

Highlights of the St. Louis  
Student Transfer Program

# volunteer

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## Dynamic Student Leaves Legacy in Peer Mentoring Program for African-American Males

*LaRonn Woods had a lot going for him when he entered the Rockwood district. He was personable, positive, thoughtful, generous and fun. The opportunities he had at Eureka High School enabled him to put all his intrinsic qualities to good use and build on them. It was an experience rich in leadership development, one which equipped him well for his current undertaking--training as a U.S. Navy officer.*

Woods, a 2015 graduate, always had a "spot in my heart" for running, he says. He was a four-year varsity sprinter and state qualifier on relay teams all four years. His track coach, seeing his enthusiasm, talent and signature upbeat personality, named him team captain his sophomore and junior years. Assistant coach Chadd Lamason said Woods deserved this coveted leadership position, citing his confidence, determination and contagious, joyful smile that lit up a room. "LaRonn was respected by his teammates because of his talent and the way he carried himself."

While Woods had a lot to offer, he wasn't perfect and Coach guided him in winning with grace and humility. "Coach taught me what I needed to know about good sportsmanship," he notes. He took what he learned and served as an example to his teammates on how to be a confident, respectful and team-oriented athlete. When asked, Woods humbly describes the gist of what he did: "I showed them the right way to do things. I helped pick them up and got them ready to run their race."

He was a friend to everyone and especially liked taking the younger kids under his wings. "I considered them like little brothers and wanted to show them how to get the job done."

Woods also was a four-year member of the Wildcat football team (running back, corner back) and was given leadership positions there too. "If

you gave your all in practice, you were named captain for the next game," he explains. He held that honor for several games.

Seeing the younger guys respond well to his influence and wanting to positively steer those who didn't do sports, in his senior year he suggested that a peer mentoring program be started for African-American males. "There is a lot to navigate in high school and I thought that if the older guys could give insight and advice to the younger ones, it would be helpful to them." It is something he thinks he could have benefitted from as an underclassman.

The administration not only gave their blessings to the formation of such a program, but reached out to school social worker Naomi Warren to be the faculty point-person. Warren helps to coordinate and guide the Fellowship of Young Men, now in its third year. The young men meet over lunch every two weeks and the focus is on relationship building, encouragement and academic help. Other school and district personnel also got behind Woods' vision--Jennifer Strausser, Terry Harris and Brittany Hogan--to help make the group viable and sustaining from year to year. Hogan's office, for example, covers the cost of pizzas that are brought in (to help reduce the time crunch) and the t-shirts that the members proudly wear.

While LaRonn Woods' aim was to be of service to others, his own toolbox was strengthened, thanks to Warren. "Mrs. Warren taught me how to stay on my grind towards getting things done." He says she worked with the mentors on organization skills, keeping them focused and motivated on what they needed to do for their classes so that in the peer meetings, they could share their strategies for success with the younger guys.

The administration took note of Woods' good intentions and the example he set. In addition to



LaRonn Woods, proud to serve his country in the U.S. Navy.

# Former Students Serve Needs of Home Community



## Charlie Bean

1988 graduate, Lindbergh High School

### OCCUPATION

Drop-out Recruiter, St. Louis Public Schools. In his six years on the job, he has helped more than 300 students return to high school and earn a diploma.

### KUDOS TO HIM

In 2015, Bean was named an American Graduate Champion by the Nine Network of Public Television, the PBS affiliate in St. Louis. He was the first person to be given this award which recognizes individuals who commit their time, skills and resources to making young people succeed. He was spotlighted on Channel 9 television and on its website. He was honored at the Association of Public Television Public Media Summit in Washington, D.C.

### HOW HE BENEFITTED FROM HIS EDUCATION

Charlie's education at Lindbergh High provided him a model by which he has built his professional success. About his Lindbergh faculty, he says, "They pulled and pulled for me." His mentors ranged from Principal Don Jones, who "kept me out of trouble by laying down the law," to Drama teacher Debra Peppers who he always knew he could seek out for a welcoming smile or listening ear.



## Brittney Cloudy

2008 graduate  
Marquette High School  
(Rockwood)

### OCCUPATION

Four years teaching elementary and Montessori students in St. Louis Public Schools before getting hired this year by Kirkwood, the district where she did her student teaching.

### KUDOS TO HER

She teaches by day and at night she is studying to become a school counselor. She is enrolled in the master's program for counseling at Missouri Baptist College.

### HOW SHE BENEFITTED FROM HER EDUCATION

As a result of serving as a cadet teacher (under Julie Furtwengler, who had been Cloudy's Algebra teacher and coach for junior varsity basketball), Cloudy became interested in the field of education as a career. Her years in the Rockwood district helped her know the value of a positive school environment. She credits her coaches with her desire to work hard and be successful. "I didn't want to let them down," she says.



## Brittany Connors

2009 graduate  
Hancock High School

### OCCUPATION

Licensed occupational therapist for a new program--a collaboration between St. Louis University and the City of St. Louis Division of Corrections--that creates services and provides support to incarcerated individuals. Prior to this, she worked at the Hope Recovery Center in midtown St. Louis where she was an occupational therapist for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

### KUDOS TO HER

Connors was named to the Hancock Hall of Fame in 2015, a distinction given to graduates who demonstrate the qualities that Hancock wants to preserve in their school culture. She also serves as president of the Missouri Black Occupational Therapy Caucus, a profession mentoring and networking organization.

### HOW SHE BENEFITTED FROM HER EDUCATION

Connors' former science teacher shared this truism that guides her in everything she does: "Every touch has a purpose." She has embraced his words and believes her "touch" (or actions) should always make a positive difference for someone else. Through her involvement in four varsity sports, she had great coaches who helped her appreciate the concept of teamwork and apply it to other aspects of her life. A philosophy she lives by took root from her coaches' influence: "To help others is to help oneself."

# Finance Manager Attributes Corporate Success To VICC Program *Gives thanks 30 years after Graduating*

*When Mary Mann hears about incidents of violence or disrespect in her home community of St. Louis--situations that have undertones of racial discord--she feels especially grateful for her education. Mann is referring to her high schools years in the Ladue school district.*

"It was the first time I attended a school where I was surrounded by people of other races and cultures," the 1986 Ladue Horton Watkins High graduate reports. Her take-away from that experience was that "regardless of one's skin color, ethnic background or religious affiliation, respect and cooperation among individuals are absolutely essential." She firmly believes that if more people in St. Louis had benefit of a diverse education, it would be a more harmonious community.

Late last August, Mary did something she had wanted to do for many years. She sat down and crafted a letter that she emailed to administrators in the Ladue district as well as the VICC office. The subject line read: St. Louis Desegregation Program--30 years later. In it, she recounts her experiences, pointing out that the success she has achieved in her nearly 30 years in the corporate world can be attributed, in part, to her Ladue education. "That foundation played an instrumental role," she notes, adding that other contributors were the upbringing she had benefit of and the self-determination with which she was blessed.

Since her childhood years, there has always been a competitive spark in Mann that compelled her to work hard and take advantage of opportunities. When she entered middle school and discovered that another girl held the reputation for being the smartest student in the class, Mann thought to herself, "Says who? I'll prove that differently." She buckled down and did.

Much later in life, when she viewed a television news report about the disproportionate number of African Americans who hold master's degrees, compared to their white counterparts, she thought: "They don't know about me!" At that point, she had already earned a bachelor's degree in business, attending night school at Columbia College while working by day at Union Electric, her first full-time job fresh out of Hickey School's accounting program. She went on to secure an MBA from Fontbonne while distinguishing herself as a bright, hard-working employee at that same company--now called Ameren Missouri--where she currently holds a management position in finance. Her out-of-pocket costs for her college degrees were negligible because the portion of tuition

her employer contributed toward higher education was based on grades and Mann's were exemplary.

In the work meetings she attends, it is common for Mann to be the only African-American in the room. That doesn't phase her because, due to her Ladue education, "I am accustomed to that," she reports confidently. There were other aspects about being a VICC student that served her well. Referring to the long bus ride to and from school, she notes enthusiastically, "Now that was some good study time!" She was motivated to do well academically because she wanted to prove to the high achieving resident kids that she was just as smart as them. "I didn't want them to have preconceived ideas about city blacks."

Mann liked the curriculum at Ladue too, which she describes as "advanced." She adds, "I took a speed reading course and we had independent study time. Our day was structured like a college schedule. These things were cutting edge back then." At the time, she didn't think twice about the nuances of her Ladue classes but, years later, she thought: "I received a really good education there."

The work study program in which she was enrolled also prepared her well. Its coordinator, Jody Bruns, who believed students benefited from seeing other cities, led trips to Washington, D.C., Virginia and New York City. This "real" travel, as Mann calls it--going far beyond just the neighboring states as she did on family vacations--instilled in her a life-long hobby of exploring other cities and countries. Work study also gave her early exposure to being part of an office environment and even bias in the workplace.

Mann believes we are all shaped by our environment. "What we are exposed to early in life can affect our long term outcomes." Some of what she gained from attending school in Ladue, she says, is "the ability to respectfully accept people with viewpoints different than mine, why it is important to produce good quality work and what it takes to become a responsible and successful person."

And for that, she said in that letter she wrote, "Thank you deseg program."



*Thirty years after graduating from Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Mary Mann wrote a letter to administrators in the Ladue district as well as the VICC Office, thanking them for the opportunity that allowed her "to receive the best education in a diverse environment" which, she wrote, "positively impacted my life." She requested that her picture for this article be taken at her alma mater.*

*"What we are exposed to early in life can affect our long term outcomes."*

Mary Mann

# Message from the CEO



This issue of the *Volunteer* includes stories about many former VICC students who are enjoying great success. It is success stories such as these--which have brought tremendous benefits to city students, as well as those from the county--that make me wish our program could continue for as long as possible. It has provided both city and county youths access to educational and interpersonal opportunities, while county districts have been able to further important educational goals, including racial and socio-economic diversity, which are so important for our region and the nation as a whole. Since the program began in the early 1980's, more than 70,000 students have been able to participate.

However, race-based school desegregation programs such as ours are not intended to continue in perpetuity and ours was originally designed to have a finite existence. At the VICC Board of Directors meeting on November 18, the board voted to extend the program for five additional years for one final time. This final five-year extension will permit enrollment of approximately 1,000 new students over the upcoming five-year period (with an emphasis on siblings) in participating county school districts through the 2023/24 school

year. In addition, siblings of eligible county students will also be allowed to attend city magnet schools. Participating districts have agreed to allow all transfer students to continue in their schools through graduation, meaning kindergartners admitted in 2023/24, for example, could remain in the program through 2036.

I look forward to serving our students for many years to come, as does the entire VICC organization.

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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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## Dynamic Student Leaves Legacy from page 1

being recognized as both Eureka High student of the month and VICC student of the month, he received the distinguished Glory of Missouri award in the category of justice, for demonstrating good decision and judgment capabilities. Further, he earned the teacher-recommended gold standard award which focuses on exemplary character.

Fueled by the difference he made in high school, Woods chose to enter the Navy so he could continue putting his leadership skills to work. After graduation, he headed to the Recruit Training Command--Great Lakes, in Chicago, to enter eight weeks of basic training. As a reservist, he entered an apprenticeship program where he learned to operate, service and repair diesel engines for navy ships and small crafts. Currently, he attends the University of New Orleans where he is a member of the ROTC program. He plans to continue to serve in the Navy while he studies to become an athletic trainer.

No matter what career LaRonn Woods ultimately settles on, he is intent on making an impact on others. At Eureka High, he discovered his strengths in this area and was groomed to be influential and effective. He leaves behind a legacy in the Fellowship of Young Men. Now the Navy and his college studies are propelling him even further. There is absolutely no stopping him now.



LaRonn Woods, center, returned last spring to his alma mater, Rockwood's Eureka High, to join in the year-end celebration of the peer mentoring program that he was instrumental in launching the preceding year. He picked up where he left off, engaging younger students in dialogue and setting a good example for them.