

Volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

Parkway Program Molds Middle School Girls into Leaders

By Peggy Magee

A program called SistaKeeper that operates in all five Parkway middle schools is boosting the self-esteem and leadership skills of female African-American students during an especially challenging period in their development.

At a time when peer pressure, social insecurity and physical changes are at their height, groups of adolescent women are learning to overcome anger, guilt or shame through introspection and self-discovery. "The best way to fit in is to find you. Once the girls learn to appreciate themselves, they can appreciate others," explains Tracie Berry-McGhee, director of SistaKeeper Empowerment Center for Girls and a licensed professional counselor with her own practice.

For five years now, the Parkway district has contracted with Berry-McGhee to run her sista circles for groups of seventh-grade girls, many whom are voluntary transfer students. The afterschool sessions, held once a week, run from eight to twelve weeks. In each Parkway middle school, approximately 15 girls are asked to participate by their school counselor. Through dialogue, journaling, poetry and other creative expression, the young ladies develop a sense of self, which then leads them to define their purpose.

One afternoon at Parkway Northeast Middle School, the girls sat in their circle, chatting informally about issues near and dear to their hearts. They shared thoughts on a wide range of topics, including: the number one thing that girls fight about, one thing no one knows about them, and something they like to do but is considered uncool by someone else.

On another day, each of them stood up in front of their peers and recited verses they had composed, completing the sentence, "I choose..." The girls were encouraged to give feedback to their fellow presenters. The snapping of fingers signified that they felt especially empowered by what was said.

One girl cleared her throat and announced with conviction, "I choose to get good grades in school. I choose to be a positive role model. I choose to hold the key to my destiny." Another

said: "I choose to be the best I can be. I choose to care about you when you could care less. I choose to lead my own life and not let anyone interfere with the path I am taking."

In response to that pledge, another girl commented, "I am inspired by what you said about doing your best. I do just enough to get by, but you study hard to make good grades." With that came a round of finger snapping.

Some recitations prompted Berry-McGhee or one of the other group leaders who accompany her (two high school mentors who are former SistaKeeper participants and another licensed counselor) to interject. For example, when one girl said, "I choose to use my words and not



Seventh-grade girls at Parkway Northeast Middle School dialogue about teen issues as part of the SistaKeeper program which encourages self discovery and finding a purpose. Parkway sponsors the program in all five of its middle schools. It is led by licensed professional counselor Tracie Berry-McGhee, at left, director of SistaKeeper Empowerment Center for Girls. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

See inside panel: Parkway Program

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Long History of Celebrating Diversity at Captain Elementary

Two students from Clayton's Captain Elementary School helped act out a short play titled "Henry Box Brown," part of a lively all-school Black History program of song, movement, poetry and art. "This is our annual night of celebration where, as a school, we showcase how much we cherish and appreciate diversity," notes principal Sandy Rosell, adding that it is now a 20-plus year tradition at her school.

Harold Walehwa, a fifth grader, portrayed Henry "Box" Brown, a 19th century Virginia slave who escaped to freedom by arranging to have himself mailed from Richmond, Virginia, to Philadelphia abolitionists in a dry goods container. Fourth grader Samuel Yeager played Samuel Smith, a sympathetic white store keeper, who helped Brown make his escape to a free state.

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman



Parkway Program (from page 1)

my fists," the high school mentor cautioned, "Sometimes holding your tongue is best." In response to another girl's verse, "I choose to live my life peacefully," Berry-McGhee conceded, "It is hard to have peace in your life. That means keeping the drama at a distance."

Berry-McGhee, who has lead SistaKeeper circles locally, regionally and nationally since 2002, stresses that her workshops (for grades 6 - 12 and, in most schools, comprising a diverse group of female students) are a prevention, not intervention. "Negativity breeds negativity," she notes. "If you feel good about yourself, you can't help but embrace others."

Her circles, she says, are designed to cut down on students' negative behavior, increase their literacy and self esteem (which positively impacts grades), and instill a greater appreciation of diversity. "The idea is that the girls will take back to school these positive attributes and become leaders in creating a positive school climate."

Berry-McGhee refers to her circles as "safe" circles, a time for the girls to openly share and not be judged, knowing that what is said in the circle, stays in the circle. In this non-threatening environment, where caring adults listen to them and not talk at them, the girls realize they have a voice. "Typically, at the middle school stage, they lose their voice," Berry-McGhee explains. "They won't talk in class, they won't ask questions. The voice they gain through our circle talks translates to a voice in class."

That newly-acquired voice, coupled with an increased sensitivity of societal issues that impact them, encourages the girls to take responsibility in helping overcome problems that plague their community. "Each girl becomes an advocate for another sister's cause, such as teen pregnancy, HIV, foster care," notes Berry-McGhee.

Parkway Central Middle School counselor Mary Allhoff believes there is value for middle school girls to have this kind of group "that is theirs and just theirs." They need an opportunity like this, she says, and the fact that it is run by someone "from the outside" makes the girls more comfortable, open, and willing to cooperate.

About the positive outcomes, Allhoff cites, "There is not as much dishing out. Now some girls will come to me first before they react to rumors and gossip. They give more thought to their actions and choice of words. They carry themselves with greater respect."

Counselor Stacey Besand, from Parkway Northeast Middle School, describes the program as an "I am we" approach which, she says, has definitely cut down on infighting among the girls. "By sharing, they realize others have the same experiences. Reassured, they gain strength to become their own person. They discover their potential."

Valley Park Bus Riders

*"arrive relaxed,
happy and
ready to learn"*

By Peggy Magee



The number of bus referrals at Valley Park Elementary School has declined significantly since the school took a pro-active approach, teaming up with drivers to make sure the same high expectations found within the building carry over to the school commute. Students are trained on riding the bus and reminded often of the rules and consequences for infractions. Assistant principal Lynn Hedrick, pictured here with Carlos Willis (a first grader who worked hard to improve his bus behavior), handles the bus program which, thanks to fewer referrals, now takes up less of her time. *Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman*

Usually when young passengers on a school bus encounter riding delays, they rise out of their seats to see what's going on, talk among themselves and engage in playtime. This can be distracting to the driver and make the situation unsafe for the students.

But that is *far* from the behavior Doris Richerson observed recently when she arrived at the scene of a bus emergency. As a trainer/road supervisor for Durham Bus Services, Richerson was responding to a call

from driver Ronelle Day who was transporting voluntary transfer students to Valley Park Elementary School. That morning, Day had to pull over and stop his bus, with about 15 students on board, because one of the students was having a serious nose-bleed.

When Richerson and EMS responders arrived at the bus about 15 minutes later, the passengers were all seated and quiet. After the situation was brought under control, the bus ride to school resumed. All told, the children on board were detained about 30 minutes.

"Generally boredom would have set in and the children would be acting out," explains Richerson who drove a school bus for 14 years.

But not on this bus. "I observed perfect behavior," she announced. It was such a welcome surprise that she suggested that the driver present the children with certificates for outstanding behavior. And while Valley Park Elementary assistant principal Lynn Hedrick happily planned a small awards ceremony the following day at breakfast, to her way of thinking the students' behavior was not out of the ordinary at all. "It's what we have come to expect," she reports with pride, citing that bus referrals at her school have decreased more than 50 percent since 2003.

That's because Hedrick has been vigilant the last few years in her efforts to improve bus riding behavior school-wide. And for the VICC students whose ride is much longer, she wants to ensure that their commute is a positive experience. "We value our VICC students and believe their bus ride is critical to their success."

A major component of Valley Park Elementary's overall strategy for incident-

free bus rides is recognizing the importance of the drivers. Each fall, Hedrick invites them to a breakfast meeting where she discusses the school's philosophy and expectations and asks for their cooperation. She works hard to keep them happy because "we like repeat drivers," meaning the continuity they bring to her bus program. Drivers are encouraged to build good relationships with students, a priority for Valley Park teachers and staff that has proven successful in helping students achieve.

"You are part of our team," she recently told a group of new Durham drivers, adding that at Valley Park Elementary School, students' time on the bus and at the bus stop is considered part of their school day and the same high expectations apply. "And so, she advised, "your job is critical to the big picture of providing a quality education to these children and raising them to be good kids."

Hedrick's 10-page bus handbook is distributed to all drivers, bus riding families and school staff. It includes detailed sections on drop-off and pick-up procedures, bus riding rules, write-ups and administrative intervention, as well as tips for a happy bus ride. Students receive bus training and get daily reminders of the rules from teachers who load the busses every afternoon. Two teachers are assigned the same bus for the whole school year, a practice that is highly effective, according to Hedrick. "They develop a relationship with the driver by helping the students settle into their seats for the long ride home."

Another point Hedrick stresses is that when discipline problems do occur, drivers notify her immediately so that together they help the child understand that there are good reasons for bus rules. A student's first bus referral, in fact, requires that they write a reflective essay (grade appropriate) during recess on what they did wrong, what they should have done instead and why. "They'll avoid writing that essay at all costs," she adds. "The goal is to prevent bus write-ups because they can lead to bus suspensions and we want our students to be in school everyday to receive their education."

To help Hedrick understand and evaluate infractions and to promote order on the bus, assigned seating is maintained. Magnets with students' names on them are attached to the seats (for ease in making changes) and the school keeps a copy of the seating chart. "This too has shown to keep problems at bay and helps ensure that the kids arrive relaxed, happy and ready to learn," notes Hedrick.

While Valley Park Elementary's bus program may seem like a lot of hard work to manage, Hedrick insists that the time she put in on the front end has paid off. "I would often spend two hours of my day on bus referrals, but not anymore. Best of all, students now spend less time out of the classroom. The idea is to work smarter, not harder."



Not only does Danny Mosby drive Green Pines elementary students to and from the city, the Atlantic Express driver mentors several transfer students during his free time on early dismissal days. Here he reads with first grader Tyler Loveless and kindergartner Keasia Washington. "I like encouraging a love of reading in students," says Mosby, who was recognized by Rockwood for his volunteerism and service to the school. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

Rockwood Bus Driver Goes Above and Beyond *Danny Mosby Recognized by District*

By Peggy Magee

If your school would like students and bus drivers to have a stronger connection, try inviting the drivers into the school to volunteer.

Rockwood's Green Pines Elementary did, not for that purpose specifically, but to mentor struggling students. Yet the presence of Danny Mosby led to both.

It was an idea of instructional coach Kathy Ehrhardt to invite the three Atlantic Express (city route) drivers to come into the school and spend time with selected youngsters on early dismissal days, during the drivers' personal time between drop-off and pick-up.

In a meeting early last fall, she shared with them Patricia Polocco's story about fifth-grade teacher, Mr. Falker, who took a special interest in a student whose learning disability had gone unnoticed up to then. Trisha learned to read and never forgot what Mr. Falker did for her. Ehrhardt told the drivers, "You can be Mr. Falker."

Since that invitation to help, Mosby has reported for duty in the school library, one morning each month, where he works with eight voluntary transfer students, either individually or in pairs, in half hour blocks. It is a quiet and cheerful meeting place and the students, in grades K - 4, feel very special helping themselves to juice and donuts or bagels which are set out.

But Mosby's impact on these children goes far beyond sharing breakfast and a

book. They benefit from having another adult in their life who gives them attention and positive encouragement, reports Ehrhardt. "It's an extra boost for the children."

As a bus driver, Mosby takes his job very seriously, she notes, making sure students follow the rules and talking with school administrators when they don't. "He runs a tight ship and uses that same no-nonsense approach and high expectation level with the students he mentors," half of whom ride his bus.

But he also has a friendly nature and chats informally with the kids as they read together. When one student arrived to the reading session, Mosby reminded him, "You used to be on my bus. I miss you." He might ask a student, "Did you get your homework done?" or "How did you do on your test?" The students respond well to the interest he takes in them, observes Ehrhardt.

Mosby says he enjoys building relationships with kids, adding, "When I'm driving, there is not as much opportunity for that." Yet on the bus, he does observe a lot and shares any concerns with school administrators, which they appreciate. "He knows when someone's not having a good day. He tips us off," notes Ehrhardt. "This information can be critical to the success and achievement of the students."

What motivates Mosby the most: "I like encouraging a love of reading in students." And he has. The students will often stop Ehrhardt in the hall to show her the book

they plan to read when Mr. Mosby comes next. One student even chose to read with him instead of attending her classroom's spring party.

And now Mosby has arranged for more students to read in his presence. In March, when he realized the library was clearing out obsolete books, he asked if he could use them on his bus. The school agreed and adhered a label, "Mr. Mosby's bus book," so that riders would return them to the crate at the front of his bus. Teachers have also donated books to the crate.

The school greatly appreciates Mosby's service. So much so that they nominated him for the 2010 Rockwood Outstanding Service in Education (R.O.S.E.) award, given to individuals who show excellence of character, performance, leadership and service to the district. He is among the 15 people district-wide to receive the award and be honored at the R.O.S.E. ceremony and dinner reception.

Mr. Mosby's work with students is especially valued at a time when school volunteers are diminishing, notes Ehrhart, explaining that in these challenging economic times, more parents need to work and are not available to help out in the schools. "But Mr. Mosby has stepped in and for that we are thrilled."

Kirkwood's Special Programs, Staff Effort Contribute to Success of 2009 Grads

Voluntary Transfer Students Perform Especially Well

By Peggy Magee

The recent accomplishments of African-American students at Kirkwood High School may have you questioning the achievement gap. The graduation rate for black students in the class of 2009 was 98.3 percent, compared to 96.6 for their white/other counterparts. Likewise, the African-American college attendance rate of 86 percent trails the white/other students' rate of 90 percent by only a few percentage points.

Voluntary transfer students performed especially well with a graduation rate of 100 percent and a college attendance rate of 81 percent. Their graduation rate far exceeds the state-wide average for black students of 73.3 percent and the St. Louis region average for black students of 69.3 percent.

Shirleas Washington, executive director of student services for the Kirkwood district, notes that these impressive numbers did not occur by chance. "Kirkwood expends significant resources in the form of programs and personnel to make certain all students succeed. It's a commitment the district has made."

She points to the Extended School Year (ESY) which enables high school students to take a credit recovery class in the summer,

meaning they can retake a class they did not pass or did not complete. Also as part of ESY, credit enhancement classes are offered in the summer whereby students can take health, personal finance or PE, making room in their schedule for desired electives.

Another program, ATLAS (Alternatives Toward Learning and Achieving Success), provides selected students with smaller classes (about 10 per class) and additional support. Kirkwood assistant principal Romona Miller, who supervises ATLAS, describes it as a "school within a school," which operates very similarly to the larger school, including having all teachers certified in their area of instruction.

"This is for a limited number of students who need an alternative way to accomplish their goals," she explains, stressing that it is not for behavior-problem students. Admission is by application and referral. "Students have to want to be in ATLAS," adding that most are very involved at Kirkwood High. Many of them spend half their day in the ATLAS wing taking core subjects and the other half taking electives throughout the building.

"Our format of providing ATLAS students with a more individual academic program located within the school building is huge," notes Miller. "It maintains the family feel

of our school and keeps ATLAS students motivated and content." ATLAS also has afterschool classes and an extended school year for students who are lacking in credits.

An on-line study program called Plato, aligned with Kirkwood's classroom curriculum, enables ESY and ATLAS students to finish up or repeat a class by learning the material they have not yet mastered and testing out of what they do know. It is a tutorial driven program, including pre and post assessments, with a certified teacher on hand for direct instruction. "This allows students who have already taken a class, but didn't complete it satisfactorily, to fill in the gaps so the class they took is not all for naught," explains Miller.

Two statewide programs in which Kirkwood participates also benefit students. The Missouri Option Program enables pupils at risk of leaving school without a diploma to take the GED test, plus fulfill other academic requirements, in order to receive a high school diploma and take part in graduation if they choose. In the Missouri A + Schools Program, students who meet specific requirements receive free tuition for two years to any Missouri public community college or public vocational or technical school. Some four-year Missouri colleges offer substantial scholarships to A+ students.

Other resources at Kirkwood include afterschool tutoring, as well as organizations such as the Black Achievement Club and My Brothers' Keeper that emphasize academics, positive choices and college attendance.

The multitude of academic resources and staff support available in Kirkwood could also explain the successes of current transfer students. More than 50 were honored recently for their grade point average of 3.0 or higher. Special recognition went to sophomore Dajae Williams and seniors Ahmed Mohamed and Shyniece Ferguson for being among the three students from each grade level to have the highest grade point average of all African Americans in their respective classes.



Smaller classes, an on-line study program and an extended school year are offered to students in Kirkwood's ATLAS (Alternatives Toward Learning and Achieving Success), one of several programs available to ensure pupils of all abilities have what they need to succeed. In the class of 2009, the graduation rate for African-American students was higher than their white/other counterparts. Their college attendance rate was equally impressive. Here, ATLAS student Orlando Mason gets help on a statistics problem from teacher Karen Sabourin. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

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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



Challenges. It seems like every day each one of us is confronted with a new challenge in life. We pick up the newspaper or watch the evening news only to learn that unemployment is remaining stubbornly high, retail sales have declined for another month, or the state of Missouri is faced with additional financial decisions which have become so arduous that even areas previously protected such as public education are now at risk of losing funding or receiving reduced funding.

Obviously the events of this past year have presented obstacles to most of us and it does not appear that next year will be any easier. Fortunately, some of the brightest, most talented, and hardest working employees are in our school systems and I am confident that they will rise up and overcome any future obstacles just as they have in the past. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands in times of challenge and controversy."

The strength of our educational leaders and the strong support for public education was recently demonstrated by the support for nine education issues on the April, 2010 ballot. Voters overwhelmingly supported two tax increases and seven bond issues in St. Louis County! I am encouraged that during these difficult times our communities are standing with us and supporting us! For many of us and many of our students and their families, the past year has been hard and next year is not likely to be any easier. Most everyday, we deal with a new stressful situation which can become overwhelming at times. It is in times like this that all of us must focus on the things that are truly important in life such as taking care of ourselves and our families so that we have the strength to care for the students and others who we are charged with supporting.

As we approach the time of graduations, I am reminded of the speech that Winston Churchill gave in October, 1941, to the students at London's Harrow School in which he challenged them to never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Although we are all facing certain challenges and will no doubt face additional ones in the time to come, we can be inspired by many of the accomplishments described in this issue of the Volunteer and also be convinced to never give in. I know you won't and I know I won't either.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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