

VICC volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

Rockwood Grad's Work to Inspire Students Holds Special Meaning for Her

Makes Her Want to Do the Best Job She Can

by Peggy Magee

Just over a year ago, Angela Lewis, 28, was director of basketball operations at Marquette University and on a path to become a Division I college coach for women's basketball. A "reevaluation" of her priorities caused the former VICC student – a 2000 graduate of Rockwood's Lafayette High School – to make a career change, she says. And it's one she is passionate about.

Lewis is now back in her hometown, working with voluntary transfer students enrolled in Rockwood schools. "Being able to inspire students' lives by showing them someone who has walked in their shoes is very rewarding," she reports. "There is a little piece of me in all of them."

As an area supervisor in Rockwood's Department of Educational Equity and Diversity, Lewis is assigned to a cluster of schools spanning all grade levels (including her alma mater, Lafayette), where she serves as a support for students, families and staff. Her duties are diverse. She meets with students one-on-one to review their academic progress and set goals. If pupils have socio-emotional problems, she works with them to come up with solutions. She collaborates with school personnel to identify students in need and implement interventions to promote success.

Most of this is done through individual consultations, but she also runs group programs, such as a leadership group for fourth-grade girls and a book club for eighth-grade boys. At the high school level, she partners with the Transitions College Prep program, seeing to it that students are aware of future opportunities.



Angela Lewis, center, makes the rounds to her assigned Rockwood schools, building relationships with transfer students and reminding them they are capable of doing great things. The former Rockwood VICC student has worked in the district's Department of Educational Equity and Diversity for more than a year now. Here she chats with Ellisville Elementary students. *Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman*

She works with VICC parents too, addressing issues that come up, and aids the schools in building good relationships with them, something that is "crucial, especially due to the distance," she believes.

That issue of distance between home and school presents other challenges, Lewis points out. "There is a tendency for VICC students to always feel like visitors." She

See Inside *Rockwood Grad's Work*

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Rockwood Grad's Work (continued)

knows that because she herself experienced it. "So much of what these kids are going through, I went through. I know exactly what it feels like. I can relate."

That holds true for the sacrifices students and their families must make. Lewis, who grew up in north St. Louis, played basketball at Lafayette and describes some of what she went through: "I would wake up at 5 a.m. and not return home until 7 or 7:30 p.m., and then still have to do homework. If there wasn't transportation for an event, I would have to stay at someone's house when usually I just wanted to go home, be with my family and sleep in my own bed." She remembers team picture day being held on a Monday one year and almost all the players forgot to bring their uniforms to school. "The resident students called their parents and they dropped off the uniforms, but I had to take my picture with a different number since my parents couldn't make the trip." While her parents supported her as best they could, they would have liked to have been more involved in her school life, but simply were not able to because of the distance.

It is the sacrifices that VICC families make each and every day that motivate Lewis to do the best job she can. "I admire them and because of that, I take my job very seriously."

And while she fully recognizes that the benefits of attending school in the county far outweigh the sacrifices, Lewis feels strongly that for optimum results, students must feel connected to their schools because with that connectedness comes a support system that can help them reach their full potential. "I advise them to get involved," she says. "That makes a big difference."

Basketball is what helped Lewis acclimate. Coming from an all-black inner city school that was within walking distance, she found Rockwood "a completely different world that I didn't know existed." But by playing basketball at Lafayette, she "developed amazing friendships," she says, including fellow basketball player Lauren Lux, of Wildwood, with whom she still remains close. "Lauren is Jewish and I was able to learn so much about her culture." The friendship Lewis maintained with the Lux family "enhanced my experience significantly," she reports.

Academically, Lewis regrets that she was not enrolled in challenge courses in middle school which, "would have put me on track for them in high school." Now she is the one telling students how great their potential is and encouraging them to stretch themselves.

And because her own experiences mirror those of her students, her message hits home with them. "The students can relate to her," notes Allison Loy, principal of Ellisville Elementary School, adding that parents too trust in what she says and confide in her. As a result, she says that Angela has been able to help families that have extreme difficulties.

From Lafayette High School, Lewis went on to St. Louis University on a full athletic (basketball) scholarship. "The basketball coaches recruited me through high school and AAU basketball," which she played during the summer months, she notes. She graduated magna cum laude from SLU. After college, Lewis played professional basketball in Germany before starting her coaching career.

Throughout her education, Lewis says her family believed in her and expected great things of her. "That is what drove me." And now, she motivates students in the same way. "I let them know that they are capable and can do anything they set their sights on. I empower them to think about their future and create a plan."

One Generation Follows Next

City Families Value What County Schools Provide

by Peggy Magee

For many St. Louis city residents, attending county school districts has become a family affair. Parents, uncles and older cousins have paved the way for younger relatives. As family members detail the experiences of multiple generations, they share sentiments of accomplishment and pride. And nearly always, their stories give credit to the schools – whether it be the caring teachers, the academics, or the high expectations – for fueling favorable outcomes.

Tracy Williams Peoples, who resides downtown, describes her family's affiliation with the Parkway district as "generations of family successes." She and her brother were both impacted in a good way by their Parkway high schools, she says, and now Tracy's oldest daughter, in her 10th year in the Parkway district, "just loves it."

Amber, a freshman at Parkway South, holds the same fondness and respect for her principal, Gary Mazzola, that her mom felt for him when she attended Parkway North and he was a teacher there. "Mr. Mazzola encouraged and empowered students each and every day," recalls Tracy, a 1995 graduate of Parkway North. Tracy's brother, Quincy Williams, vouches for Mazzola's inspiration. "He pushed me to be the best person I could be – on and off the court." Now at Missouri Baptist College on a basketball scholarship, Quincy will graduate this year with a degree in engineering.

The best part of attending a county district, according to Tracy, is the exposure it provides city students. "It allows them to experience new things, meet new people and opens their eyes to all the possibilities for their future," she says, adding that most inner city youth are not exposed to enough, she believes. Her dream is to use the degree in business that she is currently pursuing at St. Louis University to operate her own community center with program offerings that would expand students' horizons.

The Hasson family's education is rooted in another suburban district. "We have a lot of history in Valley Park," notes Angela Hasson, of midtown St. Louis, citing all the family members who have attended: herself – a 1990 graduate, her brother, four nieces and nephews and now her two children, enrolled at the elementary school.

Angela points out that, physically, much has

changed in the district since when she was there 20 years ago. But one important thing has stayed the same, she observes: the quality of the staff. "They have great teachers and administrators who really care about the students." She cites one such teacher, Mike Menley, her children's P.E. instructor. Angela and Mike attended Valley Park High together and now see each other at parent events. "They are wonderful students," Mike says about Angela's children – Angelo, in kindergarten, and Clarence, fifth grade. "They remind me of Angela because they have great smiles and are happy kids."

Lisa Fairbanks Mack, a 1989 graduate of Ladue High, sums up her reasons for attending school in the county and now having her two children in the Clayton district: "I think that venturing outside our neighborhood gives us more opportunities for success."

Lisa, of west St. Louis, points to the variety of courses she had in Ladue, including Latin, pottery and accounting, the latter which "steered me toward my career interest." She studied accounting at the college level, first at UMSL and then through University of Phoenix on-line courses while working full-time in mid-management at AT&T. Her plans are to go back to school for a master's degree in accounting or business.

Even some of the challenges Lisa faced while attending school in the county during the infancy stages of the desegregation program are now viewed by her as positive, in retrospect. "The feeling of separateness that I felt at times and learning how to deal with it was good preparation for life," she concedes. Currently, her children – middle schoolers Quincy and Kennedy – don't feel a chasm between the races. "My son especially has a diverse circle of close friends."

In addition to providing her children with an accepting school environment, Lisa is pleased with Clayton's many options for extracurricular involvement and, most of all, its high level of academics. "My children will be well prepared for college," she notes.

For Maya Washington Pierce, a schoolmate of Lisa's who remains close friends with her, the appeal of Ladue High was that, "It had everything I wanted all together – sports, academics, even courses in home economics," which was not always the case for St. Louis schools. Now a north St. Louis parent, she is pleased with the education her daughter Jade receives in the Clayton district and is looking forward to next fall when daughter Brooklyn enters kindergarten there.



The positive experiences of past VICC students, such as Angela Hasson, have prompted them to enroll their children in the program. Here, Hasson, a 1990 graduate of Valley Park High School, stands beside her sons, Clarence, 5th grade, and Angelo, kindergarten, at their school, Valley Park Elementary School. About the Valley Park district, Angela says, "They have great teachers and administrators who really care about the students."

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

Maya is especially impressed with the "great communication" between school and home, including all the resources to help parents understand what their students are learning.

The former Maritz travel director, who now serves as community development manager for the Girl Scouts of Eastern Missouri, credits Ladue with helping her land at Alabama A & M where she earned a degree in telecommunications. "Going to Ladue gave me a lot of confidence and groomed me to be successful outside the familiarity of my hometown." About attending school in the county, she says, "I loved it and now Jade loves it too."

Raquel Butler Cooper is a 1988 Clayton High graduate whose son Simeon began kindergarten in the Brentwood district last fall. "I wanted him to attend my alma mater, but because that wasn't possible, I chose Brentwood."

Raquel thinks back to 1981 (in her words, the "pioneer days" of the program) when, as a sixth grader, she entered Clayton's Glenridge Elementary School: "Of course, I was very nervous at first, but all of the students and teachers extended a warm welcome and made me feel like part of the Glenridge family." She

sums up her years in Clayton: "I was exposed to many different cultures and experienced so many adventures. I went cross-country skiing at Hidden Valley Ski Resort, sailed a hobie cat on Lake Carlyle and had many dinners and sleepovers at my friends' homes in Clayton. None of this would have been possible had I stayed in my home district." She now maintains "lifelong friendships" with some of the friends she made at Clayton, "compliments of Facebook," she notes.

From Clayton High, Raquel went to Southern University in Baton Rouge, LA where she earned a bachelor's degree in political science and a master's in public administration. She remained in Baton Rouge until recently when she, her husband and their children moved back to her hometown, making their home in north St. Louis. Currently, she is seeking employment in her specialty area, Human Resources.

Raquel says she and her husband Thomas are "ecstatic" about having their son in the Brentwood district. "His learning appears to be a not only a priority of ours, but of his teacher, principal and district superintendent as well. It does take a village to raise a child and we are thrilled to be partnering with the Brentwood district in this endeavor."

Webster Groves Student Now Assists

with Program that Once Helped Him

by Peggy Magee

An after school program at Webster Groves' Hixson Middle School enables African-American young men to positively impact each other through camaraderie and conversations that might not occur were it not for this weekly, 45-minute opportunity.

BOYZ 2 MEN, open to all male students, is now in its sixth year. Nearly 50 middle school males, the majority whom are black, have gathered each Thursday afternoon this school year for guest speakers, inspirational videos, peer mentoring and a community service project. "It's a comfortable, safe environment where they can be together," explains Dr. Ferrell Roddy, a Hixson math teacher who leads the club. "The goal is to inspire them to be responsible, respectful and ready for the challenge," he says, adding that those three r's were printed on last year's club jerseys.

That challenge, he explains, could be a test or difficult situation that occurs the next day or following week, as well as the Webster Challenge, an initiative at the high school that seeks to narrow the achievement gap by engaging African-American students in individual and group goal setting and providing additional opportunities and resources to meet them. "The staff at the high school have commented that the young men in my program transition well into the Webster Challenge because they've already had serious discussions about performing well in school and doing the right thing," notes Roddy, who is also senior pastor at an African-American church in East St. Louis.

Peer mentoring is a big component of BOYZ 2 MEN and Roddy's expectation is that his older eighth-grade students share their experiences with the seventh graders and set a positive example for them. High schoolers who were part of the program also return from time to time and serve as mentors.

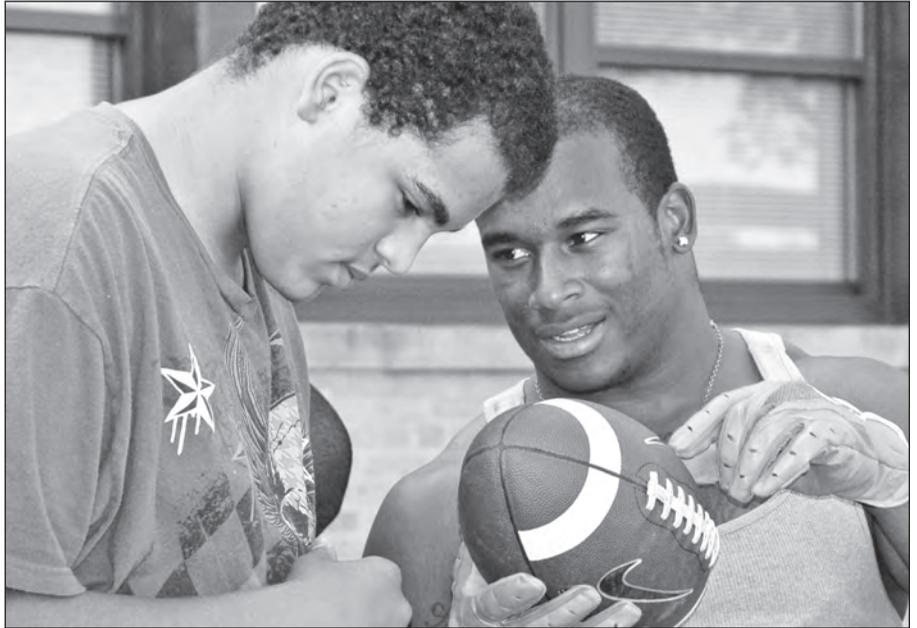
One high school mentor who has attended all the meetings this year is voluntary transfer student Ketrick Large, a senior, who during his sophomore and junior years dropped in on the club which he belonged to when he was a Hixson student. Ketrick builds relationships with the middle school boys who especially enjoy it when the Statesmen running back leads them in football drills in the school yard.

"They look up to me and want to know about high school and what it's like to play on the football team," he explains. "They have asked about the use of cell phones and how difficult high school classes are. I tell them that high school is not hard if you do your work. If you play around, it is."

Ketrick's principal at Webster Groves High School, Dr. Jon Clark, describes the mentoring that takes place as "powerful," because the relationships lead to conversations about how to be successful, plus underscore the importance of education and school involvement. "It's a good thing when students share struggles, tips and successes with one another."

And usually it is just as valuable for the student who is doing the mentoring, he points out, as is the case for Ketrick. "He knows he is there to talk/teach the younger students and to set an example," notes Clark. "That responsibility empowers him to work even harder."

Hixson eighth-grader Cory Mack of Webster Groves has been involved in BOYZ 2 MEN for two years now. He and Ketrick both spoke about the program at the Webster Groves community-wide Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration last January. Cory explains why he enjoys BOYZ 2 MEN: "It's a chance to hang out with friends, have good discussions and do fun activities. I have gotten a lot out of it."



Webster Groves High School senior Ketrick Large, a voluntary transfer student, spends his Thursday afternoons with seventh and eighth grade males at Webster's Hixson Middle School as a mentor for the BOYZ 2 MEN program run by math teacher Dr. Ferrell Roddy. Ketrick, a varsity football player who participated in the program when he attended Hixson, often leads the middle school students in football drills and talks to them about what they can expect in high school. He reports, "I tell them that high school is not hard if you do your work. If you play around, it is."

Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman

volunteer

A newsletter published by the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation to spread the word about the positive things happening in the voluntary transfer program and to offer educators a glimpse at innovative programs helping students succeed at area schools.

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Message from the CEO



It's a fact that students who attend school regularly learn more and are more successful in school than students who do not. Our recent report to the VICC Board of Directors indicated that for the seventh straight year, the overall average attendance rate for transfer students continued to increase and now stands at 93.23 percent overall which is an increase of .51 percent from the 2008-2009 attendance rate of 92.72 percent. While our attendance rate remains slightly below the Missouri state average of 94.2 percent, it is notable and commendable that our attendance rate increased during a year

in which the state's overall attendance rate declined.

Our studies confirm what parents and educators intuitively know to be true – there is a strong correlation between good attendance and student achievement. In fact, of the more than ten variables that we studied, the variable with the highest correlation to student attendance is the student's grade point average in high school. Obviously, it is difficult for students to learn if they are not in class. This important habit begins in grade school and must be continually reinforced throughout each child's school career. Most lessons are sequential and often times what is to be learned tomorrow is based upon or related to what was taught today.

There is a strong body of research reporting that children who attend school regularly are more likely to be successful during their school years. In addition, regular attendance is not only linked to higher student achievement, but also stronger bonds to the school and community, lower rates of inappropriate and high risk behavior and increased participation in higher education. Regular attendance also fosters stronger bonds with the student's teachers, coaches, and other leaders at their school.

Finally, students who participate in after school activities including sports, the arts, clubs, or other interest groups tend to have higher attendance rates. Not surprisingly, not only do students miss a lot of learning when they are absent, they are also missed by their classmates, their teachers, their coaches, their sponsors, and other leaders at their school.

While teachers, principals, and other school leaders frequently develop well thought out school improvement plans to increase the success of all students, no such effort will succeed unless students are actually attending school to benefit from such plans. Regular school attendance is also great preparation for success after graduation from high school. Whether students continue their education at the college level or immediately begin employment, the habit of regularly attending school is an excellent practice that will benefit them throughout their lives. Being successful in college or ultimately in their chosen occupation is dependent upon fostering the habit of consistent attendance.

The current and former students highlighted in this issue of the Volunteer were successful in their school career and one of the primary reasons for this success was that they regularly "show up." Whether it was Angela Lewis showing up in her Rockwood classes and staying after school to perfect her basketball skills or Webster Groves educator Dr. Ferrell Roddy or student Ketrick Large staying after school to encourage middle school boys, successful students regularly "show up" and their presence ultimately makes a significant difference in their lives and in the lives of the students to which they are serving as examples and mentors.

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