

# Volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

## County Education Helps Groom Students for State Leadership Positions

by Peggy Magee

Two current members of the Missouri House of Representatives are former voluntary transfer students and both believe that the skills and insight they gained from their experiences shaped their leadership styles. Tishaura Jones, Democrat from the city's 63<sup>rd</sup> district, is a 1990 graduate of Affton High and Clem Smith, Democrat from the city's 71<sup>st</sup> district, is a 1995 graduate of Clayton High.

### Tishaura Jones Cites High Expectations in Affton

Jones, 39, who holds the leadership position of Assistant Minority Floor Leader, gives rave reviews for the "great" education she received in the Affton school district in south St. Louis County. She admits she is not as enthusiastic about her very early and long bus commutes from the family's home in north St. Louis. Yet the discipline it required, over and above the demands of her classes, made her a better student, she points out. "I remember that my fifth-grade teacher Ms. Winkler taught me some hard lessons about finishing my homework and not making excuses. She set a higher bar and I had to work really hard to reach it."

Those practices were helpful to her in middle school at Mackenzie (now Rogers) as she recalls being named "student of the month" in the eighth grade, a recognition by teachers for exhibiting model student behavior.

At Affton High, she was part of an experimental accelerated program for bright students. "All of my teachers expected a lot from me," she remembers. And Jones responded positively to that, earning above average grades while participating in many extracurriculars – marching band, cheerleader, basketball team manager, yearbook staff and the student response team, aimed at helping resolve student disputes.

One administrator who sticks out in Jones' memory is high school counselor Joseph Scoggin, now retired. He took many African-American students under his wing, she says, keeping them abreast of scholarships and grants and encour-



This past summer, while attending a policy briefing conference in Washington, D.C., Missouri state representatives Tishaura Jones and Clem Smith were invited to a reception at the White House where they met President Obama, a highlight of their political careers. Both legislators are former voluntary transfer students and credit their county school education with helping them acquire their leadership qualities.

aging them to attend college fairs. "I'll never forget going to the Black College Fair at St. Louis Community College. I returned to his office with three schools: Howard, Hampton and Spelman. One of the other counselors discouraged me from applying to them, saying that my grades weren't high enough to get accepted. Not Mr. Scoggin. He helped me with the applications and I was accepted to both Howard and Hampton."

She chose Hampton University in Virginia where she majored in finance. Upon graduation, she briefly worked as an investment bank analyst in Los Angeles. After returning to St. Louis, she spent the next several years in different industries in an attempt to find her calling. She then made a career change to healthcare, prompting her to return to school

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FALL  
2011

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## State Leadership Position *(continued)*

for a master's degree in healthcare administration from St. Louis University's School of Public Health. For more than 10 years she worked in hospitals and community health centers.

In 2008, Jones changed career directions again and ran for the legislature when a state House seat opened up. Since then, she has risen to the number two post in the House Democratic Caucus, and most recently, worked with Republican colleagues on the issue of school choice. Believing strongly that Missouri families should have access to quality schools, she sponsored a bill expanding charter schools, broadening the entities that can sponsor them and setting clearer standards for them. While no action was taken in the session, she intends to champion the issue again next year. "As single mother of a young child, I feel that my role as a legislator is to try to level the playing field so that all parents have good choices for their children's education."

Since entering the General Assembly, Jones has heard from some of the Affton staff. A congratulations card from high school social studies teacher Loretta Selzer sits on her desk. "It's a reminder to me of one of the most warm hearted people I've ever met," she points out, adding that she admires Selzer because she always expected a lot from her students. The young state rep was especially humbled by a visit from former superintendent Gay Tompkins, who is now retired. Dr. Tompkins commented to Jones that she was not at all surprised by how her political career has taken off. "Dr. Tompkins told me, 'You had it in you all along,'" Jones notes.

Last year, Jones returned to Affton High for her 20-year reunion. "I went because I was a little homesick," she explains. "I made lifelong friends there and I wanted to reconnect in person with them, instead of just keeping in touch on Facebook."

She credits those friendships – with people of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds – with how she has developed as a person. "I feel I am well-rounded and able to relate well with all people. And I have Affton to thank for that."

### **Clem Smith Stresses Importance of Exposure which he Received in Clayton**

Smith, 34, compares the neighborhood he grew up in – next to a housing project near the intersection of Delmar and Union – to what he encountered in Clayton schools, as, "the difference between night and day."

Starting at Clayton in kindergarten, he reports, "It was my first experience being around children who were not black. Where I grew up, there didn't seem to be a Caucasian person within 10 miles." The contrasting worlds presented challenges that lead to playground scuffles, and some rather amusing memories. During his years at Meramec Elementary, he was the only African-American male in his grade level, "and so I became the resident expert on all things black," he recalls with a chuckle. "Even my teachers looked to me to lend insight about Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil War."

However the plusses far outweighed the strain of being in the distinct minority. His classmates and their families were very welcoming and the exposure he gained was invaluable. "I was invited to homes in upscale parts of Clayton. My friends had parents who were doctors and lawyers. I saw the possibilities." He still maintains friendships with kids he met in elementary and middle school.

He describes the Clayton district as a kind of "melting pot," with students of many different cultures represented. "That was a good thing – having to learn to respect differences and get along," he says, adding that Clayton resident students and their families also benefited from this multicultural atmosphere. "Being able to relate to people of other cultures and backgrounds is relevant in today's world," he notes. "It's bigger than you think," he adds, pointing out that some people, by age 25 or 30, have not had that kind of exposure and it can be problematic. "It's best to get it early," he advises.

Smith appreciates the level of education he received in Clayton. "My workload seemed a lot heavier than that of my neighborhood friends and they weren't really familiar with advanced placement or college credit courses." They didn't talk much about college either, while Smith says there was never a doubt in his mind that he would continue his education. "College was just a natural thought for me because 98 percent of Clayton students go on to college."

He started out at Southern Arkansas University but found it was not a good fit, so he returned to St. Louis after his freshman year and landed an assembly line job at Chrysler in Fenton, where he spent the next 13 years, his final ones as an inspector. While working full-time, he completed his degree at Columbia College-St. Louis. He also became a union official at Chrysler, not only the first African-American to hold that leadership position, but also the youngest person. "I was good at talking to both black and white employees because my education in Clayton provided me with that experience," he says.

About two years ago, Smith moved to The Boeing Co. where he is an aircraft assembly mechanic, working on the F18. Last January, he began his first term in the House of Representatives and was appointed Deputy Minority Whip, a role he describes as "getting everyone on the same page." He returns to his job at Boeing when he is not in Jeff City. Smith points out how his two jobs are connected: "I am shaping policy on many issues, including the machines that keep America safe. I see my role as a voice for the working class. I'm a blue collar kind of guy."

Reflecting on what is gained by being accepting and open-minded toward all people, Smith uses books as an example. "In order to fully enjoy them, you need to read all the chapters and get to know all the characters. You can't skip over some."

# Affton Grad Honored for Public Service

Another former voluntary transfer student who served in the Missouri House is remembered fondly by the Affton district, where he attended school (class of 1990) and was a classmate of current state representative Tishaura Jones (see main article). Sherman Parker, a Republican representing St. Charles' 12th district from 2003 to 2006, died in 2008 at age 37 from a brain aneurysm. Profiled in the spring 2003 edition of *The Volunteer*, Parker credited his experiences in Affton with giving rise to his political career. As

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an elected official, he returned to Affton High to talk to students about his involvement in government. In 2009, the Affton Alumni Association inducted Parker, posthumously, into its Hall of Fame.

Parker and Jones had maintained a close friendship since their paths crossed in the sixth grade in the Affton district. Jones was at the hospital when Parker died and she is still deeply saddened by his passing. "It hurts that he is not here to debate with," she says.



# Eureka Student Transforms Herself,

## *Thanks to Many People Who Believe in Her*

by Peggy Magee

A sense of pride and happiness runs through Tia Paulette when she shows off her miniature chair, enshrined in a plastic case, with the names of several staff members from her school – Rockwood’s Eureka High – printed on it. The tiny chair was a graduation gift from school custodian Tom O’Connor who crafted it. For Tia, it serves as a symbol of a turning point in her life when she transformed herself from a smart aleck, troublemaker with no future to a respected role model who plans to become a lawyer.

In her sophomore year at Eureka, Tia, in a fit of rage, threw a chair at another female student. It was the final straw for the young woman whose anger and poor attitude and work ethic were fueled by an impoverished home situation in north St. Louis that, in her eyes, hindered her from reaching her potential. She is candid about what she was like before she was suspended from school for 49 days because of the chair incident: “I was quite the troublemaker, a manipulator, a liar. I hung out with the wrong people.”

In those weeks away from school, Tia had plenty of time to reflect. “I was miserable,” she recalls. “I loved my school.” When she did return, she was concerned about how she would be perceived. To her amazement, all of the staff welcomed her back and the ones who responded to the chair incident were the most forgiving of all. It is their names written on the tiny chair. Audrey Bell was one of the hall monitors on duty, Tia reports. “After my suspension, Ms. Bell and I talked and she told me she was disappointed with me at the time because she knew I was capable of so much more.” That vote of confidence made a big impression on Tia.

Many others passed along encouraging words to her as she set about trying to make a fresh start. “I got so much support from so many people – teachers, the principals, counselors, secretaries, lunch ladies.” It was the



Tia Paulette is forever grateful to the faculty and staff at Rockwood’s Eureka High for helping her believe in herself enough to change her ways and move in a positive direction. Not only did she improve her behavior and grades, she became a role model to other students. Here she gives her commencement speech, in which she made the point that she and her classmates developed “intangible qualities,” such as persistence, courage and respect, thanks to the staff “who put their hearts and souls” into making certain that occurred.

*Photo by Samantha Vanover, Eureka High School*

push she needed. She didn’t want to let any of them down.

Being away from her classes for so long presented challenges, but Tia knuckled down and studied hard, often as much as seven to eight hours a night. Her geometry teacher, LeAnn Hottelman, was skeptical that Tia could catch up, but Tia resolved to prove her wrong. “Mrs. Hottelman was dazzled,” notes Tia, by what she was able to accomplish – nearly perfect grades on all tests and 98 percent on the final! In her other classes, she also excelled, earning A’s in nearly all of them.

Wanting more positive distractions in her daily routine, she got involved in lacrosse and winter guard, an indoor color guard activity. It was impossible to go home between the end of school and the start of practice, so she went to the home of a teammate, Kellie Kavanaugh, who lives near the school. Tia developed a close relationship with the Kavanaugh family – Adam and Denise and their two children. The family’s love and kindness were also instrumental in Tia’s transformation and they continue to be of immense support to her.

Always outgoing and communicative, Tia made known to the Eureka staff her desire and determination to change. “I knew I wanted a better life and so I made a pledge to stay in school and give it my all,” she explains. When the staff saw evidence of her success, they rewarded her with leadership tasks. She spoke at a diversity panel presented for teachers, addressing what life is like for the city kids who come to Rockwood. “I told them many of us don’t have much hope in our lives.

We don't dream big because we are not aware of how much we are cable of," she explained. The staff reassured her that she could have the same bright future as other students if she continued to work hard. "It began to sink in for me – that I am in control of my own destiny," she recalls.

There was no stopping her then; she was energized. So much so that she wanted other students to see the light. She eagerly shared her story, crediting her school family with making such a difference in her life. Freshman principal Jennifer Strauser describes Tia as a role model, noting that she regularly imparted words of advice on younger students who struggled to get along. "I simply put her in a room with them, closed the door, and let the magic happen," she reports.

Tia ended her Rockwood education in a way she could have never imagined. The scholarships she earned were outnumbered only by the accolades she received. She was selected as a commencement speaker and her insightful speech triggered tears of happiness and pride from her family and the Kavanaughs.

Her speech reflected her personal journey at Eureka and what she valued most. It began: "This is the end of our senior year; the golden year. The year of age, of responsibility, of forgiveness and of appreciation. The year of integrity, self-awareness, of respect and of recognition." She cited other qualities that she and her classmates gained from their Eureka education: persistence, courage, kindness, problem-solving. She talked about the staff members "who put their hearts and souls" into ensuring that students develop these characteristics along with the necessary book knowledge. It is the "intangible qualities," she said, "that will carry us through the rest of our lives."

Tia intends to put to use those qualities at the University of Missouri-Columbia where she is now, intently focused on her pre-law coursework. She is the first of her parents and siblings to graduate from high school, let alone attend college. Equally exciting for Tia is that the cost of higher education won't be a burden on her. The balance of her college expenses – after scholarships, grants and financial aid – will be paid by a local family, both parents who are lawyers, who heard about Tia's story from Adam Kavanaugh. "This wonderful couple has agreed to pay for all my college expenses and their generosity overwhelms me," notes Tia.

Grateful for her many blessings, Tia intends to make a difference in the lives of others by continuing to do her best and setting a good example. "I see my future as being directly linked to the future of others who come after me. It's as if I'm on stage and I have to perform the best I can. I want my success to inspire other students to become leaders."

# VICC Counselors Offer Workshops for Schools



VICC counselor Jennifer Christy works with a group of Brentwood Middle School students last spring as part of a multi-week workshop. The VICC counselors offer a number of workshops for students, parents and staff that are available free of charge to participating school districts. For more details, contact Lisa Gray, 314.721.8422, ext. 3015 or lgray@choicecorp.org.  
*Staff Photo*

In addition to working individually with students on an as needed basis, the VICC counselors also offer a variety of workshops that schools can request.

Among the workshops are a training model for groups of girls, a workshop that focuses on the concerns and issues that face the African-American male student, a middle and high school transitional program, a workshop designed to improve race relations among middle and high school students, a strength based curriculum that helps overcome challenges with solutions that youth can understand and workshops for both students and parents on the achievement gap. They also offer a workshop designed to help school staff better understand their African-American transfer students.

## WORKSHOPS

- **Conflict Mediation**
- **Bus Behavior**
- **Girls Within Reach**
- **Survival Kit for Young Men**
- **I Choose Success**
- **Enriching Race Relations through Education**
- **Why Try?**
- **Tests Matter: What You Learn Will Help You Earn**
- **For Parents: Tests Matter**
- **Understanding Your African-American Transfer Students**

All workshops are offered free of charge and can be scheduled by contacting Lisa Gray at the VICC, 314.721.8422, ext. 3015 or lgray@choicecorp.org.

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*A newsletter published by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation to spread the word about the positive things happening in the voluntary transfer program and to offer educators a glimpse at innovative programs helping students succeed at area schools.*

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# Message from the CEO



I suspect we have all heard many moving stories of how our acts of caring and kindness result in the betterment of community and sometimes even ourselves. Who has not heard of the expression “Pay it Forward” or that our good deeds are rewarded? We hear touching stories on the radio of how the person in line ahead of us at the local drive-thru paid for our coffee or our food and, hopefully, we are motivated to do the same for others. My Mom uses the expression that we should “cast our bread upon the waters” and that our acts of kindness would result in someone being kind to us in the future – and even if they didn’t

our day would be enriched knowing that we helped out a fellow human being.

As educators we have the unique opportunity to positively impact the lives of the students we encounter. The stories in this issue of the *Volunteer* highlight several former students who were profoundly affected by support staff, teachers, counselors and administrators in the schools they attended. This month I’d like to share a touching story (apparently somewhat embellished, according to Snopes.com) about how what we sometimes believe to be small acts of kindness can ultimately make a profound difference.

## **A Glass of Milk – Paid in Full**

One day, a poor boy who was selling goods from door to door to pay his way through school, found he had only one thin dime left, and he was hungry. He decided he would ask for a meal at the next house. However, he lost his nerve when a lovely young woman opened the door. Instead of a meal he asked for a drink of water. She thought he looked hungry so brought him a large glass of milk. He drank it slowly, and then asked, “How much do I owe you?” “You don’t owe me anything,” she replied. “Mother has taught us never to accept pay for a kindness.” He said, “Then I thank you from my heart.”

As Howard Kelly left that house, he not only felt stronger physically, but his faith in God and man was strong also. He had been ready to give up and quit.

Years later that young woman became critically ill. The local doctors were baffled. They finally sent her to the big city, where they called in specialists to study her rare disease. Dr. Howard Kelly was called in for the consultation. When he heard the name of the town she came from, a strange light filled his eyes. Immediately he rose and went down the hall of the hospital to her room. Dressed in his doctor’s gown he went in to see her. He recognized her at once. He went back to the consultation room determined to do his best to save her life. From that day he gave special attention to the case.

After a long struggle, the battle was won. Dr. Kelly requested the business office to pass the final bill to him for approval. He looked at it, then wrote something on the edge and the bill was sent to her room. She feared to open it, for she was sure it would take the rest of her life to pay for it all. Finally she looked, and something caught her attention on the side of the bill. She began to read the following words: *“Paid in full with one glass of milk. Signed, Dr. Howard Kelly.”*

We may think our acts of kindness are small and insignificant but you never know what the result may be. The student we are educating today could be the next member of the Missouri Legislature or even President, a future attorney or physician, or may even return and become a teacher or administrator in one of our schools, or a future Superintendent.

So believe in each and every student – it will make a difference to them – and also to you!

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