

VICC volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR'S LEADERSHIP SHAPED BY COUNTY EDUCATION

by Peggy Magee

The VICC program helped make Sharonica Hardin the educator she is today. "It wasn't all peaches and cream by any means," however, she points out, "quite often it is the more challenging experiences that we look back on as being the most valuable. That was the case for me."

At the young age of 27, after five years as a classroom teacher, she was named principal at Adams Elementary in the St. Louis Public School district and has since climbed the ranks to an assistant superintendent in the Ritenour district. The VICC program, she notes, "made me stronger. It molded me."

Hardin grew up in north St. Louis and entered the Rockwood district as a sixth grader back in 1985, just a few years after the transfer program began. "It was a lot to navigate without the skills or the tools," the 1991 Lafayette High grad reports. "I felt like I didn't fit in. I was kind of an outlier." She acknowledges that since those early years, districts have implemented programs and procedures so that transferring students do not feel isolated or labeled, as she did.

There were some high points, however, such as having Laura Finucane as her assistant principal. "She made me feel like I was the most important person to her. She knew I needed that. She saw something in me and believed in me." Also, singing in the choir was a "good outlet" for her, she says, and she enjoyed a congenial bond with her music teacher, Ms. Butler.

Hardin's personal experiences served as informal case studies for the instruction she received to earn a master's degree in Education Administration from St. Louis University and a Ph.D in Educational Leadership from UMSL. She reports, "I had first-hand knowledge of how important relationships are. When we have human connectedness, we are more productive, more motivated

and happy." Holding certification as a professional in human resources, she heads up the human resources department at Ritenour where her job centers on people. She hires, trains and mentors. "People matter!" she insists.

The priority she places on human capital impacts her leadership policy as she works to help teachers, administrators and support staff do their jobs well. "We have a responsibility to make all students feel wanted and connected. We must value our roles and understand the impact our actions (or lack of) have on the lives of the children we touch."

Looking back on her Rockwood education in a broader sense, Hardin cites other positives. "The exposure I had to a 'college going' culture." Also, seeing the affluence of other neighborhoods provided her "a global, holistic perspective. It gave me high aspirations. I knew of the possibilities."

As trying as it was for her at the time, Hardin can say without hesitation that the VICC program helped her become who she is today—a dynamic administrator making significant contributions in turning out the leaders of tomorrow.



Former VICC student Sharonica Hardin, right, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources in the Ritenour School District, believes that attending Rockwood schools molded her and influenced her leadership practices. Here she chats with Ritenour High School principal Patricia Closson at a leadership development retreat for district administrators.

Photo by Doug Bray, Ritenour School District

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LANGUAGE ARTS UNIT IGNITES STUDENT'S INTEREST IN POETRY WRITING

by Peggy Magee

I AM

by Albert Cloudy

I am me
I am me
Had my troubles in the beginning
Got on track and now my world's spinning
Doors are opening
With lots of opportunities to choose
So many possibilities it's hard to lose
Words cannot express
What this program has done for me
Bussed from the city and out to the county
Takes a toll physically and mentally
But the education is worth it, most definitely

More resources given to us everyday
While other schools barely have a place to play
I am lucky that I've entered the doors to success
You, me, and all of the others should count ourselves blessed

Activities that we can attend with a little bit of help
Always have someone to depend on when there's no one else
Friends I've made from different cultures and backgrounds
Love, support, and guidance constantly surrounds
With this occurrence I have a lot to show for
They left me with a thirst that's got me wanting more for
Adults on my side, ready to lend a helping hand
Or willing to motivate, express ideas, take a stand

This school, this place, my second home
Pushed me forward through every hardship I've known
Each day made it apparent I was not alone

Take time to really think about where you would be
If it wasn't for the help of the V-I-C-C
Maybe another school, you would make lots of friends
Friends who in front of, you'd have to pretend
An education, too, but one that's harder to grasp
Memories that'd fade and impressions that wouldn't last

Only a few more steps
And we've made it to the other side
Glad we stood in the moment
Glad we put forth the time

Not saying we've had it easy or didn't take sweat
All the hard work and adversity made us our best
Our very best to stroll across the graduation stage
Our very best to start the next chapter, the next page
... in our lives

So thank you to those who made it all possible
For taking a risk on me, you're truly phenomenal
You've given me a debt, I'll never be able to repay
But please, know in your hearts, it's me you have saved

I am me
Was not so good at the beginning
Now a future so bright; I'm destined for winning
Thank you

Albert Cloudy, at the young age of 19, can soon call himself a published poet. His exposure to poetry and subsequent opportunities that have come his way can be traced to his education at Rockwood's Marquette High School, from which he graduated in 2013.

Albert was introduced to poetry by Shelly Justin in the language arts class she teaches for freshmen who struggle with reading and comprehension. As part of her poetry unit, she teaches about slam poetry which is written to be performed and very often judged in a competition, called a slam. Generally, the subject of a slam poem has deep personal significance to the writer. "Slam poetry seems to particularly capture the interest of students who have a hard time verbally expressing themselves, as Albert did," she notes.

For a classroom slam, Albert wrote and recited a poem about an altercation that broke out around the corner from his house in west St. Louis where a young adult from the neighborhood was killed. "People were shooting at each other near my house and I wrote about it," he reports solemnly.

Poetry became an outlet for Albert to process the hard reality of growing up in the inner city. He knew from attending school in Rockwood since first grade that the way of life in other communities contrasts sharply to the one where he lives. His poems mainly touch on what is happening around him and his thoughts on how it could be different. "I just wish there could be unity and harmony everywhere," he says.

While his school activities, such as the academic culture club, track team and musicals, had start and stop points, poetry writing was a constant for Albert. Justin and other faculty encouraged his interest. She suggested he participate in her annual school-wide poetry slam where students perform their works before three judges and an audience. He did so for four years straight and one year was voted one of the top three contestants. Last spring she invited him to be a judge for the slam. When she introduced him, she announced, "Albert connected deeply with that little poetry unit I teach. After leaving my class, he continued to write poetry and fell in love with it. I am proud to report that he will soon be a published poet." The enthusiastic applause that broke out was an indication of how excited everyone at Marquette is for him.

Among those clapping in support of Albert was Ginny Frings, a local author and motivational speaker. Upon hearing about Albert's talents a year earlier, she eagerly stepped up to mentor him at the request of a representative from the Partners in Education program who contacted her after being notified about Albert's talent by a Rockwood staffer. When Frings read Albert's poem titled *I Am*, she was immediately impressed. "It had all the components of a professionally written poem," she points out. She set up a meeting with Albert and talked with him about his poetry and goals. Knowing his desire to become a police officer, she introduced him to two local law enforcement officers who authored the *Light Bringer* series. They too offered words of encouragement and advice to the teen. (Albert also plans to become a masseuse for which he is currently enrolled in school).

Frings was so taken with Albert that she invited him to write the 12 poems that introduce each of the chapters in her soon-to-be-published book on strength, *UR Titanium*. She gave him a brief description of each chapter's content. "He composed thoughtful lyrics that fit perfectly. He nailed it every time," she reports. "I am in awe of this young poet, Albert Cloudy." Because Albert is such an inspiration to Frings, she included him in the Acknowledgments section of her new novel, *Blue-Eyed Ruse*. She thanked him for sharing his gifts as a young poet, adding that he is on a path to great success.

In his sophomore year at Marquette, Albert wrote a poem about Martin Luther King Jr. that he recited at Rockwood's annual African-American achievement celebration. His poem was so well received that he was asked in his junior year to deliver another poem for the same event. The result is *I Am* about his experiences in the VICC program. Keep in mind that he created this poem for the purpose of delivering it at a popular district wide event attended by students, parents, board members, school and administrative staff—an auditorium full of people whose eyes were peeled on a young man who found his passion in a "little poetry unit" taught at Marquette High School.



Twelve poems by Albert Cloudy, a 2013 graduate of Rockwood's Marquette High School, will be printed in a soon-to-be-published book by local author Ginny Frings, left. Language Arts teacher Shelly Justin, right, introduced Albert to poetry his freshman year. Rockwood faculty encouraged his interest in poetry writing and passed along his works to Partners in Education who asked Frings to mentor him, which she enthusiastically did. Photo by Peggy Magee

DISTRICTS HEAD TO THE CITY TO STRENGTHEN PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

by Peggy Magee

You've heard the real estate adage—that repeat of the same word—stressing just how important location is. In education, a comparable adage would be relationship, relationship, relationship.

These days, schools work extra hard to forge connections with students and families right from the start. For families who reside in the city, distance often makes that more difficult. However this summer, administrators, counselors and other staff from county districts took to the highway to build bonds with their voluntary transfer families.

In Parkway, district counselors for the second summer scheduled appointments at the homes of all new VICC students, including existing families who had another child entering the district. If the school principal or another building administrator is available, often he or she will join the counselor on the home visit. "It's an opportunity to establish positive relations and bridge the gap between home and school," notes counselor Moyenda Anwisy. Since last year, the primary focus of the district counselors is to work with Parkway students from the city.

When Claymont Elementary School principal Aaron Wills accompanied district counselor Sara Moulder to the north St. Louis home of new Claymont kindergartner Trent Young, his older brother Seth, also at Claymont, and his neighborhood friends thought it was pretty neat to have a school principal sitting in the Young's living room. And although the visitors engaged the older sibling in friendly conversation, most of the dialogue was directed at Trent and parents Ronda and Lee Young.

Principal Wills, a balloon sculptor in his spare time, immediately breaks the ice when he enters the homes of his students by making the children animal balloons. Delighted by his creations, the children get a chance to try their own hand at operating the balloon pump. Trent enjoyed the balloon activity and responding to the questions Moulder posed to him, such as where he went to preschool and what he liked about it. Moulder also asks parents about their students' personalities, strengths and weaknesses and what excites and motivates them. With that information, she writes a report for the



Hancock Place High School freshmen, siblings April and Jeremiah Turner, of south St. Louis, accept goody bags last July from principal Cathy Lorenz, left, and assistant principal Shelly Vogler who visited the homes of all incoming high school students before the start of school. The administrators welcomed the families to the high school and reminded them about upcoming school events and dates. Photo by Peggy Magee

classroom teacher. "Knowing about our students in advance helps us to have a plan for them when they arrive," she explains.

At these meetings, parents get a packet of information which the counselor reviews with them. Lee Young appreciates that the principal and counselor took the time to come to his house. "This visit has made my son more at ease about starting school. He's in good hands at Claymont."

For the Hancock Place district, its small size lends itself to a more intimate climate, one which is easy to establish relationships and trust. At the high school, this is the fourth summer that home visits were made to all incoming freshmen, both those in the city and resident families, by principal Cathy Lorenz and assistant principal Shelly Vogler—whose idea it was. They are informal visits because as Lorenz explains, "We determined that it's better for our visits to be spontaneous rather than highly structured." However, the kids do start texting one another when they know we're in the neighborhood, she adds with a laugh. The pair come armed with a "goody bag," as Lorenz calls it, with school information and snacks of course. It's an effort to kick start the families' "sense of belonging," she notes.

Siblings April and Jeremiah Turner were watching a movie when Lorenz and Vogler knocked at the door of the family's apartment in south St. Louis on a Monday morning in July, one of 13 stops they made in the city that day. The teens seemed pleased to see their visitors whom they know from their years at Hancock Middle School, located next door to the high school. They listened attentively while the administrators gave them a brief summary of upcoming school events and dates to remember. "Look in the bag, all the information is in there," Lorenz suggested. "Are you planning on going out for a sport?" she asked Jeremiah, giving the date of try-outs. As the conversation came to an end, Lorenz told the brother and sister, "Good

news. This year all Hancock students get free breakfast and lunch."

When mom Lisa Turner, who was at work, heard about the visit, she replied, "That's awesome!" About the Hancock district, she said, "They do a great job of getting to know everyone."

For two days in May and again in July, screeners from the Rockwood district stationed themselves at Harris Stowe State University performing assessments for kindergartners entering Rockwood schools. The same screening is held for incoming resident kindergartners at the district's early childhood centers. For the convenience of voluntary transfer families, Rockwood began providing sessions in the city several years ago. About the testing, Cindy Lewis, screening supervisor for Rockwood, notes, "The information serves as a great resource for teachers and staff so they can be as prepared as possible for each new student."

After the child is screened, one of the directors meets with the parent for a private conference. "We let them know where their child is developmentally and the kinds of things they can work on before school starts," points out Lewis. Also present are facilitators from Rockwood's Department of Educational Equity and Diversity (DEED), who welcome the families and talk with them informally. They also give each child a backpack full of school-related goodies.

DEED director Terry Harris views the screenings as "the first meet and greet for many of our families." He notes, "It's our way of extending a warm welcome and showing our interest and enthusiasm in having a collaborative relationship with them."

There's that all-important word again: relationship.

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Message from the CEO

David S. Glaser



The recent tragic death of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old student in north St. Louis County, as well as the death of actor and comedian Robin Williams, got me thinking about my own mortality and the importance of doing things in life that really matter. I believe that all of us are fortunate and blessed to be working in careers that give us opportunities to make a difference in the lives of children—differences that can matter for many years into the future and throughout their lives. Obviously money, fame, and fortune come and go and if your only measure of success is these things, I believe you are likely to be disappointed.

The articles in this issue of the *Volunteer* provide tangible outstanding examples of how educators are making a difference in transforming the lives of students. Whether it is making an extra effort and visiting students and their families in their homes, taking time to build meaningful relationships with your students, making students feel like they are the most important person in the world or developing the passion and interest of your students, the opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others are constantly available to all of us. I am especially moved by the poem written by student Albert Cloudy. I feel his poem clearly expresses the difference that the VICC program makes in the lives of so many students and the difference that all of the teachers, administrators and other support staff make in these students' lives as well.

It was a great reminder that while we may call our jobs work, what we do really matters to so many students and their families. Having a job that allows us to become an expression of who we are and what matters most to us in life provides us opportunities to truly make a difference in the world in which we live and that gives all of us meaning, significance, and purpose.

Vicc volunteer

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