

Vicc volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program



Michael Liddell sits outside the St. Louis Board of Education building, in a courtyard dedicated to his mother, school desegregation pioneer Minnie Liddell. Her landmark lawsuit brought changes to the St. Louis education scene and opportunities for students. Michael, who is himself a product of the magnet schools and holds a master's degree in business, wants to continue his mother's legacy of creating "a level playing field" for all students.

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

"GOOD FIGHT" BY MINNIE LIDDELL MADE OPPORTUNITIES POSSIBLE FOR STUDENTS

Son Michael Wishes to Keep Trail She Blazed Alive

by Peggy Magee

He's a college graduate with a master's degree who has worked at enough jobs to know what he does not want to do for a living. What he would like to do is use his brains, his strong interpersonal skills and his insightful understanding of the St. Louis education scene to make a difference in the lives of others.

This 36-year-old husband and father of two wants to make his mark in education, inspired by his late mother, Minnie Liddell, and her 30-year crusade — one that ultimately led to the creation of specialty magnet schools, which have helped integrate St. Louis schools, and the nation's largest school choice program, that has allowed students to transfer between the St. Louis district and participating county districts.

"Mom fought a good fight," notes Michael Liddell, the youngest of Minnie's five children, referring to the meetings, the stacks of legal reading, the phone calls and days in court that consumed a large part of his mother's life. Michael was a recipient, at the time, of the resulting new educational opportunities. Unlike his older siblings who, because of their ages, could only

avail the magnets for a few years, Michael started and ended his education at the Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) schools, beginning at Shaw, moving on to Marquette and graduating from Central in 1994.

The magnets, with their strong academics centered around a themed focus, attract both St. Louis city and county students. They were established to settle a 1972 federal lawsuit filed by the parents of five black students who pushed for quality, integrated schools within the city's public education system. Liddell v Board of Education of St. Louis was filed in the name of Minnie's oldest son, Craton, who passed away at the age of 43 in 2002. This year marks the 40th anniversary of the landmark desegregation case which changed the face of education in the St. Louis metro area.

Though the case settled in 1999, Michael is still involved with aspects of it and he would like to continue the work of his mother in creating "a level playing field" for all students, he says. "It's about receiving the resources and support for a good academic founda-

See inside "GOOD FIGHT"

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"GOOD FIGHT"

continued from page 1

tion," he explains. Having worked as a substitute teacher, he can attest that the lack of funding for some districts means limited school resources which puts students at a disadvantage. To alleviate that disparity, he believes parents need to be pro-active and seek out opportunities separate from school to help give their children an edge. He would like to guide them in accessing those resources. Training the parents to work with their children at home is also a part of his plan. To equip himself to do this kind of work, he has received training and certification as a parent liaison from the National Parent Teacher Association.

Michael learned from his mother how much can be accomplished when parents become informed and involved. The birth of her monumental case began with a group of parents called Concerned Parents of North St. Louis who, on their own, found two lawyers and held bar-b-ques and dances to raise filing fees. "It was grassroots activism at its best," recalls Michael, fueled by the passion of his mother who made education a top priority in their home. She knew it would take years to change the system and hoped that her own children would see the benefits, he reports. However, her persistence was also rooted in her desire to make things better for the kids who weren't yet born.

Over the years, countless people have told Michael how much they admire his mother and appreciate the availability of the voluntary transfer program. Yet others are critical of the bussing aspect, the exodus of thou-



Education reform crusader Minnie Liddell

Photo provided by family

sands of city students out to the county and question what is truly gained by integrating classrooms. He stands firm, defending the outcomes of his mother's valiant efforts. "The proof is in the pudding," he points out, citing statistics comparing transfer students with those who have chosen not to participate. "Attendance rates are higher for students enrolled in the transfer program. They also graduate from high school at a higher rate and continue on to higher education in greater numbers."

At its core, he believes the desegregation program provides educational opportunities that equip students with what they need to chart their own future. "It makes it possible for them to choose what they want to do in life instead of letting their circumstances dictate what they have to do." Best of all, notes Michael, is that the program is voluntary. "It's up to the families to participate or not."

It's the personal stories that are the real measure of the program's success, he contends. "We hear about this all the time: kids being the first in

their families to attend college, made possible in many cases, by scholarships. This doesn't happen by chance. The students are groomed by their schools. Their teachers care about them, build relationships with them and push them. They have access to programs to develop leadership skills, explore careers and prepare for college. Higher education is the goal for everyone."

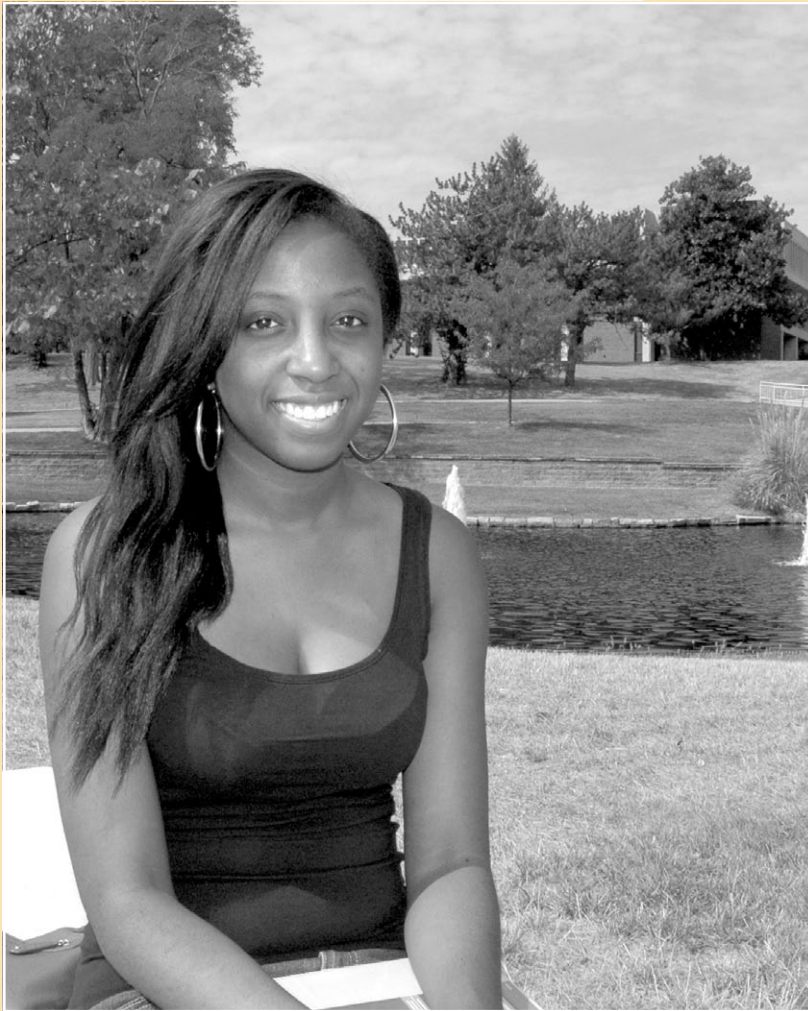
Being exposed to diversity also gives students a leg up, he believes. "It broadens their horizons by hearing other viewpoints and seeing other lifestyles."

Michael speaks from experience. His own path was positively shaped by his education in the magnet schools — both at the VPA schools and at the separate part-time Honors Music magnet program, which he entered in sixth grade. "I was able to do things I could never have done otherwise," citing the advanced musical training he received (trombone and piano), the distinctions he garnered (only freshman on the statewide honors band) and the traveling he did ("all over the U.S.") for performances. "Other programs also prepared us to be successful," he adds, such as an ACT prep class he took and being part of a mentoring program.

His talent as a musician earned him a full music scholarship to Jackson State University in Mississippi, where he attended for several years before he "switched gears completely." After a move back to St. Louis, he enrolled at Fontbonne, where he earned a bachelor's degree in business administration and then an MBA in 2010. He currently manages a T-Mobile retail store.

Michael is contemplating his next steps, spurred by his mother's example.

"I'd like to be a force in making sure students receive the kind of education they need and deserve. Just like my mom was."



Working toward a career in psychology, Whitney Howard, a recent Brentwood High graduate, attends college at UMSL. Seeing the lifestyles of her classmates boosted the ambition of the former VICC student, she reports. "I saw the possibilities and realized I could have that too if I worked at it."

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

CLASSMATES' LIFESTYLES INSPIRE STUDENT

Brentwood Experience Provides Dream and Good Start to Achieve It

by Peggy Magee

At the young age of 18, Whitney Howard is a woman with many missions, all of them leading to the ultimate one: to "break the cycle" that has perpetuated in her family from generation to generation – disadvantaged people with few opportunities and dashed hopes.

"I want a good life. I want the American dream, picket fence and all. No one in my family has ever had that," explains Whitney, who was raised by her mom in north St. Louis.

Even so, she believes it is 100 percent achievable for her, thanks to her time in the Brentwood school district. Brentwood provided so much, but it was what Whitney observed outside of school that made the greatest impact, she says. "I saw the kind of life my classmates had. When their dads came home from work, everyone sat down to dinner together. They had nice homes in safe neighborhoods."

Wanting that for herself gave her the ambition to acquire what she needs to make it possible. "I don't think I would be as ambitious as I am had I not gone to Brentwood. I saw the possibilities and realized I could have that too if I worked at it."

Whitney spent her entire education in Brentwood. She calls the academics "high quality" and the teachers "motivating." She earned good grades and was involved in school activities, including debate, cheerleading, mentoring and Missouri Girls State. Upon completing her required high school coursework midway through her senior year, she enrolled full-time at Florissant Valley Community College for the second semester. She took night classes which enabled her to borrow her mom's car when she returned home from work. At the end of the semester, the determined teen also picked up a restaurant job where she worked 25 hours per week, one she continues to hold.

All but one of Whitney's community college classes transferred to University of Missouri-St. Louis where she started in late August, majoring in psychology, with 14 credit hours under her

belt already. She hopes to enter the Honors Program at UMSL. (Another mission.)

Whitney's drive and high achieving ways did not go unnoticed in Brentwood. At graduation (she did return to walk with her class), she was awarded the Outstanding VICC Student award. "Whitney left a positive mark at Brentwood," confirms Ivy Hutchison, college and career specialist at Brentwood High, noting that she is a responsible and well respected young woman. "She is goal oriented, always friendly and people are drawn to her for her positive personality and can-do attitude."

Whitney had always planned to take a fast track to complete high school and she has a similar strategy for college. (Add another mission.) "I want to go to summer school so I can graduate in two and one-half years and then move on to graduate school." She says she needs a Ph.d. to have her own private practice in counseling or to teach at the university level.

Thankfully, tuition is not a concern as her mother, Tonya Thomas, works at Washington University, which provides higher education benefits for children of employees. (Inspired by her daughter, Mrs. Thomas is working on a bachelor's degree in Human Resources with plans to graduate in December.)

Whitney modestly describes herself as "outcome oriented," while her mom says she "hustles" through life. The young go-getter says she wants to be an example for others, "to show it's possible to go from nothing to something." (Again, a mission.)

And as she works toward that, Whitney makes sure to give credit to the Brentwood School District for the education, the opportunities and the experiences she received. "I'm on my way to achieving the dream I created for myself there," she says. "Brentwood launched me in the right direction."

ROCKWOOD WELCOMES NEW FAMILIES WITH INFORMATIVE EVENING, FULL OF FUN

Veteran Parents Reach Out to New Ones

by Peggy Magee

VICC families new to Rockwood schools this year got a heads-up on what to expect from more veteran families, plus came away with backpacks filled with school supplies – a warm, welcoming gesture by the district’s Department of Educational Equity and Diversity (DEED).

The New Student Ice Cream Social, intended primarily for children in kindergarten through grade 3 and their parents, attracted 70-80 families to Harris Stowe State University at the end of July. This year’s orientation event had a different slant from past years, according to department coordinator Terry Harris, who, along with his staff, works with VICC families to make sure they have successful experiences.

According to feedback Harris received, the new focus was “absolutely, hands-down” more geared to what new families want and need. In the partitioned gym, while children enjoyed supervised play activities, their parents could talk about what was on their minds and get valuable advice. “One table featured parent-to-parent communication and another offered parents strategies for advocating for their children,” explains Harris.

“We wanted the ice cream social to be a casual, relaxed event where parents would feel comfortable talking and asking questions about the new experiences their children would be having,” he adds. Outside, family members could sit in a school bus or cab and talk to transportation representa-

tives. A bar-b-que dinner was served, and children left with an age-appropriate book.

At an assembly in the auditorium, parents were introduced to staff members in the DEED office, plus learned about the history of the transfer program, as well as Rockwood’s mission. Janette Madlock-Dent, who was accompanied by her older daughter and two children new to Bowles Elementary, says she was happy to find out that several of the DEED staffers are themselves graduates of the VICC program. “The staff has great experience to work with our children,” she notes.

Another mom, LaQwana Trice, had good feelings about Rockwood even before she arrived, having been a student there before moving to north St. Louis County. At the social, she talked with another parent who encouraged her to get involved in the PTO at her daughter’s new school, which she says she intends to do. “I learned things I didn’t know and was made to feel welcome. The ice cream cake was awesome.”

LaQwana Trice and her daughter exit a school bus available for viewing at a Rockwood event for new families, held in late July at Harris-Stowe State University. Ty’Riana is in kindergarten at Green Pines Elementary. She had fun playing in the gym, along with her younger brother, while mom – who as a child attended Rockwood – learned some new things about the district.

Photo by Peggy Magee



volunteer

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



Does the desegregation program make a difference and should it be continued? These are questions that I am frequently asked in my current role as VICC's CEO. I always answer them with an emphatic "yes," the program is making a difference and we should continue it for as long as possible for the benefit of not only the students in the city, but also the students in the county who gain from being educated in a more diverse environment.

The benefits to the students from the city are numerous and well documented -- higher test scores, better attendance, and higher graduation rates are some of the results of the program. Other benefits are slightly more difficult to quantify but are well detailed in several of the articles in this issue of the *Volunteer*. Students are exposed to a new environment and presented with new challenges and new opportunities. Suddenly families who have never had a child graduate from high school, much less attend college, decide that these are opportunities they want to pursue as well. Students see and observe the successes of other families and students and decide they want to have a life comparable to their classmates. Similarly, students in the county have opportunities to work together with other students from a more diverse background and, as a result, are better prepared to be successful in college and the work environment.

While the program has helped to close the achievement gap, we still have a ways to go. I am frequently asked for my thoughts and ideas on what teachers and administrators in county districts can do to help close the achievement gap. As a result of these questions, I've come up with a response that is easy to remember. I tell them it's as easy as A, B, C.

A) Adjust your teaching to help all students be successful. Most teachers are familiar with the concept of differentiated instruction and understand that the teaching of each student needs to be customized to enable every student to be successful.

B) Believe in the students. As I've mentioned in previous columns, I am a firm believer in the axiom that students, and for that matter all people, generally perform to the level that others expect of them. The same concept applies to our students. If you believe they will be successful, it is much more likely that, in fact, they will be successful.

C) Connect. It is critically important for all of us to connect with the students who we teach and serve. Students are more likely to respond and do well and exceed our expectations when we connect with them and they know that we care about them, their families and their successes.

The VICC program does provide significant benefits to all the students that we serve, not only the students from the city, but also the students from the county. How much of a difference the program will make is in your hands.

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