

## Los Angeles Times

September 24, 1991

# Jim Brown Taps Potential of 'Baddest Cats' in City

By JESSE KATZ  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The city lights twinkle far below Jim Brown's Hollywood Hills home, steam rises from his heated swimming pool and the boys from the 'hood sit in his mirror-paneled living room awaiting their weekly dose of self-esteem.

They come from Watts, Compton, Willowbrook and Carson, most of them former Crips and Bloods with long prison records, racy monikers and fading tattoos. Those without a ride from South-Central to Sunset Plaza Drive get door-to-door service, courtesy of their host, in a taxi or rented van.

The 55-year-old football Hall of Famer/movie star/*Playgirl* centerfold greets each of them with the smooth, grip-shifting handshake of the streets. They call him Mr. Brown. With seemingly no apprehension, he gives them free run of the house, lets them raid his refrigerator, play his stereo, swim in the pool.

"Some nights you will come up here and you will see the baddest cats in the city . . . the brothers society says you cannot do anything with," Brown says. "Yet we know these young men with their negative power, if turned positive, can change our communities. This is the source . . . the hopes for America."

For the last year, these reunions have been the soul of Brown's latest project, a 15-step course in personal responsibility he calls The Amer-I-Can Program. Its message, for which he says he has spent his life preparing, draws on the self-determination of Malcolm X, the capitalism of Ronald Reagan and the recovery plan of Alcoholics Anonymous.

At a time when police and politicians are at a loss to stem the rising tide of gang violence, Amer-I-Can is one of the hottest tickets in town. Brown — partly through the force of his personality and partly through the street credibility of the young men he has enlisted — has managed to convince some in power that they will accomplish little without the help of those who have fallen through the cracks.

His graduates — among them Chopper, Wig Out, T, Jawbone, Playmate, Hannibal and Twilight — make regular pilgrimages to the house, talk business, share feelings and bask in a few hours of luxury. Then they return to their neighborhoods, as well as to

California's prisons, where they teach "life-management skills" to young men and women who have never learned to believe in themselves.

Brown wrote the Amer-I-Can handbook himself, outlining simple lessons in the value of positive thought, proper communication, goal-setting, family relationships and job-seeking skills. A favorite catch phrase: Eliminate the negative, establish the facts and pick the best option.

"It's a dream come true," says Charles Harris, 25, a former Compton Avenue Crip who spent six years in custody between the ages of 12 and 21. "This taught me that if I can change myself, I can change the world around me."

Last week, Harris and several other graduates of Brown's program met with Mayor Tom Bradley, who was seeking to dampen tensions in the wake of an arson fire that left five dead at the Jordan Downs housing project in Watts. Reporters waited outside, expecting Bradley to comment on the blaze, but he emerged from the meeting wanting to talk only about Amer-I-Can.

"I think we have hit upon a gold mine," the mayor said. "We have the kernel of a major, major breakthrough."

The state Department of Corrections, which last year paid Brown nearly \$250,000 to teach the course to 2,100 inmates in eight prisons, has been equally impressed. Although officials have no system for measuring the program's effectiveness, rave reviews from the inmates prompted them to boost the contract to \$295,000 for the current fiscal year.

Word of the program also has filtered across the country, with contracts being worked out in Ohio, New York and Nevada. City officials in Las Vegas, under the auspices of the Mayor's Committee for a Better Community, recently pledged \$50,000 to Brown's group for help in dealing with their own gang scene.

"Certainly, there's an element of risk, but nothing else we've come up with has been particularly effective," says Las Vegas Mayor Jan Jones, who was able to persuade the Golden Nugget hotel to provide free room and board last week for four visiting Amer-I-Can representatives — all former gang members.

"These guys are from the same streets . . . and have generated a solution from their experience," Jones says. "That is not something I could ever develop."

What makes the endeavor unique is that Amer-I-Can is a private, for-profit business — "with emphasis on profit," says Brown, who estimates he has personally bankrolled the program with \$300,000. "No nonprofit nonsense."

Whenever the company wins a government contract, at least \$500 is deposited into each of nine neighborhood "hardship" funds. Each fund operates like a mini-franchise controlled by a group of top graduates — with titles such as captain, chief of staff, director of security — living in that community.

For Brown's devotees, it's a bit like a rich uncle giving them the Porsche keys when they have been told all their lives they would never learn to drive. "He allows us to use him as a catalyst, but not lose our dignity or manhood," says Hussain Lynks, 20, a former Grape Street Crip, who has lived all his life at Jordan Downs.

In the last month, money has gone to a girlfriend who needed diapers and medicine for her baby, somebody's mother who couldn't pay the light bill, bus passes for a several high school students and \$100 to the Zuñiga family, five of whom perished in the Jordan Downs fire.

Amer-I-Can funds also were used to pay funeral expenses for Steve Clemons, a 27-year-old father of four shot in the back by sheriff's deputies on Labor Day after he allegedly pointed a gun at them at Willowbrook Park.

"We're not slick — we don't have computers, we don't have fax machines, we don't have great brochures," says Brown, whose muscular frame, though now a bit creaky, still appears imposing in his tight black shorts and warm-up jacket. "But we do get the money directly to the individual who can do the job on the community level."

Because it is a private firm — it was incorporated one year ago — there are no outside standards to which the program must submit, no numbers Brown has to crunch in order to justify funding. If you like his product, you employ his services; if you don't, you don't. At any rate, he says, those who might scrutinize his efforts are the very people whose own ideas have already proven futile.

As he speaks to a group of about 50 homeboys and homegirls in his living room, Brown breaks out his best imitation of a bean-counting bureaucrat:

"What's your success rate, Jimmy?" mimics Brown, as the room bursts into hoots of laughter. "I say, 'What you mean, success rate?' Every day we got a success rate. . . . This is success right here. What are you going to do, tell these brothers that this doesn't help them?"

To demonstrate what his program is all about, Brown leads the group through a "feeling session," during which they are asked to look at a page with 267 adjectives and pick the word that best reflects their emotions.

Kimo Hutchinson, 21, a newcomer to the program, tells the others that he is feeling anxious, having recently returned empty-handed to his Crenshaw District home after five months of soul-searching in Nebraska. During that time, Hutchinson explains, he was arrested three times, stabbed once and found "nothing but brick walls for me."

Keith Shedrick, 30, a former Piru Cabbage Patch Blood who now trains other graduates to teach the Amer-I-Can course, stands up and offers words of encouragement.

“Now and then the thought crosses my mind that I want to go out there and just take mine, you know, just straight go on a crime spree,” says Shedrick, who wears a clenched fist carved from wood around his neck.

“But I just want you to know, brother, there’s a lot of support in this room. When I’m away from here, I be thinking about these brothers, and I don’t want them to read in the paper or hear about me being brought down after all this positive communication we’ve been having. So, I just want to let you know, stay strong, brother, stay strong.”

Compassion for the underdog is nothing new for Brown, who has long been an outspoken advocate for civil rights and black economic development. He has also twice successfully fended off allegations that he assaulted women; a judge dismissed one case and, in the other, prosecutors declined to file charges.

Born in segregated Georgia and raised in a white, affluent New York suburb, Brown battled 1950s-era racism to become what many gridiron aficionados still consider the greatest running back in the history of the game.

He retired from the Cleveland Browns in his prime in 1966 to try his luck in Hollywood, where he challenged stereotypes through his leading roles in such films as *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Split*.

His only personal experience with gangs came as a teen-ager, when he joined a group known as the Gaylords that cruised Long Island with switchblades and tried to pick up girls from rival high schools. But he believes the lesson of his life – that success is there for those who want it – is directly relevant to the troubled youths he sees today.

“I made myself a promise: for the rest of my life, I will never let anyone tell me what I can and cannot accomplish,” Brown writes in his 1989 autobiography, *Out of Bounds*. “As a black man in America, I would draw on that credo again and again.”

Although Brown is the president of the company and his home its headquarters, he takes pains to avoid the impression that this is merely a personality cult. He describes himself as a facilitator, a conduit, an element in the process. But it is clear that his charisma and celebrity status play large in the equation.

“He shares himself,” says James P. Smith, director of the city-run community center at the Nickerson Gardens housing project, where Brown’s group was paid \$10,000 last year to teach Amer-I-Can to about 20 youths. “That’s the kind of signal these kids are asking for.”

The most personal thing Brown shares is his home – “my castle and my sanctuary” – a four-bedroom, 3,700-square-foot spread where he has lived since 1968. Over the years, guests have included Mayor Bradley, Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, surfers from Pacific Palisades and contestants from the Miss Black California Pageant.

On a warm evening last week, Mayfield Winbush, a 33-year-old ex-Avalon Crip known as Jawbone, leaned against the railing of Brown's panoramic patio, soaking up the lights of the Los Angeles basin and the gentle buzz of crickets in the night air.

"Down there, sometimes there's no hope and so much anger," he said. "Coming up here is like coming to another world for us. I think Jim knows that, too."