

See Important News from the  
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 on reverse side.

# parentlink

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by Peggy Magee

## County Friends' Lifestyles Show Transfer Student What is Possible

Having lived on "both sides of the fence," Terrill Smith, 33, credits the side that provided a stable school and community environment with helping him become the person he is today. Smith is a successful home builder and entrepreneur who takes time to mentor students at the Construction Prep Center in Wellston, a program that trains adults – many from disadvantaged or troubled backgrounds – to enter the construction trade. Smith is a product of the construction program as well as the St. Louis student transfer program.

The suburban school district he attended – Rockwood – showed Smith a side of life markedly different from

what he observed in his own neighborhood in mid-town St. Louis. His years in Rockwood started with Eureka Elementary, followed by LaSalle Springs Middle and Eureka High. "I went to the homes of my classmates and saw their solid family structures, their safe neighborhoods and the organized way in which their households operate," he recalls. "I realized that this was the lifestyle I wanted."

He remembers too the "unbelievable" quality of education he received, the caring teachers who reached out to students and the parents who launched fundraising and other school projects, all in support of their children. By just casually observing the parents working together, he says, "I saw the good that can come from strategizing, communicating and networking." Having also floated between schools in the Kansas City and St. Louis districts, he reports, "The education in Rockwood was always way ahead of anywhere else I attended."

His experience in Rockwood allowed Smith to see what is possible in life, he reports, and that ultimately led him to understand the importance of making good choices. But that didn't happen until after he hit rock bottom. As fast as a bullet (literally), he swerved off the right course he was on – being proud of himself for meeting the high academic expectations at Eureka High and enjoying his football coaches and teammates – to a path of self-destruction.

The turning point is when he was shot in the back by

a stray bullet not far from his home in the city. After being hospitalized for two weeks, he made a full recovery and returned to school but, he points out, "I had changed. I was angry, I turned away. I gave into the wrong peer pressure."

He got involved with "illegal stuff," he says, and because he had always excelled at everything, he worked at being the best at that. He was scheduled to graduate from Eureka High in 1995, but did not. After a 90-day suspension in his senior year, he chose not to return to school. His troubles continued to mount and at one point he faced the possibility of going to prison.

Smith believes his environment played a part in his decline, yet he also acknowledges that he made bad choices. "Our environment is so powerful in terms of steering us in a positive direction," he explains. "If you cannot physically move out of a negative environment, then take yourself out mentally. We have the ability to create our own destiny because we have choices."

Smith got a second chance with his involvement in the Construction Prep Center, a kind of boot camp that not only offers trade-related skills, but instills a work ethic and professionalism



Terrill Smith, on right, a former student of the voluntary transfer program and the Construction Prep Center, makes regular return visits to the Center to give current students tips on construction techniques and to inspire them by sharing his story. By attending the Rockwood school district, he says he saw other families and neighborhoods and learned about what is possible in life. "I realized that this was the lifestyle I wanted." Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

in its students. A stand-out participant, he motivated his classmates and, after graduation, was hired as a carpenter's apprentice for a large builder. Since leaving the program 10 years ago, he has returned on a regular basis to pass along advice and lessons learned to current students.

During a return visit, Smith met and befriended a student who became instrumental in providing further opportunities for him. The doors the friend opened led the talented tradesman to start his own successful construction company. Recently, he began a separate business designing and distributing customized silicone wrist bands. He and his two children live in a rented house in Frontenac so they can attend the Ladue school district. He is active

in their lives and works hard guiding them in how to best find success and happiness.

"It's all about hard work," Smith stresses, noting the importance of listening, learning and putting forth full effort. "The choices we make affect us tremendously," he adds, "and my rule is to never make a decision that compromises my integrity or character." He believes that opportunities present themselves everyday "and it is up to us to grab hold and make the most of them."

The opportunity he was given some 25 years ago, to attend a school district in St. Louis County, is one for which he continues to be thankful. "It showed me another side of life that I realized I too could have if I made good choices."

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VICC/Transpar employees and their families are not eligible for prizes (but please do follow along to see what's new with VICC.) Anyone found to use multiple accounts to enter will be ineligible.

## A Good Night's Sleep is Best for Learning

by Peggy Magee

Children need their sleep. Without it, their academic performance can suffer.

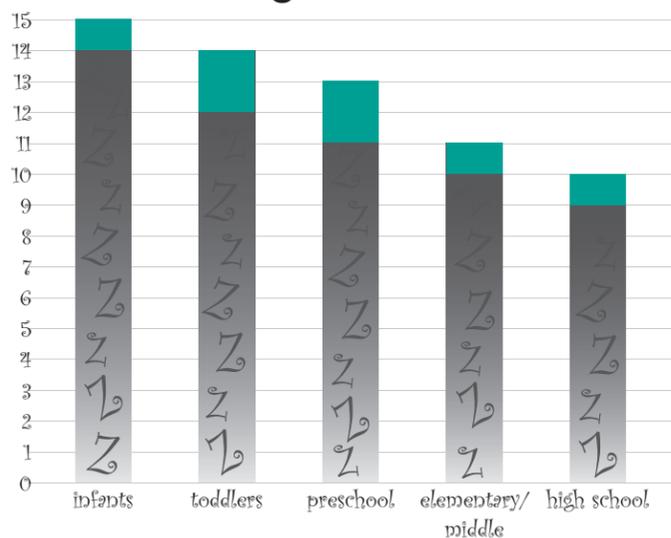
Dr. Joseph Ojile, founder of the Clayton Sleep Institute, addressed a gathering of Parkway voluntary transfer parents and advised them on how sleep directly impacts students' alertness and their ability to learn. "Sleep helps consolidate what they learn and prepares the brain to take in new information," he told the parents. "Sleep also helps with learning new tasks faster."

Students who get the right amount of sleep have a greater chance of doing better in school, according to Dr. Ojile. He says students who are sleep deprived often fall asleep in school, have low grades, have difficulty focusing and get in trouble for bad behavior. Lack of sleep can also lower the immune system, contribute to acne and other skin problems and even lead to depression.

So how much sleep is necessary? Dr. Ojile recommends students in kindergarten through grade eight get 10 - 11 hours of sleep each night, while high schoolers should have 9 - 10. "That means that a third grader who gets up at 6 a.m. should go to bed at 8 p.m."

See **SLEEP** (on reverse side)

### Recommended Hours of Sleep Each Night for Children



# Parkway South Step Team *Raises Bar for Members*



An afterschool club at Parkway South High School has 40 African-American students – the majority whom are voluntary transfer students – focusing on their grades, feeling connected to the school community and building a strong support system with each other. Not to mention they get to “stomp” to their hearts’ content.

It’s the “P. South” Step Team, a group that performs combinations of complex rhythms and sounds through footsteps, spoken word and hand claps. Stepping or step dancing has a long tradition in African-American fraternities and sororities.

Under the direction of administrative assistant/building manager BJ James, the team has garnered respect and excitement throughout the school community and won many awards in step-offs with other local step teams.

But success in competitions is secondary for the steppers. Their main goal is to have a winning record of grades and effort. “We are an academic-focused club,” reports James, adding that discipline and character building are also emphasized. “I tell the students that when they leave high school, either society will tell them what they can do or they can tell society what they

## News from Your Transportation Department

Summer school transportation cards should arrive in the mail approximately one week in advance of the start of your summer school.

If you need any changes for summer school, such as a different daycare address, please let your school know before **May 1**.

Any transportation changes, such as route or time changes, made after the start of summer school will be communicated to you by your child’s school. **Please be sure that your child’s school has good phone numbers on file for you.**

Anytime temperatures are forecast to be above 95 degrees, your child will be permitted to bring a water bottle to school to be filled with water only at the school for the afternoon ride home.

BJ James, the sponsor of the Parkway South Step Team, checks the form of stepper Kelsey Jackson during practice. Under James’ leadership, the team maintains high academic standards and has garnered a favorable “buzz” among the school community. Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

are going to do. That choice is theirs to make.”

James’ club motto, “Better Our Education with Step” is something the steppers take seriously. Junior Tia Terry admits that her participation motivates her to keep her grades up. “If our grades fall below a C, we are restricted from competing.”

All the students, in fact, work extra hard so that when James checks their grades, as he does every other week, he knows who is working toward the goal he has set of each student earning between a 3.5 and 4.0 grade point average by the end of the school year.

“If their grades are not good, I check to see if they are

turning in their homework,” he explains. If they are not, he encourages them to do so, even if they don’t understand the material, “so the teacher knows in what area to provide additional help.” He advises them to talk to the teacher about getting extra help or, if needed, he will mediate between the student and teacher.

An expression that James repeats often is, “Get out of the hallway,” his way of moving students along to their next class so they can get settled in their seats, prepared to listen and learn. “It becomes a domino effect,” he explains. “When the step team sets the example of getting to class on time or going to the homework room for help, other students follow their lead.”

“Academics is our first priority above all else,” confirms sophomore stepper D’Marko Cosey, who says he’s pleased that is the case. “We are serious about our studies; that’s a good thing.” D’Marko also values the camaraderie among the team members. “I was welcomed with open arms and the more experienced

students were eager to help me learn the steps.”

The step team provides a sense of belonging to its members. And James’ strong rapport with them and his effectiveness in gaining visibility for the talented group – both school wide and in the community – provides students with an appealing option for school involvement.

The result is more students wanting to join, “which causes aspiring students to raise their own expectations of their grades and citizenship to meet Mr. James’ high standards,” notes Principal Gary Mazzola. “We are now seeing students who may not have been motivated in school working at getting good grades so they can be eligible to make the team or to keep their spot on the team.”

It was four years ago when Mazzola was approached by several students wanting to start a step team. “I heard the pride in their voices as they stepped and chanted the name of their high school.” With BJ James as its director, the team has grown and improved and become quite popular, he reports. “The Step team has brought something new and different to South High and that exposure is a good thing for all students.”



## Message from the CEO

David S. Glaser

Is the voluntary transfer program successful? This is a question that I am frequently asked and, I believe, it is critically important all of us be well prepared to answer affirmatively and passionately. Recently there has been considerable media attention related to the Turner vs. Clayton School District court case and this has increased the number of people in the community asking this very question. I frequently point to the compelling evidence that does indeed confirm the success of our program. Why else would parents choose to have their students ride a bus for almost an hour every day each way to and from school if they did not see the benefits of the program? In addition, we can point to graduation rates, test scores, and attendance rates which are all also indicative of the increased success rate and the benefits for students and their families to participate in the program.

However, I believe the most compelling evidence is demonstrated by the lifelong success achieved by the participants in the program. Many graduates of the program have continued on to college, obtained a degree in education, and are now teachers or administrators in the very districts they attended as students. Obviously, they saw the benefits of the program personally and made a conscious decision to give back to the community and the program by helping to educate future graduates.

As was highlighted in previous issues, other graduates have gone on to public service and are currently serving in the state legislature or working in other forms of government service. Other students have graduated from the program and have started their own businesses. One example is highlighted in the current issue of *Parent Link* which describes the achievements of Terrill Smith, a successful home builder and entrepreneur who mentors students at a construction prep center. Despite challenges, he eventually turned his life around and now has a successful life for himself and his family. He credits the voluntary transfer program with broadening his perspective on life and providing him with a bigger picture of the opportunities available to all of us.

Finally, while attending a VICC awards ceremony presented by one of the participating county districts, I heard personal stories of students who are exceedingly successful as a result of their participation in the program. I heard a high school student deliver a moving poem that he wrote which clearly communicated how he is benefitting from participating in the program and the difference it is making in his life. Despite the challenges all students face, the opportunities are even greater. Other high school students at this assembly shared the plans they have to attend college, the dreams ahead of them, and how caring teachers and administrators had prepared and motivated them.

The bottom line is that, as parents and students currently participating in the program, it is each one of you who will most resoundingly answer the question regarding whether or not this program is successful. There will always be naysayers and critics and the best way to silence them is to demonstrate in your life the difference the program has made and the opportunities it has opened up. Tony Robbins, author, entrepreneur and award-winning speaker, notes, “Success comes from taking the initiative and following up . . . persisting . . . eloquently expressing the depth of your love. What simple action could you take today to produce a new momentum towards success in your life?” So that is my challenge to you. Ultimately each one of you will define the success of this program. Take action today to produce new momentum toward success in your life and in the lives of your fellow students. If you do this, answering the questions and criticism will be easy.

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## SLEEP (continued)

Getting the right amount of sleep is especially challenging during teenage years, when the body’s circadian rhythm (internal biological clock) is temporarily reset, causing teens to fall asleep later at night and wake up later in the morning. Typically, high schools have very early start times, meaning that often teens only squeeze in six or seven hours of sleep a night. “They tend to make up for this accumulated sleep deficit by sleeping later on weekends,” says Dr. Ojile.

While the doctor generally advises people to pay back their sleep debt, he cautions that when teens make up sleep on weekends, it can cause further trouble. “Because of the variation of sleep and wake time, it could lead to problems with sleep limitation during the week, circadian rhythm disruption and insomnia.” His recommendation is that they make a concerted effort to go to bed on school nights at a time that enables them to get nine to 10 hours of sleep.

Concern about sleep deprived kids is nothing new. Experts have been fretting about tired children since at least 1897, research shows. Yet the problem is even greater these days with the vast amount of electronics available to children. Computers, cell phones and televisions in bedrooms all serve to distract children from falling off to sleep on time.

While enforcing strict bed times may seem daunting to some parents, Dr. Ojile insists that it is critical. “Sleep is as important to a student’s overall health as diet and exercise.”