

“CHAMPION” FROM BRENTWOOD SCHOOLS Heads to Top-Ranked Wash U

The fact that Sharon Bracey named her baby boy “Nigel” could be the first clue that Nigel Bracey was destined for greatness. “Nigel” is an Irish name meaning “champion.”

This “champion” turned heads in the Brentwood school district, where he spent his elementary, middle and high school years, for possessing “the whole package,” a description Brentwood schools Superintendent David Faulkner uses to refer to Nigel’s combination of intelligence, character and leadership.

With all that going for him, it’s no wonder that the recent Brentwood graduate is continuing his education at the highly-selective Washington University, whose acceptance rate is just 17 percent, with ambitious plans to major in engineering. He is the recipient of the Mesmer Scholarship that considers achievement, potential and need in making an elite education a reality for students like Nigel.



Brentwood High School graduate Nigel Bracey, who now attends Washington University, was molded and nurtured by his mother Sharon Bracey. In addition, the staff at Brentwood schools continually encouraged and supported him. Pictured here with Nigel and his mom are Brentwood Superintendent David Faulkner, left, and Brentwood High principal Ed Johnson.

How did Nigel beat the odds of growing up in a single parent, low income household and come to excel far beyond many of his well-healed suburban counterparts? His journey began when his mother, Sharon Bracey, made the decision to enroll him and his two sisters in the VICC program after researching all their educational options. Every day for 13 years, they rose early to catch the bus and then did homework late into the night. For the entire family, it was a sacrifice; one that has paid off as both sisters have impressive records of accomplishment too.

Nigel insists his mother established a solid foundation for them. “My mom has a hardworking work ethic and attitude and she drilled that in us.” He describes her as “one of the wisest people I know.” The shy and humble

Mrs. Bracey, when told that Nigel credits her with his success, shares some of her parenting strategies (only at this writer’s insistence). “I worked with my children long before they were enrolled in school,” she explains, citing areas such as reading, math and communication skills. She has always talked with her children a lot, “passing along life lessons and using everyday situations as teachable moments,” she explains. “I stressed to them that they need to be their own person and encouraged them to become leaders, not followers.”

Nigel clearly took his mother’s advice and ran with it. According to his high school principal Ed Johnson, he made the most of the opportunities available in Brentwood. Referencing some of the high level classes Nigel enrolled in and his myriad of activities, Johnson reports,

“Nigel is a perfect example of the spirit of the VICC program.”

Indeed, accelerated or college credit classes comprised nearly half his high school course load and, in some years, the majority of it. All four years, he held class officer positions including president and vice-president. His senior year he was voted Prom King. He was a member of the basketball team (four years), baseball team, National Honor Society and Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

At his counselor’s recommendation (and at the insistence of his mother), he applied for and was chosen to attend the three week-long Missouri Scholars’ Academy which he describes as “life changing.” He was a camp counselor

Continued on page 2: Heads to Top-Ranked Wash U

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
ST. LOUIS, MO
PERMIT NO. 3737

Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation
7425 Forsyth Blvd., Suite 110
St. Louis, MO 63105



TIPS for Parents

Parkway school psychologist Kimberly Yates was a featured speaker at one of the monthly meetings of the district’s PAMEE group (Parents Advocating for Multicultural Excellence in Education.) Her advice is appropriate for all parents and worth sharing.

- Whenever you have a concern about your student, no matter how great or small, DO NOT remain silent. You are your child’s best advocate. Start with the teacher, but feel free to access the school nurse or the social worker, depending on the area of concern.
- If you are invited to a meeting for your student, find out the nature of the meeting and who will be in attendance. Come to the meeting with specific questions. Generate ideas in advance about intended outcomes for your student (specific goals).
- Ask questions so you can be equipped with information to make informed decisions that are in the best interest of your child. Take the time you need to review all relevant information prior to making any decisions.
- Understanding your child’s report card is an essential tool for measuring his/her progress. If you have questions about it, contact the teacher and/or counselor for a detailed explanation.
- Explore your district’s website and follow your district on social media. This is an immediate way to keep current with school news.
- Attend conferences and meetings in person. If the meeting time and date do not coordinate with your schedule, request another date and time that is convenient for you.
- For parents of high school students, work with them to monitor their credits each semester. Communicate with the school counselor so that you are well informed of the graduation requirements.

CITY MANAGER'S LEADERSHIP INFLUENCED by Former Mehlville Administrators

In 1984, when Abdul-Kaba Abdullah entered the Mehlville district as a first grader, he and his parents had no idea of what awaited him at the end of the one-hour bus ride from his home in the Walnut Park area of St. Louis.

This was just the second year of Mehlville's participation in the voluntary transfer program so everything was new and untested. What they found--beginning in elementary school and continuing through to high school--were administrators who made it their priority to provide access and equity to those students who left the familiarity of their neighborhood schools and traveled great distances for educational opportunities.

Sure, there were challenging moments along the way, but Abdullah always felt nurtured and supported by his schools' leaders. He rattles off past principals, other administrators and a former football coach (names the 38-year-old remembers from decades ago!), citing their unique qualities and telling how he and the rest of the school community were positively impacted by their leadership.

He reminisces about Gary Heyde, his high school football coach, noting, "He was an advocate for kids and an advocate for education. I would not be who I am without him." About his middle school principal Jack Jordan, he says, "He gave me every opportunity to succeed."

Those individuals who set the tone for their schools hold a special place in his heart, he says. As a working professional, his decisions have been guided by the same principals of fairness and justice to which they held tight. In his current job as city manager for the City of Berkeley, as well as in his prior positions dealing with affordable housing, community development, and training and employment (all in St. Louis), he has strived to shape the implementation of policy "so that it represents the voice of the unheard as well as the voice of the heard," he points out. "It's important to protect the interests of the underrepresented and to not disenfranchise any group of people."

Beyond seeing firsthand the power of effective leadership, Abdullah cites other benefits of attending Mehlville schools. "I was able to interact with people of other cultures and see how they live." The 1997 Mehlville High grad recollects details of his academic life--his love of social studies and science, his exposure to classical music, the cultural awareness he

gained through the study of a foreign language--and connects them directly to the person he has become. "There were so many opportunities to learn and grow and so many outlets to express ourselves," he says.

Playing on the Mehlville football team (running back) also expanded what Abdullah refers to as his "circle of learning." He traveled to other parts of the state for tournaments, attended football camps on college campuses and met with college coaches who visited Mehlville on recruiting trips. "I found out what college life was like and what universities can offer from a career and lifestyle standpoint."

Abdullah credits Mehlville with helping him discover his interests, shape his values and learn what he wanted out of life. He grew up loving to travel, appreciating the arts and possessing a strong global perspective. His young children have already traveled to two foreign countries. He wants them to grow up as he did, with diverse interests and a thirst for expanding their horizons.

After graduation, Abdullah attended Northwest Missouri State where he majored in geography, minored in public administration and played football for the Bear Cats. He went on to acquire two management related master's degrees and intern for a congressman in Washington, D.C. In his short life, he has achieved a great deal and had a wide range of gratifying experiences--both professionally and personally. A proud resident of St. Louis, he and his wife and children live just blocks away from where he grew up. He is active in the community and works hard to make St. Louis a safe and thriving place to live.

Abdullah describes the opportunity to attend Mehlville as "the most important decision my parents ever made." He still keeps in touch with some of his classmates, regularly attends class reunions and makes himself available for any mentorship opportunities of current students in the VICC program. He says that Mehlville "altered my life because it put me on a course to succeed." And for that, he says, he will be forever grateful.



Abdul-Kaba Abdullah, a 1997 graduate of Mehlville High, models his leadership style after the administrators he had in Mehlville schools who made it their priority to provide access and equity to all. He currently serves as city manager for the City of Berkeley.



Message from the CEO

David S. Glaser

In this issue of the *Parent Link*, you can read stories about two former VICC students who are enjoying great success. The first story is about a student who recently graduated from the Brentwood district and is beginning his studies at Washington University. The second student graduated almost 20 years ago from the Mehlville district, in 1997, and is now leading the City of Berkeley as the City Manager.

It is success stories such as these--which have brought tremendous benefits to city students, as well as those from the county--that make me wish our program could continue for as long as possible. It has provided both city and county youths access to educational and interpersonal opportunities, while county districts have been able to further important educational goals, including racial and socio-economic diversity, which are so important for our region and the nation as a whole. Since the program began in the early 1980's, more than 70,000 students have been able to participate in the program.

However, race-based school desegregation programs such as ours are not intended to continue in perpetuity and ours was originally designed to have a finite existence. At the VICC Board of Directors meeting on November 18, the board voted to extend the program for five additional years for one final time. This final five-year extension will permit enrollment of approximately 1,000 new students over the upcoming five-year period (with an emphasis on siblings) in participating county school districts through the 2023/24 school year. In addition, siblings of eligible county students will also be allowed to attend city magnet schools. Participating districts have agreed to allow all transfer students to continue in their schools through graduation, meaning kindergartners admitted in 2023/24, for example, could remain in the program through 2036.

I look forward to serving your children for many years to come, as does the entire VICC organization and our participating school districts.

From page 1 Heads to Top-Ranked Wash U

and mentor for the middle school's eighth-grade camp.

Interestingly, the very things Nigel has had access to in his life are what education experts believe contribute to the academic success of low-income students: early exposure to books, afterschool activities, summer learning experiences and volunteer opportunities. Positive role models are also included in that list and Nigel has had those too.

In addition to his mother, he had a history teacher in middle school who ran a program for African-American males. "Mr. Harris guided us through adolescence," Nigel reports. He also credits David Faulkner with having "a positive impact on me." Because Nigel showed an exceptional interest in science, plans were made for him to meet on a regular basis with Faulkner who had been a science teacher before moving to the central office. This informal mentoring arrangement began in elementary school and continued through high school. It was Superintendent Faulkner who accompanied Nigel on his tour of Washington University earlier this year when his mother was unavailable that day.

Certainly, Nigel had forces pulling for him. But it was his own strength of character and desire to make something of himself that landed him on the Washington University campus. Brentwood college and career counselor Lori West sums up Nigel, who was named Brentwood's Outstanding VICC Graduate for 2015, this way: "Nigel is an honest, genuine, charismatic and approachable young man, respected by both peers and staff."

Enough said.