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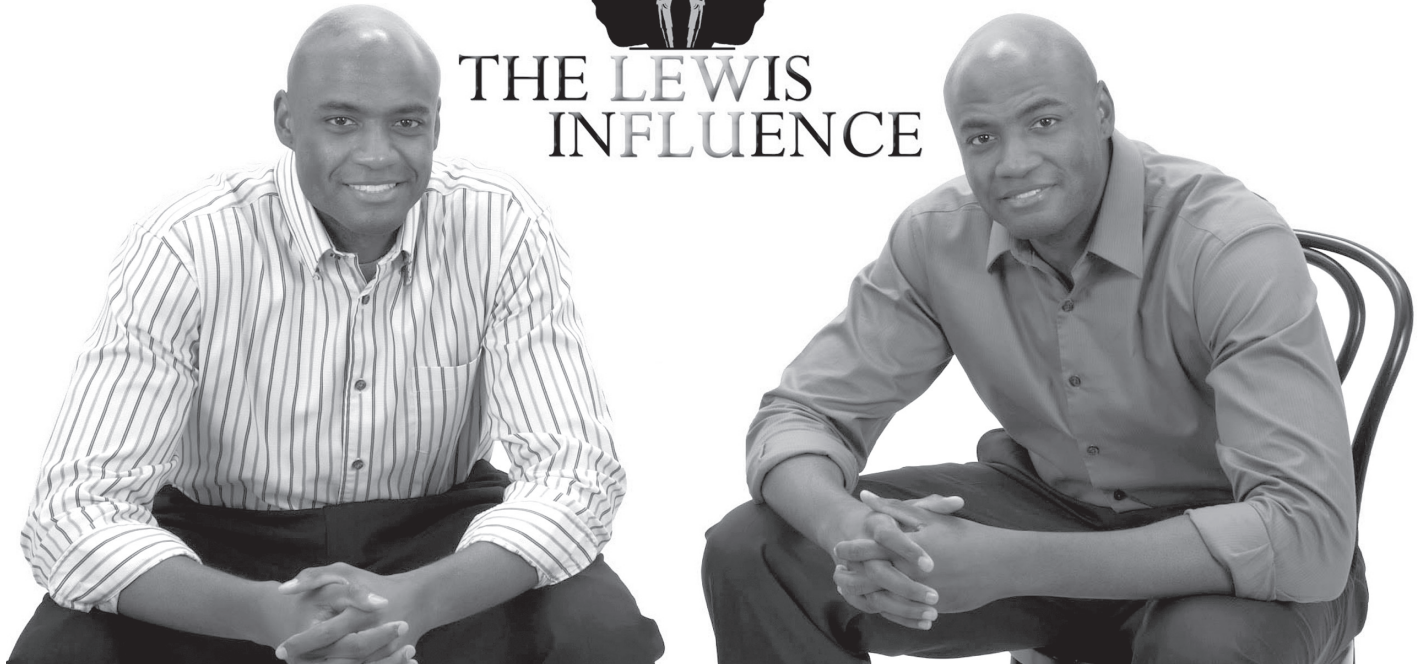
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parentlink

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THE LEWIS INFLUENCE



When twins Rodney and Ron Lewis, 1999 graduates of Lafayette High School, talk to groups of young people, they stress that success is within their reach, even if the odds seem stacked against them. The educators are grateful for the high expectations, the diverse student body and the exposure to lifestyles different than their own that they experienced in the Rockwood district. They also appreciate the way the faculty and staff got behind them. "They invested in us and rooted for us," notes Ron, pictured on left.

Photo by Portrait Innovations

LEWIS TWINS WELL SERVED BY ROCKWOOD EDUCATION NOW PASS ALONG LESSONS LEARNED

by Peggy Magee

It was double the pleasure when twins Rodney and Ronald Lewis walked the halls of Rockwood's Lafayette High School in the late 90's. Uncannily similar in looks, teachers and students found it nearly impossible to tell them apart. Additionally, they were affable and well liked, hard working in the classroom and fierce competitors on the basketball court. Cut from the same cloth, why they even had identical ACT scores!

Fast forward 15 years and the young husbands and fathers still mirror each other. At age 33, they both have impressive jobs, plus work as a consulting team, visiting schools and youth centers to point the way to young adults about achieving success in college and life.

It's a topic they are passionate about, having grown up in a north St. Louis neighborhood known for, in their words, "drive-bys and drugs." Despite the odds, they found success and now want to give back "by providing guidance and inspiration to young people," explains Rodney, principal of Griffith Elementary School in the Ferguson-Florissant district. Ron, director of the TRIO Student Services Support Program at St. Francis University in Fort Wayne, IN, and adjunct professor at Ivy Tech Community College in Indianapolis, sums up their zealous strategy: "We advise students to roll up their sleeves and tell their inner city neighborhoods, 'You can't stop me!'"

The twins especially direct their message to first generation college students because that is what they were. In a book they are currently writing titled *Gritty*, the dynamic educators say they use relatable principles with compassionate stories from their college experiences

to convey the strength of a "gritty" mindset.

Their own tenacity grew from observing their parents' hard working ways. Too, their mom and dad's keen interest in their positive development motivated the twins to make their parents proud. The 1999 Lafayette High grads also credit the voluntary transfer program and share similar sentiments about the benefits of attending school in the Rockwood district. Again, alike in every way.

Although, at first, each felt in Rodney's words "culturally inadequate," when they transferred to Rockwood's Crestview Middle School from their all-black St. Louis public school, the exposure they gained to other ethnicities, lifestyles and ways of thinking was valuable.

The difference between their old and new school and nearby vicinities was startling, "like going from point A to point Z," reports Rodney. What they found in Rockwood, he says — rigorous academics, grounds and buildings on the caliber of a college campus and a diverse student population — prepared them well. The school's diversity, he points out, "was reflective of the real world." About the academics, he notes, "We had to put in extra work. More was required of us." Ron adds, "Our parents expected us to achieve."

They did, with the support of faculty and staff. "They pumped us up," says Rodney about the Lafayette administrators, their teachers and coaches, by keeping tabs on them and dispensing advice. Ron concurs: "They helped groom us. They invested in us and rooted for us. We are extremely appreciative."

Going back and forth between their two worlds — the inner city and the wealthy suburbs — helped the twins build, in their words, "social capital." Explains Rodney, "There is time for 'playing' and a time for 'business.' It's important to know the difference."

Ron talks about how their west county world opened his eyes to possibilities. "When I saw where my

friends lived and what they had, I thought, I want that." And when he discovered that his friends' moms and dads had college degrees, he thought, "Well I can get one too if it means I can live like this."

And so the pair did, thanks to full athletic scholarships to play basketball for St. Louis Community College at Meramec and then Barry University in Miami, FL. They both received a bachelor's degree in Broadcast Communication, followed by master's degrees and even doctorate degrees. Ron has a master's in sports management and is currently pursuing a Ph.D in global leadership from Indiana Technology Institute. Rodney holds two master's degrees: one in teaching and the other in educational administration. He earned an Ed.D in educational leadership from Maryville University.

For Rodney, Crestview Middle School was his "gateway" to a fruitful educational journey where each opportunity made him want to move upward to the next. At one point after his graduation from Barry University, he returned to Lafayette High as a hall monitor while earning his certification in physical education and health at Lindenwood University. His high school delivered for him then too. He was asked to coach men's basketball. Teachers and administrators respected him for the work he did mentoring students and regarded him as part of the educational team. "The experience I gained and the advice I received helped put the pieces of my career path in place." He went on to land a P.E teacher job in the Parkway district, followed by assistant principal jobs— first in Parkway and then in Valley Park.

"Seizing the moment" is the phrase the twins use to describe the way they took full advantage of every opportunity that came their way in Rockwood. "We were always asking 5,000 questions," admits Ron. "Soak it dry" is Rodney's description of how

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FORMER STUDENT SHARES POSITIVE MEMORIES OF EDUCATION

by Peggy Magee

Bryan Clay had a lot to reminisce about when he made a sales call on the VICC Office in Clayton. As a sales executive for Shred-it-St. Louis, he researches the companies he calls on to talk about the advantages of his shredding service. When he realized that VICC is the organization that made it possible for him — a teenager from the city — to attend school in the Valley Park district, he had plenty of memories to share with Rose Mary Cockrell, the VICC staff person with whom he met.

Chatting about his teachers and coaches, the administrators and the friends he made, the 1987 graduate of Valley Park High School summed up his 20 minute conversation with Cockrell by saying: "I wouldn't have traded my education in Valley Park for anything."

But he had some major misgivings at first. "I flat out didn't want to go to school out there." Firstly, all his friends were enrolled at Ritenour High School, which is much closer to the north St. Louis neighborhood where he grew up attending city public schools. Valley Park, on the other hand, is off Highway 44 — near "where the rocks are," he remembers telling his friends as a locator note for the bluffs near Fenton. Besides that, the school doesn't have a football team, which was a huge disappointment to him.

He describes his freshman year as "a time of acclimation for all of us." This was back in the early 80's and for most resident students, it was the first time they attended school with more than one or two African-Americans.

Similarly, for the transfer students, it was generally the first time they had more than a couple Caucasians in school with them. There were no African-American teachers. Administrators knew this was uncharted territory. They set the tone by embracing the new students, making them feel welcome and comfortable. Clay describes the feeling of "commonality" that existed among students: "We were all treated the same. There was no preferential treatment given."

After the initial period of transition, Clay reports that the black and white schoolmates formed friendships, brought together by their shared classes, love of sports and competitive spirit. Academically, he was a good student, fueled by the "high value" placed on education by his parents, teachers and coaches. With the absence of football, Clay took up basketball, baseball and cross country. He was good at each but especially excelled at basketball. Because of his school and family's high expectations for him, he worked equally hard on his studies.



Valley Park graduate and Shred-it sales executive Bryan Clay stands with VICC staffer Rose Mary Cockrell beside a locked console for document shredding that is serviced by Clay's company. When Clay made a sales call to the VICC Office recently, he talked with Cockrell for 20 minutes about his positive experiences being part of the voluntary transfer program. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

Clay says he learned an important lesson by having to turn in a different direction athletically. "No matter how bleak a situation seems, there is always something positive that comes from it." For him it was learning new sports. He was named captain of the basketball team. His baseball team was the first in the history of Valley Park to go to state. "It was a good year for the Hawks," he points out, name dropping Valley Park's mascot. (He went on to play basketball and run track at University of Central Missouri before returning to St. Louis and

attending St. Louis Community College at Meramec.)

The Valley Park teammates spent time together outside of school as well. Clay tells of hanging out, studying and eating meals at the homes of friends who lived near the school, either before or after practice. In the summer, they got together for pick-up games, both in Valley Park and the city. Clay notes that even though the county kids said they hardly ever went into the city, "They came in for some pick-up games with us!"

At the time, Clay didn't give this co-mingling of cultures

much thought except that they were fun times. Looking back on it now, as a working adult with a wife and two grown sons, he is more insightful. "It really helped knock down barriers and stereotypical mindsets that people can have when they are never exposed to anything." What he experienced in Valley Park jibes with the beliefs he holds today as a deacon at First Baptist Church of St. John. "It's the content of one's character that is important. It's about having an open mind and an open heart."



Message from the
CEO
David S. Glaser

As the end of the school year approaches, so do opportunities to celebrate all of our students' success. Like me, hopefully you have had the opportunity to attend recognition programs for your children. This is the time of year when the hard work of our students and the support they have received from their parents and families begin to pay off. Whether that recognition is in the form of an academic award, a musical or artistic award or recognition for a job well done in an athletic endeavor, I join with you in saying well done and in celebrating your students' successes and achievements.

In addition to the immediate recognition that our students receive, sometimes, as is described in the articles in the current issue of *Parent Link*, their success may occur or continue to occur later on in life. I was particularly struck by the comments made by the Lewis twins when they noted their parents' hard-working ways and knowing their mom and dad's keen interest in their development and how it motivated them to make their parents proud. Make no doubt, the attention you give your children and the importance you place on their education will make a huge difference in their ultimate success. Some of that success is earned immediately and other success occurs later in life as they attend college, get jobs, and have opportunities to give back to their communities and families. Then they too can pay it forward by making a difference in the lives of students that are currently attending school.

My wife sometimes laments that I am a hopeless music lover and pay attention not only to the beat of the music but also the words. I recently heard a new song by Switchfoot and the lyrics were haunting and even somewhat motivational:

*"Is this the world you want?
Is this the world you want?
You're making it
Every day you're alive.
You change the world.
You change the world
Every day you're alive!"*

Wow! Whether we realize it or not, each of us truly has the opportunity to affect the world in which we live. By our actions and every day decisions, we make the world what it is and change the world into what it can become. Let's together go out and make the world and change the world into a better place for the benefit of our children and their future and all of our futures.

LEWIS TWINS WELL SERVED BY ROCKWOOD EDUCATION (from page 1)

students should make the most of their education as they did.

In school and in the workforce, the twins have gleaned much insight about overcoming the odds — advice they share in their workshops and book. "There is no pigmentation when it comes to possessing passion, drive, determination and being hungry to succeed," notes Rodney. Both brothers emphasize the power of networking and importance of building relationships. "Having someone else push your cause is necessary," points out Ron. "You need others to believe in you and help you."

They are grateful that Rockwood educators stepped up for them.



Two Students Honored for Heroism

Two students from Rockwood's Crestview Middle School demonstrated kindness and good judgment when they took quick action to help another student who fell ill on the bus ride to school in January. Daija Parker, left, raced toward Elijah Clark, right, when she saw his head slumped down at his chest. She talked to him to find out what was wrong when he then fell to the floor. She attempted to help him back in his seat. She stayed by his side while the bus driver, Kennedy Taylor, center, pulled over on the highway, checked on Elijah and alerted the bus company and the school. An ambulance was called. Kiara West, not pictured, who observed what was happening, remained calm and described the incident to the bus driver who communicated details to the EMS responders. The bus driver filled out an incident report commending the young ladies and the school recognized them at lunch. Elijah was back at school soon and grateful to the girls. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman