

# volunteer

Highlights of the St. Louis Student Transfer Program

## Kirkwood Walking Counselor Launches

# “My Brothers’ Keeper”

## African-American Males Unite to Help Each Other

Donald Smith, 48, knew right away last fall that joining the staff of Kirkwood High School was a good decision for him. It was the immense personal satisfaction the newly-hired walking counselor – a 1979 Kirkwood graduate himself who still lives in the community – felt when he befriended and began mentor-

ing a male student from a single parent home. Smith soon realized that the student – a well-mannered, well-behaved scholar athlete – had friends and classmates who could benefit from having someone take a special interest in them. So Smith asked the student if he would like to join forces to help those pupils. **See Inside:** *My Brothers' Keeper*



Donald Smith, far right, and some of the guys from My Brothers’ Keeper, a club Smith started at Kirkwood High, get ready to march in the Kirkwood Greentree parade last fall. The club, with upwards of 100 African-American male students, focuses on academic monitoring, peer mentoring and community service. Its members want to be known among the Kirkwood community as being responsible young men who work hard and have a plan for themselves. *Photo by Marilyn Zimmerman*

# “My Brothers’ Keeper” (continued)

And so began a school club which has grown to nearly 100 African-American students who look out for and help one another as they make the most of high school and chart plans for afterwards. Appropriately named “My Brothers’ Keeper” by Smith, who heads it up, the group is comprised of high achievers whose responsibility it is to keep tabs on and prop up those members who struggle, either academically, behaviorally or both. From Smith, all of the teens get words of encouragement, advice and an older friend who has traveled down the same path as a lot of them and now leads a rewarding life.

“We focus on grades, behavior and post high school plans,” notes Smith, who has worked countless hours (much of it off the clock and with his own money) to organize the club, spearhead fund raising projects, schedule guest speakers and arrange community service work, which is required. The guys are expected to check in with him once a week so he can review their grade report summary. He talks with them individually about their progress and if any grade is lower than a C, the student may be required to attend after-school tutoring.

At one recent meeting, Smith met with students one-on-one after they were checked in by club officers. “We just want you to get the best possible grades,” he told one student after advising him to head to the library after school for tutoring. To another student, he said, “You are doing fantastic. You get to escape the tutoring.” A student with a D in a subject was told by Smith, “You know your potential is better than this.”

As the teens waited their turn, a sign-up sheet was circulated for t-shirt orders. “Our new t-shirts will be really nice,” Smith announced. “They are free if you helped with one of the fund raisers or have been doing your community service. Otherwise, the cost is \$10.”

While the atmosphere at these meetings is comfortable and upbeat, a common issue for many of the young men, more than half whom are voluntary transfer students, is that they don’t feel part of the school or the Kirkwood community. Smith notes, “I tell them it doesn’t matter if they live in Kirkwood because if they are making good grades, exhibiting good behavior and doing good things in the community, they have every reason to be proud. And if they feel good about themselves, others will too.” Student athletes, he contends, have their sports team to identify with, but a lot of kids who are not in sports feel invisible. “This club is something they can feel a part of.”

VICC student Montrell Jones, club treasurer, explains the relationship that exists among the members: “We’re basically a family. Everyone knows that if they need help, someone will help.” A standout football player and recognized young artist, Montrell is well liked and respected by the entire school community. He talks to other club members and offers them tips if they are struggling with a class or having problems with a teacher. “They listen to me,” he says.

Montrell is looking forward to going on a college visit to Atlanta and Nashville in February, a trip sponsored by

the school’s Black Achievement and Cultural Club with whom My Brothers’ Keepers regularly teams up. Once a month, they have a joint meeting featuring topics such as strategies for success, the college planning process or hearing inspiring words from a guest speaker.

Also serving as a peer advisor is Mycole Pruitt, another football player who earns good grades. He too reaches out to other students and, if necessary, talks to them about what to do to bring their grades up or how to avoid getting into trouble. “I’m kind of an influential person. If they see me doing the right thing, they will want to,” he says.

If one of the fellows does *not* do the right thing, he may be called in to see his grade level principal who asks Smith to be part of the meeting. “Because the boys have a connection with Donald, they tend to listen to him,” explains sophomore principal Cathy McGrath. “They can relate to him because he is someone from the community who has ‘been there, done that.’ The kids feel like they are not alone.”

Kiesha Hudson, who has two sons in My Brothers’ Keeper, agrees. “I like the fact that the kids have someone they can get help from on how to handle situations. Mr. Smith gives them a game plan, lights a fire under them and tracks their progress. He holds them accountable.”

Most important, McGrath notes, is that the students see that someone really cares about them. “They know Mr. Smith is trying to help them be more successful and move them to a better place.” by Peggy Magee

# Another Year of Attendance Gains by VICC Students

## *Rates Higher than in their Neighborhood Schools*

The overall attendance rate of voluntary transfer students continues its trend of annual increases and now stands at 92.38 percent overall. That is the conclusion of the most recent findings (for 2007/08 school year) in an annual study begun six years ago by recently retired VICC chief executive officer Bruce Ellerman, at the recommendation of VICC's Parent Advisory Committee.



Before retiring as chief executive officer of the VICC, Bruce Ellerman announced the findings of the most recent VICC attendance report. For the fifth straight year, attendance for VICC students continues to rise. Under Ellerman's direction, the VICC has remained on sound financial footing and continues as a stable and viable option for city students.

"It is highly encouraging to see that attendance rates continue to improve significantly, especially given the long bus rides and early pick up times that our students experience," notes Ellerman. Though the current rate remains slightly below the state average of 93-94 percent, the most recent figures are higher by several percentage points than those for the students' neighborhood schools in the city, he adds. "This indicates the commitment of our families and the reliability of the transportation program."

The purpose of the annual VICC Attendance Analysis, first prepared for 2002/03, is to determine what variables have the greatest impact on transfer student attendance and to identify any developing trends. Disaggregated information for transfer student attendance had not been gathered prior to this report. The school districts now provide attendance and other demographic data to the VICC which compiles it into a comprehensive database and analyzes a number of factors: age, gender, economic status, special education status, geographic location, bus contractor used, academic status, distance from school and school district attended. Along with the comparative data, observations and recommendations are included in the report.

Ellerman credits the districts for the attention they give the report

and their ongoing efforts to use the information to positively influence transfer student attendance.

"The districts are taking note of their transfer student attendance and how it compares with other districts and using this as a benchmark for improvements," he said.

Grade point average, school district and student age are the three factors having the strongest correlation with attendance rates. For the third year straight, GPA is the factor most directly tied to attendance rates at the middle and high school level. The attendance rate for students with a 3.0 GPA or better is over 95 percent; for students with 2.0-2.9 GPA – almost 93 percent; and for students below 2.0 GPA – about 88 percent. Also in keeping with past trends, smaller school districts generally show slightly better than average transfer student attendance rates, particularly at the middle and high school level. Additionally, as in the past, attendance rates tend to decline as students get older with elementary attendance being the highest (93.95 percent) and high school the lowest (90.59 percent).

Factors that show little or no impact are the zone in which students live, the gender of the student, the distance from home to school, bus ride time or economic status.

"We are pleased that for the fifth year straight, attendance for VICC students continues to rise," notes Ellerman. "Through the collaborative efforts of the VICC, the school districts and the transfer families, further improvements can continue to be made." This trend is important not only for our students' success but also impacts the financial support from the state, as each per-

centage point of attendance generates about \$460,000 in additional funding for the transfer program.

Ellerman's optimism shines forth as always, a natural outgrowth of the hard work and dedication coming out of the VICC office in his 10 years as chief executive officer. In that time, his adeptness at understanding and securing school funding has enabled the VICC to operate with stability and financial security despite changes impacting the program, such as modifications to the state funding formula and the transition to a school district governed program. "We positioned ourselves so that our funding stream remained secure which translated into long term financial planning and sealed the predictability piece," he points out. In addition to his mastery of fiscal matters, Ellerman demonstrated strong decision making and leadership skills, according to his staff.

While his 10 years with the VICC may seem like a long employment run by today's standards, Ellerman reports that every one of his staff has been there longer. "That shows their commitment to the program and to what it is trying to achieve. Their service has contributed greatly to the stability of the program and to its success."

Ellerman leaves the VICC happy that he was able "to play a part in a program that offers stable and viable options for city students and brings diversity to county schools that wouldn't be present otherwise," he says.

**Editor's Note:** You can view the 2007/08 VICC Attendance Analysis on our website at [www.choicecorp.org](http://www.choicecorp.org). By Peggy Magee

# Educator's Passion Rooted in Parkway Education

## Transfer Experience Continues to Make An Impact

As a VICC student in the Parkway district during the early years of the voluntary transfer program, Samantha Elliott Briggs helped break down barriers and stereotypes by engaging in dialogue on issues pertaining to race. Because of her active participation in Parkway South's committee on race relations and the district-wide Superintendent's Leadership Advisory Council, she views her role in high school as "being involved in peace making."

Her early grappling with issues about diversity and biases combined with the "amazing" experience she had working at a special needs school (as part of a career shadowing experience) prompted the 1991 Parkway South graduate to study education at Clark Atlanta University. From there, she taught in Atlanta public schools and Tuscaloosa city schools where she noticed many educational inequalities. Desiring to see those injustices eradicated, she went back to college to study and do research on the subject.

Equipped with a master's degree and Ph.D, she is now a consultant and curriculum specialist in the area of equity and access in education. This noted author and presenter is also professor of Gender and Race Studies at The University of Alabama, plus teaches in its College of Education.

Reflecting on the opportunity she had in Parkway to explore perspectives and make her views heard, Briggs notes, "My experiences in Parkway propelled me to do what I am doing now." She credits her teachers and the administration, saying, "I was allowed to exercise my voice; I was not silenced," adding, "That is how we fail children – by not letting them have a say."

Briggs was especially interested in making herself heard because of the personal challenges she faced on a daily basis, she says. With her father being one of the original lawyers in the St. Louis desegregation case, she led a middle class lifestyle in the Central West End, including private schools prior to Parkway. Yet in the west county district, she found that she and other African-American students were "prejudged and categorized" by some people. It was one of the hardest things she had to overcome as a teenager. "But I learned from it" and, overall, being part of the transfer program, "was definitely a positive experience for me."

And one that continues to play a part in her personal and professional development. A year ago, she was a featured speaker and discussion facilitator at a national summit on

interdistrict school desegregation sponsored by Harvard University. She spoke about the Mix It Up program, of which she was director at the time, an initiative of the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance program. At the conference, she talked with many people involved in the St. Louis desegregation case – lawyers, former VICC executive director Susan Uchitelle, even Don Senti, her former Parkway junior high principal, now superintendent of the Clayton district. She heard student presenters representing Boston's desegregation program and was brought to tears listening to their stories of conflicting, dual social worlds and the isolation they felt.

"It reminded me of my own experience and saddened me that some 23 years later, voluntary desegregation plans are still necessary for equal educational opportunities and that social divides have yet to be bridged."

At the heart of Briggs' work is her unwavering determination to break the cycles of poverty and illiteracy that still exist. She takes a front-line role in this by running an academic enrichment summer camp for impoverished children in rural Eutaw, Ala., an hour's drive from her home. The camp provides hands-on learning in different academic areas with a math and science emphasis. She would like to see it evolve into a year-round after-school program. "It's about providing children in this community more opportunity, more access to a good education."

The passion sparked in Parkway nearly 25 years ago continues today for Dr. Samantha Elliott Briggs, Ph.D. "I continue to fight the fight," she says. *by Peggy Magee*



The career path of Samantha Elliott Briggs, Ph.D. was shaped by her experiences as a voluntary transfer student in the Parkway district. She is now a consultant and curriculum specialist in the area of equity and access in education and also teaches at The University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. *Photo by Val Downes*

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*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



As the new CEO of VICC, one belief that I am firmly committed to is that all of us, myself included, have the responsibility to work together to do whatever it takes to enable all students to be successful, achieve academic and personal success, and reach their full potential. The articles in this issue of the Volunteer show how others have embraced this concept.

Reflecting on the various paths those featured in this issue of the Volunteer have taken to help insure student success reminded me of a recent cozy evening spent at home with my family watching one of my favorite actors, Mel Gibson, in the 2002 film, "We Were Soldiers." One of my favorite parts is Mel's speech to his unit just prior to leaving for Vietnam:

"Look around you, in the 7th Cavalry, we got a captain from the Ukraine, another from Puerto Rico, we got Japanese, Chinese, Blacks, Hispanics, Cherokee Indian, Jews and Gentiles, all American. Now here in the States some men in this unit may experience discrimination because of race or creed, but for you and me now, all that is gone. You will watch the back of the man next to you, as he will watch yours, and you won't care what color he is or by what name he calls God. This I swear: When we go into battle, I will be the first one to set foot on the field, and I will be the last to step off. And I will leave no one behind. Dead or alive, we all come home together. So help me God."

What is my point? They were all fully committed to their mission no matter how great the cost. How much more do all of us need to do to be fully committed to doing everything in our power to enable every student in every district to be successful and achieve their full potential. It is unlikely this effort will cost us our lives, but make no mistake, our efforts to make sure every child succeeds will require our complete and total commitment just like that of the leaders – Donald Smith, Samantha Elliott Briggs and Bruce Ellerman – profiled in this newsletter.

This summer I visited with the superintendents of every county district that serves transfer students and a similar theme was shared by each of them. They all indicated that regardless of where a student lives, once enrolled in their district, every student is one of theirs. They do not distinguish between a resident student and a transfer student. They are fully committed to the success of every student!

That is our mission and commitment. We must watch the back of every student in our district no matter what their race, religion, socio-economic background or ethnicity. It is up to each one of us to do everything in our power to genuinely care about each person, take a personal interest in them and enable them to succeed. That is my commitment. So help me God.

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