LEWIS TWINS WELL SERVED BY ROCKWOOD EDUCATION

NOW PASS ALONG LESSONS LEARNED

By Peggy Mague

It was double the pleasure when twins Rodney and Ronald Lewis walked the halls of Rockwood's Lafayette High School in the late 90's. Uncommonly similar in looks, teachers and students found it nearly impossible to tell them apart. Additionally, they were affable and well liked, hard working in the classroom and fierce competitors on the basketball court. Cut from the same cloth, why even had identical ACT scores!

Fast forward 15 years and the young husbands and fathers still mirror each other. Age 33, they both have impressive jobs, plus work as a consulting team, visiting schools and youth centers to point the way to upward mobility. Despite the odds, they found success and now want to give back “by providing guidance and inspiration to young people,” explains Rodney, principal of Griffith Elementary School in the Ferguson-Florissant district. Ron, director of the TRIO Student Services Support Program at St. Francis University in Fort Wayne, IN, and adjunct professor at Ivy Tech Community College in Indianapolis, sums up their zealous strategy: “We advise students to roll up their sleeves and tell their inner city neighborhoods, ‘You can’t stop me’! The twins especially direct their message to first generation college students because that is what they were. In a book they are currently writing titled Gritty, the dynamic educators say they use relatable stories from their college experiences to convey the strength of a “gritty” mindset.

Their own tenacity grew from observing their parents’ hard working ways. Too, their mom and dad’s keen interest in their positive development motivated the twins to make their parents proud. The 1999 Lafayette High grads also credit the voluntary transfer program and share similar sentiments about the benefits of attending school in the Rockwood district. Again, alike in every way. Although, at first, each felt in Rodney’s words “culturally inadequate,” when they transferred to Rockwood’s Crestview Middle School from their all-black St. Louis public school, the exposure they gained to other ethnicities, lifestyles and ways of thinking was valuable.

The difference between their old and new school and nearby suburbs was startling. “Going from point A to point Z,” reports Rodney. They found in Rockwood, he says — rigorous academics, grounds and buildings on the caliber of a college campus and a diverse student population — prepared them well. The school’s diversity, he points out, “was reflective of the real world.” About the academics, he notes, “We had to put in extra work. More was required of us.” Ron adds, “Our parents expected us to achieve.”

They did, with the support of faculty and staff. “They pumped us up,” says Rodney about the Lafayette administrators, their teachers and coaches, by keeping tabs on them and dispensing advice. Ron concurs: “They helped groom us. They invested in us and rooted for us. We are extremely appreciative.”

Going back and forth between their two worlds — the inner city and the wealthy suburbs — helped the twins build, in their words, “social capital.” Explains Rodney, “There is time for ‘playing’ and a time for ‘business.’ It’s important to know the difference.”

Ron talks about how their west county upbringing opened his eyes to possibilities. “When I saw where my friends lived and what they had, I thought, I want that.” And when he discovered that his friends’ moms and dads had college degrees, he thought, “Well I can get one too if it means I can live like this.”

And so the pair did, thanks to full athletic scholarships to play basketball for St. Louis Community College at Meramec and then Barry University in Miami, FL. They both received a bachelor’s degree in Broadcast Communication, followed by master’s degrees and even doctorate degrees. Ron has a master’s in sports management and is currently pursuing a Ph.D in global leadership from Indiana Technology Institute. Rodney holds two master’s degrees: one in teaching and the other in educational administration. He earned an Ed.D in educational leadership from Maryville University.

For Rodney, Crestview Middle School was his “gateway” to a fruitful educational journey where each opportunity made him want to move upward to the next. At one point after his graduation from Barry University, he returned to Lafayette High as a hall monitor while earning his certification in physical education and health at Lindenwood University. His high school delivered for him then too. He was asked to coach men’s basketball, Teachers and administrators respected him for the work he did mentoring students and regarded him as part of the educational team. “The experience I gained and the advice I received helped put the pieces of my career path in place.” He went on to land a P.E teacher job in the Parkway district, followed by assistant principal jobs— first in Parkway and then in Valley Park.

“Seeing the moment” is the phrase the twins use to describe the way they took full advantage of every opportunity that came their way in Rockwood. “We were always asking questions,” admits Ron. “Sooak it dry” is Rodney’s description of how
FORMER STUDENT SHARES POSITIVE MEMORIES OF EDUCATION

by Peggy Magooe

Bryan Clay had a lot to reminisce about when he made a sales call on the VICC Office in Clayton. As a sales executive for Shred-it-St. Louis, he researches the companies he calls on to call on the VICC Office in Clayton. As a sales executive for FORMER STUDENT attended school with more than 44 — near “where the rocks are,” he remembers telling his friends as a locator note for the bluff near Fenton. Besides that, the school doesn’t have a football team, which was a huge disappointment to him. He describes his freshman year as “a time of acclimation for all of us.” This was back in the early 80’s and for most resident students, it was the first time they attended school with more than one or two African-Americans.

Similarly, for the transfer students, it was generally the first time they had more than a couple Caucasian students in their school. There were no African-American teachers. Administrators knew this was an uncharted territory. They set the tone by embracing the new students, making them feel welcome and comfortable. Clay describes the feeling of “commonality” that over among students: “We were all treated the same. There was no preferential treatment given.”

After the initial period of transition, Clay reports that the black and white schoolmates formed friendships, brought together by their shared classes, love of sports and competitive spirit. Academically, he was a good student, fueled by the “high value” placed on education by his parents, teachers and coaches. With the absence of football, Clay took up basketball, baseball and cross country. He was good at each but especially excelled at basketball. Because of his school and family’s high expectations for him, he worked equally hard on his studies.

Clay says he learned an important lesson by having to turn in a different direction athletically. “No matter how bleak a situation seems, there is always something positive that comes from it.” For him it was learning new sports. He was named captain of the basketball team. His baseball team was the first in the history of Valley Park to go to state. “It was a good year for the Hawks,” he points out, name dropping Valley Park’s mascot. “He went on to play basketball and run track at University of Central Missouri before returning to St. Louis and attending St. Louis Community College at Meramec.”

The Valley Park teammates spent time together outside of school as well. Clay tells of hanging out, studying and eating meals at the homes of friends who lived near the school, either before or after practice. In the summer, they got together for pick-up games, both in Valley Park and the city. Clay notes that even though the county kids said they hardly ever went into the city, “They came in for some pick-up games with us!”

At the time, Clay didn’t give this co-mingling of cultures much thought except that they were fun times. Looking back on it now, as a working adult with a wife and two grown sons, he is more insightful. “It really helped knock down barriers and stereotypical mindsets that people can have when they are never exposed to anything.”

What he experienced in Valley Park jibes with the beliefs he holds today as a deacon at First Baptist Church of St. John. “It’s the content of one’s character that is important. It’s about having an open mind and an open heart.”

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In school and in the workforce, the twins have gleaned much insight about overcoming the odds – advice they share in these workshops and books. “There is no pigmentation when it comes to possessing passion, drive, determination and being hungry to succeed,” notes Rodney. Both brothers emphasize the power of networking and importance of building relationships. “Having someone else push your cause is necessary,” points out Ron. “You need others to believe in you and help you.” They are grateful that Rockwood educators stepped up for them.

As the end of the school year approaches, so do opportunities to celebrate all of our students’ successes. Like me, hopefully you have had the opportunity to attend recognition programs for your children. This is the time of year when the hard work of our students and the support they have received from their parents and teachers begin to pay off. Whether that recognition is in the form of an academic award, a musical or artistic award or recognition for a job well done in an athletic endeavor, I join with you in saying well done and in celebrating your students’ successes and achievements.

In addition to the immediate recognition that our students receive, sometimes, as is described in the articles in the current issue of Parent Link, their success may occur or continue to occur later in life. I was particularly struck by the comments made by the Lewis twins when they noted their parents’ hard-working ways and knowing their mom and dad’s keen interest in their development and how it motivated them to make their parents proud. Make no doubt, the attention you give your children and the importance you place on their education will make a huge difference in their ultimate success. Some of that success is earned immediately and other success occurs later in life as they attend college, get jobs, and have opportunities to give back to their communities and families. Then they too can pay it forward by making a difference in the lives of students that are currently attending school.

My wife sometimes laments that I am a hopeless music lover and pay attention not only to the beat of the music but also the words. I recently heard a new song by Switchfoot and the lyrics were haunting and even somewhat motivational:

“In this the world you want? Is this the world you want? You’re making it Every day you’re alive. You change the world You change the world Every day you’re alive!”

Wow! Whether we realize it or not, each of us truly has the opportunity to affect the world in which we live. By our actions and every day decisions, we make the world what it is and change the world into what it can become. Let’s together get out and make the world and change the world into a better place for the benefit of our children and their future and all of our futures.

Valley Park graduate and Shred-it executive Bryan Clay stands with VICC staffer Rose Mary Cockrell inside a locked console for document shredding that is serviced by Clay’s company. When Clay made a sales call to the VICC Office recently, he talked with Cockrell for 20 minutes about his positive experiences being part of the voluntary transfer program.

Message from the CEO

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