Program Helps Students Recognize Potential

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

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.”

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Clayton VICC Program Inspires Adaptation of Shakespeare Play

Yaniel Sargeant, a counselor in Rockwood’s DEED Office (now employed elsewhere), sat in on both programs and believes the LOVE program is beneficial, especially for students transitioning from elementary to middle or 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 modern 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 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 another one and building camaraderie are stressed and a forgiveness ceremony encourages the girls to put behind hurt feelings—their own or others—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 feel it. A real desire to tell an adult. If you don’t do anything, you are guilty too.”

Each session features both new and repeated activities, so the girls are thinking about themselves and their potential. Seated in a circle, they start by sharing something positive that happened that day. Afterwards, Duncum 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,” 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 voice makes them feel powerful, 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. “They are by hanging out together, talking and laughing. They become close and celebrate each other’s ambitions as they are by hanging out together, talking and laughing. They become close and celebrate each other’s ambitions. The synergy they develop bolster 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.”

Former VICC students Maalik Shaker, 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 during the Clayton VICC program. Both Shaker and Garey are now attending college with interests in the film industry.
Please Take Note
Changes to Distribution

To streamline the distribution of the Volunteer and save VICC mailing costs, we plan to begin sending out this document exclusively in an online fashion as an attachment to an e-mail. We will continue to post it on the VICC website, www.choicecorp.org. Send Lisa Gray your e-mail address at lgray@choicecorp.org so we can continue to send this important publication to you. If you do not have Internet or e-mail access, call Lisa at 314-721-8422, x3015 and we will mail you a copy. If we do not receive a response, you will no longer receive the Volunteer from us.

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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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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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