for work recently in a steam-pressed cocoa dress shirt and matching slacks, burgundy shoes and a ring of jingling keys, larger than a high school janitor's, on his waistband. He is still the responsible kid who gave \$50 of his paycheck to his family in the movie.

Agee joined him an hour later. He wore a platinum rope around his neck, diamond-studded earrings and enough fabric in his baggy jeans and shirts to construct a five-man tent.

"What's up, A-gee," William said, affectionately.

"What up, dawg?" They clasped hands, embraced and laughed long and hard.

The family man and the class cutup, together again.

They were supposed to hang out on Saturday, but Agee forgot to call Gates back.

"What happened?" Gates said, laying on the guilt. "I keep tryin' to tell you, man, you my only outlet. You the only cat who can get me out of my element."

Later, when Arthur leaves for family court to make sure his child-support payments are current, Gates reflected on his bond with Agee, a bond transcending the film 10 years later.

"Arthur was always doing the things I wanted to do," he said. "I think we need each other. I keep his feet on the ground and he keeps mine off of it."

© 2004 The Washington Post Company