

volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

Two Former VICC Students: Partners in Life, at Work and in Putting Students First

Terry and Ericka Harris at work in Rockwood District

A young married couple, both former VICC students now employed by the Rockwood School District, are working hard to empower current VICC students to chart a positive future for themselves.

Terry Harris, age 27 and a 2000 graduate of Rockwood's Lafayette High School, coordinates Rockwood's VICC office and mentors, advises and encourages students from the city. Ericka Woods Harris, age 26 and a 2001 graduate of Clayton High, teaches language arts to students at Rockwood's Crestview Middle School. Previously, she had served as a classroom assistant and student teacher in the Rockwood district and also worked in other districts.

The VICC program is "near and dear" to their hearts, Terry says, because it offers city youths "something that can impact their measure of success." That opportunity – the environment, education, resources and personal experiences – is what engaged he and Ericka. And now they are thrilled to be in a position to help this generation understand the possibilities in store for them.

"There is always something special about coming home," reports Terry as he talks about his job in Rockwood, a district that enrolls nearly 1,800 VICC students. "I help them navigate the system so that they get full benefit of what they came to Rockwood for." Clad in a shirt and tie (his "uniform," he claims), he walks school hallways talking to students about their plans and pointing them toward resources that will move them closer to accomplishing those goals. He might encourage students to stay after school to brush up on academics, meet with their guidance counselor for help in college planning or enroll in an afterschool ACT prep class, one specifically for VICC students that he helped launch. "They listen to me. I've earned their respect because they know I've walked the talk," he says, adding that he's from a low income household, the first in his family to graduate from high school and college.

The message Terry stresses to students is one that was communicated to him by the faculty and staff when he attended Rockwood: "You can be anything you want to be and we will help you get there." He says he was made to believe anything was possible for him and he responded positively to that.

His high achieving ways earned him a multicultural leadership scholarship to Missouri State University where he studied history and African-American studies. Three years out of college, he joined Rockwood and returned to school at night to secure a teaching

Saturday Academy

**Gives Rockwood VICC Students
Broadened Perspectives**
*Harris Part of Team Showing
Students the Way*

by Peggy Magee

As the eighth grade VICC students from Rockwood's Crestview Middle School sluggishly streamed off the bus and into their classroom at St. Louis University, waiting to greet them each Saturday morning were Terry and Ericka Harris, products themselves of the VICC program. Always at the 20-somethings' side during the nine-week Saturday Academy was their wide-eyed young daughter Mahri, eager to take on any little task such as passing out donuts.

The Harris family was part of a team led by Crestview eighth-grade principal Jamie Jordan with assistance from Terry Harris, of Rockwood's VICC Office. Terry's wife Ericka Harris and Deb Title, both language arts teachers at



Ericka and Terry Harris
Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

See Inside: **Putting Students First**

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See Inside: **Saturday Academy**

Coach Helps Athletes Further their Education

*Arlee Conners, Former VICC Athlete,
Inspires Them with His Own Story of Success*

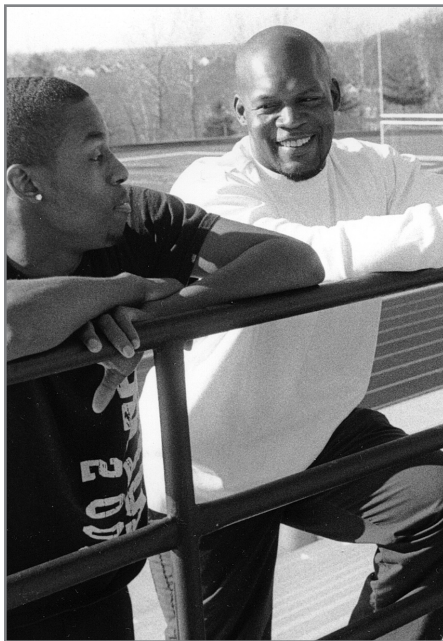
John Hopkins studies business management at Northern Illinois University. You'll find Lamont Brown cracking the books at Lincoln U. Antonio Webb walks the halls of Iowa Wesleyan College. Jerone Williams is making the grade at North Iowa Area Community College in transition to Northern Iowa University.

by Peggy Magee

Each of these young men, who came from the inner city to attend Oakville Senior High School, played football under Head Coach Arlee Conners, who also serves as physical education instructor and track coach. Now they're continuing their education, thanks to full or partial football scholarships. They feel fortunate for the opportunity and grateful to Coach Conners for his help.

"I would not be where I am today were it not for Coach Conners," notes John Hopkins, who describes the 38-year-old coach as his "biggest role model." The pair used to chat regularly and Conners advised him on issues he had at home and at school. "Coach helped me with life decisions. He kept me grounded and in line."

Indeed, many students from Oakville Senior High in the Mehlville district, both transfer and resident, look up to the caring coach. But the transfer students especially connect with him because he has walked in their shoes. Like them, Conners was part of the VICC program. He went on to college – Purdue University – on a football scholarship. His own coach at Lindbergh High, Gene Gladstone, was instrumental in making that happen. And now Conners is paying it forward for his athletes.



Coach Arlee Conners, once a standout VICC athlete who attended Purdue University on a football scholarship, talks with Oakville Senior High student Steve Martin about college athletic scholarships. Conners says he tells his athletes that they need to apply themselves and focus on their academics, the same advice he received.

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

"These kids need my help," he explains, adding that, in most cases, no one else in their family has gone to college, let alone played football at the college level. He believes it's his job to help the students further themselves. "An athletic scholarship is their ticket to getting a college education for free or at a reduced cost. The affordability factor holds back a lot of them, but an athletic scholarship makes college possible."

Lamont Brown, a math major at Lincoln University, likes that he landed at a small, Division II school where, "it's kind of isolated which is good because it allows me to focus on my studies." He says Coach Conners helps talented athletes get to college by supporting them in the recruiting process. He talks to the athletes about their goals, makes sure they have a highlight video and resume, and takes a proactive approach in making the colleges aware of their abilities. Explains Lamont, "Coach Conners contacts college coaches, which gives his athletes added exposure – that extra boost."

First and foremost, however, Conners advises them in academic matters because GPA, core courses and SAT/ACT scores are factors that determine if students can meet the college's admissions standards. "I tell them they need to apply themselves and to focus on their academics," because, he adds, no matter how talented a player is, a college coach has little interest in him if he cannot meet the admissions requirements.

Conners remembers how his own high school coach encouraged him to stretch himself academically so that he would be more attractive to colleges. As a result, he enrolled in harder classes, signed up for ACT/SAT prep classes and made the honor roll.

Having been a transfer student himself, Conners tells his students from the city what they need to know about being successful at their suburban high school, reports 2008 graduate Lamont Brown. "He told us that the opportunities are here for us and that it's up to us to make the most of them." The coach's advice and encouragement "meant a lot to us," Lamont notes, especially coming from someone who shares a similar background with them.

Oakville teacher Kevin Niedringhaus, an assistant coach, agrees. "Coach Conners has been a positive influence on all our student athletes, but especially those that deal with early morning and late afternoon bus rides to and from the city. He has traveled that path and helps those students as they balance their academic and athletic activities."

The accomplishments of Coach Conners are an inspiration to all Oakville players, adds Niedringhaus. "The fact that he made the jump from Lindbergh High School, a team in our conference, to a university they watch on Saturday afternoon television and ESPN Sports Center, shows them that with hard work, anything is possible."

Even now, Conners continues to push himself. Besides juggling the demands of teaching, coaching two varsity sports and helping his top players get recruited by colleges, he maintains a busy home life in north county. He and wife Kathleen have three daughters, ages 18, 7 and 5, and an 11-year-old son who plays football for Oakville Junior High School. Asked how he manages, Conners humbly replies, "When there's a will, there's a way."

A great attitude for his students to emulate.

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Saturday Academy

Some of the Crestview Middle School Students in the Saturday Academy program walking on the campus toward the bus which transported them to the Oldham Middle School. Leading the way are Terry Harris, far right, and his wife Erica Harris. Behind them is grade principal Jamie Jordan, third from right, spearheading the program to prepare the students to embark on high school with their parents. *Marilyn Zimmerman*

Crestview, were involved along with assistant principal Jill Scheulen.

The purpose of the Saturday Academy was to prepare the eighth graders to embark on high school with their sights set on preparing for college and a successful life. The Harris' involvement was particularly meaningful to the 20 or so students who regularly attended, points out Principal Jordan. "They are wonderful role models. The students see that here are two people who have backgrounds similar to theirs and who have accomplished a lot. It shows the students that achieving their goal is within reach."

Building relationships with the students was something the entire team focused on each week. Just the fact that the staff devoted their Saturday mornings to the students sent a strong message, notes Principal Jordan. "It signaled to them that people believe in them and want to help them succeed. And when students know we care about them, they tend to work harder so they don't disappoint."

Another emphasis was exposure, she says, because, "I noticed that these students are missing a lot of the experiences that their county counterparts have had." More instructional time, which education studies recommend, was also a factor in starting the program.

Each Saturday had a different agenda and purpose and concluded with eating lunch together at a restaurant. By visiting such places as KSDK-TV, the St. Louis Blues corporate offices and a photography studio, students gained a better understanding of the world around them and became more informed about career options. Field trips were also taken to the George Washington Carver exhibit at the Missouri History Museum, the Dred Scott courtroom at the Old Courthouse and the Black History and Culture Museum.

Back on campus, Terry Harris spent some time teaching African-American history. He stressed to the students, "Given how far we've come, please believe that there is nothing you cannot do." And so high expectations were

instilled while providing students with insight and experiences so they could feel more confident about their futures.

Students also received encouragement and advice on excelling in the classroom. "Studies show that there is a direct correlation between high school drop out rates and how well students perform in their eighth-grade year and their level of preparation for their transition to the next level," explains Harris.

There were dialogues about what it's like to be a VICC student – what they struggle with and what they enjoy, notes Ericka Harris. "Terry and I were involved in those conversations and we advised them based on what worked for us," she reports. "Throughout the program, we stressed leadership qualities and the importance of making good decisions. We also talked a lot about college attendance. We let them know college is attainable and what they need to do in high school to make themselves good college candidates."

One significant result of the program is that students came away feeling



... Saturday Academy walk through St. Louis University ... Courthouse, one of many field trips the group took. ... ka, holding their daughter's hand. Crestview eighth- ... d the nine-week program whose purpose was to ... sights set on college and a successful life. Photo by

Putting Students First (continued)

certificate. His plans are to obtain a master's degree. "I want to make the same impact on kids that my own teachers made on me."

Like her husband, Ericka wants to reach out and steer kids in the right direction. Even as high school students, they seemed headed down the same path. Both thrived in their county districts and got up very early to commute to school from their city neighborhoods – Terry in west St. Louis city and Ericka north of there in the Riverview Circle area.

Early one school morning, while driving herself to Clayton High, Ericka again passed the cute high school boy waiting at the corner of Hamilton and Julian. She just assumed he was a voluntary transfer student because "generally any kid waiting at a bus stop at 6:30 a.m. is." This time, the outgoing teen pulled over and gave Terry her name and phone number. He called her that afternoon. They've been married five years now, have a young daughter Mahri and reside in Clayton.

Originally Ericka set her sights on teaching in Clayton so she could "contribute to the greatness that I am blessed to be a product of." She especially values all that Clayton has to offer. Her involvement in so many different activities allowed her "to discover my strengths and weaknesses and to meet great people and make lifelong friends."

Like Terry, she moved on to Missouri State University on a multicultural leadership scholarship and was on the Dean's List. When Terry accepted a job to work at Edward Jones Co., the couple, married at this point, moved back to St. Louis where Ericka continued her college studies at UMSL. She holds a bachelor's degree in education and has plans to further her education at some point to become a school guidance counselor.

Ericka's past experience working in Rockwood made her eager to join the district again when she was offered the job at Crestview. She is especially honored to work in a district that participates in the VICC program, she says. "I feel I can be an example of the success that can be accomplished when a student takes total advantage of the program." That said, she points out that VICC students contribute to the program as well as benefit from it. "We each bring new and different experiences to the table which is why the program is special."

VICC Board Appoints New CEO

The Board of Directors of the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC) recently appointed the current chief financial and legislative affairs officer and treasurer of the Rockwood School District David S. Glaser to succeed VICC's current CEO Bruce Ellerman upon his retirement in December, 2009.

Glaser has over 16 years' experience as chief financial officer for local school districts, beginning with Francis Howell from 1991 to 1996, before assuming his current position with the Rockwood School District. Rockwood is the single largest participating district in the VICC program, with about 1,770 students enrolled. He is expected to begin his work at VICC in November, 2009.



David S. Glaser

"This new, exciting and challenging opportunity will enable me to continue to support and work with students while maintaining many of my current professional relationships and friendships," Glaser notes. "I am excited about continuing to work in an organization committed to providing outstanding educational opportunities for children."

Ellerman has served as chief executive officer for the VICC since 1999, when a settlement was reached in the long-standing lawsuit that created the St. Louis Student Transfer program. In June, 2007, the VICC Board voted unanimously to extend the enrollment window for new students an additional five years through the 2013-2014 school year. Currently a total of 6,477 St. Louis city students attend school in St. Louis County as part of the voluntary transfer program. An additional 161 students are transferring from St. Louis County school districts to attend magnet schools in St. Louis.

invigorated about working toward a bright future for themselves, according to Principal Jordan. "Students are now coming to me asking about grades and homework and how to handle concerns they are having with teachers. They seem more motivated to do well in their classes. As student Darquise Gowdy put it, "I don't think that my dreams are just fantasies anymore, and so I am actually going to try to reach them."

Next year's plans include offering the Saturday Academy again, possibly as a year-long program meeting once or twice a month, says Principal Jordan. "The transportation funding from the Rockwood VICC Office and the monetary donations from Rogers-Townsend Advertising Agency and White Wave Food, Inc. were a big help in making the program possible. We would like to continue it next year."



Graduate Greyling Wilkes, left, and students from Parkway Central High School load up 2,600 books that Wilkes later transported to a New Orleans high school. The former transfer student, who now owns a small transportation company, delivered the donated books collected by Central students and staff. "I had a wonderful experience at Central and there is nothing I wouldn't do for the school," he says.

Photo by Parkway School District

"Wonderful Experience" *Compels Businessman to Help Alma Mater*

by Peggy Magee

Fifteen years after graduating from Parkway Central High School, former transfer student Greyling Wilkes still feels a strong connection to his alma mater. So much so that without hesitation, he stepped forward to handle the logistics of a community service project the school carried out last spring. Wilkes, the owner of a local transportation company, drove a truck load of books collected by Central students and staff to the Sarah T. Reid High School in New Orleans.

"I had wonderful experiences at Central and there is nothing I wouldn't do for the school," reports the 1993 Central graduate whose company, Top Notch Transportation, provides a host of services including non-emergency medical transportation, van service for businesses and bus service for special needs children.

When Central became aware of Reid School's lack of resources since Hurricane Katrina, a book collection was organized by the school's community service club, of which teacher Teresa Mullins is sponsor. "With the support of our assistant principal, we collected used texts from the various departments and asked the staff and students to bring in books for the library," she explains. "Nearly 2,600 books later – an amount that when boxed consumed an entire classroom – now brought about the issue of how to get them there. I knew that Greyling had a small transportation company and so I called him asking for advice. To my absolute surprise, he volunteered his services to make the run himself!"

In early August, Wilkes arrived at Central in his shuttle bus and he and the students loaded up the books. Later, he and one of his drivers set off for New Orleans. At the other end, Reid School staff helped with the unloading.

Wilkes, 33, is justifiably proud of what he has accomplished in life. He started his business five years ago, "just me and one vehicle." Now he has five vehicles and several employees. He is married and has a two-year old son, Greyling Jr. Last fall, the family built a new home in Lake St. Louis.

About his Parkway education, Greyling says, "It helped me get a grasp on life outside my South St. Louis neighborhood. It showed me I could strive for things that I wouldn't have thought were within my reach."

Equipped with that confidence, he went on to succeed not only business wise, but as a concerned and responsible citizen.

Message from the CEO



Several years ago, the VICC counseling staff developed a student workshop focused on the achievement gap and the impact that having a solid educational foundation has on a student's future. At the time, the national economy was expanding, there was full employment and wages were rising. Credit was readily available and it was widely considered a time of economic prosperity. However, even in those "good times," education was the surest pathway to financial success as statistics indicated that college graduates with a bachelor's degree earned over \$1 million more than individuals with only a high school diploma. It

seemed to be a pretty simple and straight forward relationship -- the more you **learned**, the more you **earned**.

However, what we did not know at the time, or at least what we neglected to even consider, was the value of education in down times . . . the value of a college or even just a high school diploma in recessionary times when unemployment ran high, wages were stagnant or falling and credit was tight. Not surprisingly, it turns out that a good education is even more valuable in such trying economic circumstances.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, not only does education level equal higher earnings, it also substantially reduces the likelihood of a person becoming (or staying) unemployed. For example, in 2008, the average person dropping out of school before getting a high school diploma was **three times more likely to be unemployed** than a college graduate holding a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, for those drop-outs who did have a job, their earnings were **only 40 percent** of what bachelor degree holders made. Even compared to high school graduates, the difference in both employment rates and earnings were sobering as graduates were 40 percent more likely to be employed and made 50 percent higher salaries than drop-outs.

Are there individual exceptions to these overall averages? Are there cases where some people "beat the odds" and succeed regardless? Absolutely. That's just the nature of statistics and large populations – there will be a few outliers. (And as some cynics might say, a few "out and out liars" too!) But these exceptions are rare and usually involve either luck or extraordinary talent/skill or work and dedication far beyond the effort and time it takes to do well in school. So, look at the odds and you tell me what direction you would rather see your students and their parents choose to insure their future:

Odds of

- 1) Winning a Lottery Jackpot 1:195,249,054
- 2) Becoming a Pro-Athlete 1:50,000
- 3) Being Murdered..... 1:18,000
- 4) Dating a Millionaire 1:215
- 5) Going to Prison
 - a) General Population 1:37
 - b) Black Male..... 1:3
- 6) Becoming a Self-Employed Business Owner..... 1:10
- 7) Graduating from High School through VICC 1:1.2 (85%)
- 8) Continuing to College/Advanced Training
After Graduation from a VICC School..... 1:1.1 (90%)

Now, I'll admit to being "slightly" biased in favor of the VICC program. But I'm also biased in favor of providing young people with the best education possible as a way to improve their odds for a successful future -- regardless of the economic conditions at the time!

And I doubt if any of VICC's successful graduates profiled in this issue of the Volunteer would disagree with me on that!

Bruce Ellerman
CEO