

Highlights of the St. Louis  
Student Transfer Program

# volunteer

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Preteen girls from the Rockwood district take turns talking about their strengths in the empowerment walk activity during last summer's Love Project. The program, which was tacked on to the summer school day, was designed to help them gain confidence and a spirit of sisterhood. Program director Shante Duncan, in the background, looks on as Nykieta Alexander recites affirmative statements about herself.

*Photo by Peggy Magee*

## Program Helps Students Recognize Potential

### *Introspection, Bonds of Support and Affirmations are Key*

***One of the preteen girls who had been bullied by older students can now brush off mean comments. Her friend who struggles with public speaking, even participating in class, feels more comfortable with it. Another girl believes she can now do things her own way instead of following someone else's lead.***

All of the 14 Rockwood female students, participants of the VICC program and new to middle school this year, say they took away something valuable from their participation in the Love Project, a two-hour empowerment program tacked on to the final two weeks of summer school classes last June. "The acronym LOVE stands for Learn Oneself Very Extensively," explains education consultant and program creator Shante Duncan who had been hired by Rockwood's Department of Educational Equity and Diversity (DEED) last winter to present a longer program of the same name to a group of teenage girls, most of whom have since entered high school.

"African American women of all ages struggle with insecurity, cultural stereotypes, financial matters and interpersonal relationships and many of these issues start at an early age," reports Duncan. "The LOVE Project is about exploring ourselves and learning who we are as a first step to realizing our worth and understanding that we are destined to greatness."

*See inside: Program Helps Students Recognize Potential*

Former VICC students Maalik Shakoor, left, from the Clayton district, and Darian Garey, from the Kirkwood district, performed together on stage at last summer's Shakespeare in the Streets project in Clayton. Playwright Nancy Bell's inspiration for *Good in Everything* came from feedback and comments she received about the Clayton VICC program. Both Shakoor and Garey are now attending college with interests in the film industry.

Photo by J. David Levy



## Clayton VICC Program Inspires Adaptation of Shakespeare Play

### VICC Students Take the Stage

Maalik Shakoor describes being educated in the reputable Clayton school district as “an opportunity” for him—a 2014 Clayton High graduate—and his siblings who currently are enrolled. However he does wish that his school mates had visited his north St. Louis neighborhood to understand the reality of his roots.

“How can someone love you if they don't know you? And how can they know you if they're afraid to come to your house?” Shakoor expressed those thoughts about the Clayton school community during a classroom discussion with visiting local playwright Nancy Bell in the spring of his senior year. Little did he know that the following fall he would be on a stage, in the middle of downtown Clayton, playing the lead in a play and reciting those exact words. This performing experience for Shakoor, who in September entered Webster University as a film major, supplements other recent screen and film projects of his.

Clayton was chosen as the site of the 2014 Shakespeare in the Streets project (SITS) in which the Bard's work is integrated into the history and culture of specific neighborhoods. Bell, the project's playwright-in-residence, talked to students in the advanced acting class at Clayton High to research ideas and scout out talent for the play she planned to write. Prior discussions the SITS creative team had with Clayton residents and leaders revealed that the school district contributes greatly to the character of the community. With that in mind, they decided to focus on one of Shakespeare's comedies of young people having adventures.

The resulting play by Bell, performed in

Clayton last September, was titled *Good in Everything*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's romantic comedy *As You Like It*. Combining touches of olde England and life in Clayton, it centered on the voluntary transfer program and showcased the encounters between resident and transfer students in Clayton. The cast was comprised of professional actors, students and a teacher from Clayton High, as well as Clayton residents. In addition to Shakoor, who played the leading role of Orlando, former transfer student Darian Garey appeared on stage, as did Clayton transfer student Mikayla Johnson.

In *Good in Everything*, some Clayton students venture into St. Louis city and run into a Clayton transfer student (Orlando) on his home turf. Their eyes are opened to this environment of which they know little. They are able to connect with that world and two characters from different parts of town (Orlando and Rosalind) even find love.

Unlike in the play, Shakoor points out that his friends from Clayton didn't, in his words, “cross over the line” into his world. “I was always in their world.” It should be two-sided, he believes, because it's valuable for all students to step outside of their comfort zones.

Darian Garey's friends from Kirkwood didn't cross the line either, but that didn't bother him. “It didn't matter,” he says, because there were plenty of opportunities for all the kids to get to know one another and with that interaction came acceptance. Darian felt very much a part of the Kirkwood community play-

ing varsity football at Kirkwood High. “It was the best time of my life,” he notes, pointing out that he enjoyed good friendships with resident students and their families.

After graduating from Westminster College in Fulton, MO where he majored in Business Administration/Marketing and served as captain of the football team, Darian is now pursuing an MBA in film marketing at UMSL. He found out about the SITS auditions from a local audition website and landed the part of Oliver, a tough gang member and older brother to Orlando.

Nancy Bell says she chose to make the Clayton VICC program the focus of her play because it contributes to the uniqueness and

vitality of the district. “It brings together young people from widely different backgrounds who would never otherwise have a chance to meet or have a conversation. It's not perfect, but it has quietly been impacting a lot of young people's lives for more than two decades.”

According to the play's director, Alec Wild, the Clayton students surprised and inspired the SITS team at every turn. “We admired their commitment to tolerance and diversity. It is the young people of the world who are leading the charge to move past prejudices and intolerance. The students of Clayton, both the local residents and those in the desegregation program, exemplify that leadership.”

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Yaniel Sargeant, a counselor in Rockwood's DEED Office (now employed elsewhere), sat in on both programs and believes the LOVE project is beneficial, especially for students transitioning from elementary to middle or middle to high school. “When students matriculate to another school, it can be a challenging time for them,” she notes. “The program helps them gain reasoning and problem solving skills, plus it boosts their self-confidence.”

The young ladies learned about African queens and important female African Americans in the mainstream world for the purpose of understanding the long-standing strength of African-American women, explains Duncan. She talked candidly with them about the stereotypes that plague African-American women, many typified in the media and music videos. Enlightening them about the character and achievements of successful African-American women serves to dispel those stereotypes, she points out. “The girls learn what they can do to not perpetuate the stereotypes.”

Supporting one another and building camaraderie are stressed and a forgiveness ceremony encourages the girls to put behind hurt feelings—their own or ones they've caused. The healing that takes place brings an inner peace which Duncan stresses is essential to being healthy and productive. Because the program is based on honesty, respect and confidentiality, they feel comfortable disclosing encounters they've had with school mates. Duncan dispenses sage advice on how to best handle those types of situations. On the topic of bullying, she said: “When you see someone being bullied, you have a responsibility to tell an adult. If you don't do anything, you are guilty too.”

Each session features both new and repeat activities that get the girls thinking about themselves and their potential. Seated in a circle, they start by sharing something positive that happened that day. Afterwards, Duncan might direct them to name three things they

like about themselves. Or she might ask them to give a compliment to the girl seated to their right. One day, time was allotted for the girls to write their life story. About the future-thinking exercise, Yaniel Sargeant reports, “They read them out loud. Their futures ran the gamut: attending college, being married, writing books, traveling the world. Ms. Duncan told them to take those dreams and set goals on how to achieve them.”

Regularly, the girls took an empowerment walk where they marched in a circle around the room, either individually or one behind the other, completing “I am” statements out loud, beginning with their name, followed by positive descriptions of themselves and concluding with “I am me.” Again, many thoughts were expressed: “I am smart, I am an independent female, I am a straight A student, I am brave, I am kind,” etc. The thinking, according to Duncan, is that if they regularly recite these empowerment statements, they will come to believe them. “Even if the statement is not altogether accurate, if spoken consistently, it becomes their truth.” She encouraged the girls to look in the mirror at home and have empowerment conversations with themselves.

Chanting these affirmative statements in the presence of each other gives the girls a collective sense of power, notes Sargeant. “Hearing everyone's great qualities makes an impact and helps them understand the need to be supportive and encouraging to one another. They begin to understand the concept of sisterhood.”

Indeed, sisterhood is at the heart of the program, says Duncan, “The girls connect to who they are by hanging out together, talking and laughing. They become close and celebrate each other's ambitions.” The synergy they develop bolsters their sense of self and improves their confidence, she adds. “And very often that translates to doing well in school—both academically and leadership wise.”

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## Message from the CEO



Have you ever considered - What is your mission? Or what gives your life meaning? With the celebration of Martin Luther King Day on my mind, I recently read a speech that he gave a group of students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia on October 26, 1967. In the speech, he asks the students a similar question: "What is your life's blueprint?" He mentions three key points. First, it is important that we all have a deep belief in our own dignity and worth or as he calls it, "somebodiness." It is important to remember that what we do counts and matters and that our life truly has some ultimate significance. Secondly, he mentions the importance of achieving excellence in our various fields of endeavor and setting out to do everything in an outstanding fashion. Finally, he concludes that once we know and discover what we plan to do with our life, we should, "Set out to do it as if God Almighty called you at this particular moment in history to do it. Don't just set out to do a good job. Set out to do such a good job that the living, the dead or the unborn couldn't do it any better."

For me, during the last five years of my work life, my primary mission and purpose have been to provide as many excellent opportunities for as many students as possible in the VICC program. This means providing opportunities for students from the City to attend school in a County district, as well as opportunities for students in County districts to benefit from a more diversified and integrated education. I have seen students benefit from these opportunities and have also seen districts willing to continue to make and, in many cases, increase the number of spaces or opportunities for students to participate.

This issue of the *Volunteer* highlights how schools are making a difference and providing increased opportunities for the students they serve. So how about you? What gives your life meaning, what is your mission and how can you take advantage of the opportunities you have to make a difference in the life of a child?

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