

SPECIAL REPORT

Eyes on the prize

Kanikah LeMon started every day with one goal for her kindergarten students: get them ready to overcome the daunting obstacles along the road to graduation.



1995 GEORGE WASHINGTON CARVER SCHOOL 1996

MS. LEMON JONES - KINDERGARTEN

ROW A: TARA WATCHELL, CHRISTOPHER SEALS, KEANA SHEPARD, GARDNER, PHILLIP M. JONES, KESHIA EVANS, TIA WILSON, ROW 2: MRS. UKSHEA MITCHELL, D'LYNN SPYBORN, JERRELL J. GREEN, CHARLES GOLLEY JR., VINCENT FISHER, HENDRICKS, DANIEL LINDSEY, MARK RICHARDSON, LATASHA AUSTON, MS. LEMON JONES, ROW 3: JAMESIA BLANKENSHIP, LA BORRAH SIMS, GEORGE WASHINGTON JR., RAYMOND TWINE, MAAGER WEBB, KENETTA HAMPTON, ROW 4: JA DAN GIBSON, CARL ANTONIO CRAIG JR., GEMANE WASHINGTON, JEREMY BEASLEY, SYLVIA JOHNSON, BRIANA ANDERSON, NIKETHA A. RODGERS, JENIE PETERSON, TERRELL GUNN

By Jill Tucker and Nanette Asimov

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITERS

As the camera shutter clicked 13 years ago, the 28 students standing on the risers in their matching blue sweaters had just started kindergarten in San Francisco's Bayview district. Their futures were wide open, their dreams fully intact.

The 5-year-olds with their goofy grins and say-cheese smiles didn't know about the statistics that showed black students were more likely to fail in school.

Across California, at least a third of African American students drop out of high school, according to state estimates — a higher dropout rate than for any other ethnic group. That trend is one of the most vexing problems facing public education and

has failed to improve despite tens of billions in tax dollars and decades of attempted reforms.

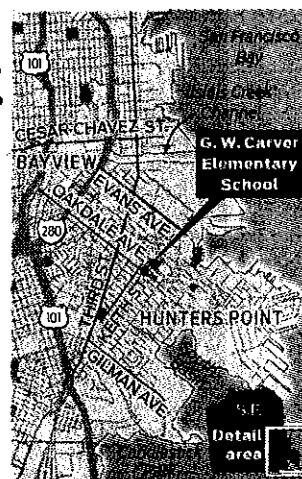
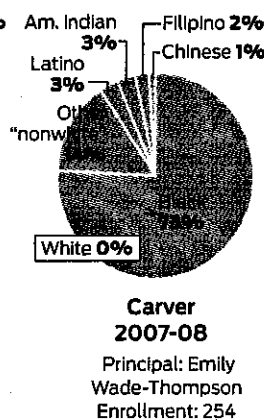
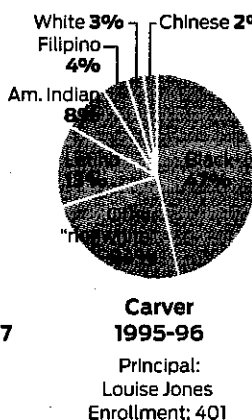
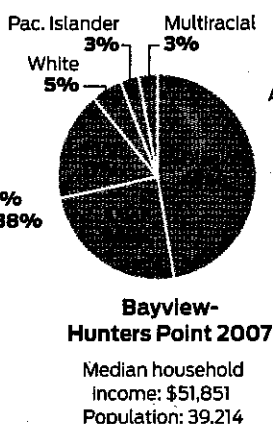
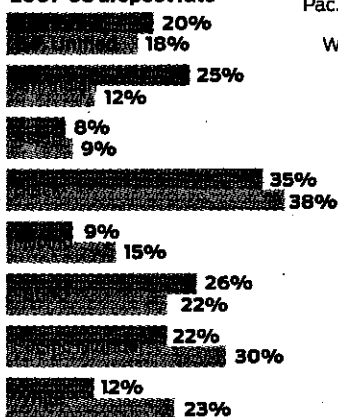
Many, particularly those attending schools in inner-city neighborhoods such as the Bayview, cope with disproportionate poverty, crime, health problems, drugs and broken families.

With only the photo as a starting point, The Chronicle set out to determine what happened to the students in Kanikah Lemon's 1995-96 kindergarten class at Dr. George Washington Carver Elementary School. The newspaper wanted to see how they fared against tremendous obstacles as they worked toward their high school diplomas with the class of 2008.

Carver continues on A16

Demographics and dropouts

2007-08 dropout rate



Source: California Department of Education, San Francisco Unified School District, San Francisco DrillDown study, Zipskinny.com

John Blanchard / The Chronicle

SFGate.com

The Chronicle is publishing selected profiles of the 28 Carver kindergarten kids in today's paper. All their profiles, as well as those of

their teacher, principal and classroom aide, can be found on the SFGate Web site. Also posted is an audio slide show of Carver

photos by staff photographer Kim Komenich. To read the profiles and view the slide show, go to: sfgate.com/carver.

What happened to Bayview class

Carver from page A1

Of the 28 children in LeMon's class, *The Chronicle* reached all but one: 21 have graduated from high school and another is expected to receive her diploma next week and the other five have not finished high school and appear to be dropouts by the state's definition. Two of the five have completed their coursework and only need to pass the required High School Exit Exam to get their diplomas. These Carver children are the sons and daughters of postal workers and bus drivers, musicians and airport workers. Some had parents on drugs. Others grew up without knowing their fathers. At least three had parents who had been incarcerated. Many grew up to the sound of gunshots, and nearly all knew someone who died from one of those bullets.

Jeremy Beasley, fourth from the left on the bottom row in the photo, had a father in prison serving a 30-year sentence for conspiracy to distribute crack cocaine and federal tax evasion.

Tiara Mitchell, top left, saw her father go to jail, her parents' divorce, and her family split up as her brother struggled — successfully — with leukemia.

Keshia Evans, top row second from right, experienced homelessness and a move to public housing after the sale of her grandmother's house, and personal tragedy when her cousin and then a close friend were killed.

They all graduated.

When they attended Carver in 1995-96, almost 80 percent were poor enough to qualify for the federal lunch program.

"Some of the children came to school very tired. They'd been awakened by gunshots.

► **A look back:** Principal Louise Jones led a bold plan to improve academics at Carver. **A19**

Drugs were rampant," said their principal, Louise Jones. "I'm positive it affected how they felt. But I always kept my eyes on the prize, and the prize was always the children."

Carver opened in 1974 and quickly drew the attention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP sued the state and school district in federal court, saying Carver was among several San Francisco schools with mostly black students that received less money and fewer experienced teachers than other schools.

A judge agreed and issued an order in 1983 to reverse the unfair treatment and desegregate the schools.

Carver's annual funding grew substantially, and change began to happen.

"Carver 'got it' in terms of what was needed: A positive environment, high standards, and high expectations," said Peter Graham Cohn, one of the NAACP lawyers. When the 28 children walked in the door of LeMon's kindergarten classroom in the fall of 1995, Carver was ready for them.

So far, 14 of LeMon's former students have enrolled in college, and several more plan to go. Two others are enrolled in a vocational training program.

Terrell Gunn, bottom right, who had watched friends turn to gangs, headed for California Baptist University in Riverside.

Latasha Allston, third row up on the right, grabbed her running shoes and left for Jackson State University in Mississippi, where she competes in

track and field.

Cris Seals, top row second from the left, who had an aptitude for listening to classmates' troubles, enrolled as a psychology major at California State University Los Angeles.

LeMon (formerly LeMon-Jones) remembers all 28 — 27 African Americans and one Filipino-African American. Her goal for them was clear: teach them to read, to write and to learn, and, in 13 years, get them to graduation day.

"I just treated them like they were my children, and I wanted to get them ready for school," LeMon said.

Many inner-city schools are not equipped to confront the issues these children face. The teachers are often less prepared for a class of children with complicated problems, the facilities and materials are subpar, and parental help, the backbone of success, is sometimes absent.

While educators aren't responsible for the problems found outside the school's walls, understanding the lives of the children can help them overcome their barriers to an education.

"The expectation is that because you are in a predominantly African American school, you won't be successful," said current Carver Principal Emily Wade-Thompson. "I think we exemplify the African proverb that it takes a village."

The Carver kids' journeys to adulthood offer insight into the roles the homes, neighborhoods and schools have in overcoming academic challenges.

Several families sought out the suburbs.

Kenetta Hampton, far right in second row, moved with her

family to Santa Clara when she was 12, one of several students who said their families fled the violence and negative influences that could keep them from finishing school.

"Two of my brother's friends were killed, shot in a car," said the Mountain View High School graduate. "So we knew we had to get him out of there."

Kenetta was among those who set their sights on college and took a straight path through 13 years of school and now attends California State University East Bay.

Some attended private schools, while others attended small, alternative high schools that offered more individual attention and flexible schedules.

Gerrine Washington, for example, third from left in first row, went to the alternative John Muir Charter School campus on Treasure Island. A mother at 16, she carried her daughter to class where her teachers held the baby girl while Gerrine took tests. She graduated in July.

"When you're little, you think you're going to do stuff," Gerrine said. "And things happen."

George Washington (no relation), third from left in second row, also finished late, completing his graduation requirements in a juvenile detention facility, where he had been sent for possession of a weapon, which was also a parole violation, according to his mother.

Mager Webb, second from right in second row, who graduated from San Francisco Unified's John O'Connell High, said Carver started his education off right.

"Ms. LeMon, she was like our parent outside of our parents," said Mager, who found a job handling packages in San Francisco. "She taught us respect and to have pride in our race. She taught us basic black history. We were learning that in kindergarten, and understanding it."

It appears that at least five of LeMon's former students are

considered dropouts, using the state's official classification for students who did not graduate on time and did not immediately enroll in a class designed to help them earn a diploma.

Charles Gulley Jr., third from left in third row, for example, passed all his high school coursework but has failed the math portion of the High School Exit Exam more times than he can remember. He's planning to take it again and again if necessary.

"I'm determined to get my diploma," Charles said. "But I want to make money before I go to college. I can always go to school."

Sitting in a booth at Denny's recently, he stared at his kindergarten class picture, laughing and pointing at his younger self and ticking off the classmates he still sees or knows.

Charles remembered that

Terrell Gunn, now a certified minister and college student, brought a Bible to school even back then.

He remembered that Ja'Bar Gibson, lower left, who graduated from Live Oak High in Antioch and plans to enroll in college soon, made his classmates laugh.

Each student had a story to tell at the time, another to tell today — stories that belie simple stereotypes and statistics.

Everybody still looks the same, Charles said smiling, looking a lot like the 5-year-old in the photo, his dreams still intact, his future — like that of his classmates — still wide open.

Chronicle staff writer Leslie Fulbright contributed to this report.

*E-mail the writers at
metro@sfgchronicle.com.*

Tracking down the kids from the kindergarten class of '96

It started last fall with a picture and four rows of names.

From there began the arduous hunt to find the 28 young adults who made up that 1995-96 kindergarten class at Carver Elementary. Where are they now? What are their hopes? Who inspired them? How many finished high school?

A few were easy to locate through the public networking site MySpace. Others took months to find.

Because of their age (most are now 19), they often didn't show up in public record searches. Some have extremely common names. Birth certificates were scoured for addresses, death certificates to see if any had died.

Reporters compiled lists of addresses, sent letters to parents, knocked on doors, checked newspaper archives, asked San Francisco City College and other schools to forward notes to former Carver students who might be enrolled.

As the reporters' Carver network grew, students helped locate missing classmates — such as whose mom knew someone's grandmother. One tip came from the owners of Ruth's Children's Shoppe on San Bruno Avenue, which supplies the uniforms that Carver children still wear.

Once found, the students were interviewed by phone, via e-mail and text messages. Their parents, teachers and, in one case, a father in prison, and in another, a minister, were also interviewed.

The Chronicle would like to acknowledge the assistance of Carver Principal Emily Wade-Thompson despite her busy job. The Chronicle also appreciates the time that former Principal Louise Jones and former Carver teacher Kani-kah LeMon spent sharing their memories, as well as the help provided by the 28 members of LeMon's kindergarten class of 1995-96. We wish you well.

An update on the people in the George Washington Carver class picture

In reference to the 1995-96 class photo on Page One, the names of the students are:

Row 4

Tiara Mitchell
Graduated from Deer Valley High in Antioch. Attending City College of San Francisco.
"I'm always sitting down studying — I barely watch TV anymore."

Cristopher Seals
Graduated from Archbishop Riordan High in San Francisco. Attending Cal State Los Angeles.
"I'm planning on getting my master's and my doctorate, and going straight through. No breaks."

Keana Shepard-Gardner
Graduated from Oceana High in Pacifica. Hopes to enroll in Skyline College in San Bruno.
"Skyline is a lot better than high school. People go because they want to be there."

Phillip M. Jones
Graduated from Oakland Tech. Attending both College of Alameda and Laney College in Oakland.
"My mom has always been there with positive words, supporting me 100 percent."

Keshia Evans
Graduated from Marshall High in San Francisco. Attending Everest College in San Francisco.
"I made it! I did it! All of us were emotional at graduation."

Tia Wilson
Expects to graduate from Jordan High in San Francisco once she passes the math portion of the state Exit Exam. Currently attending City College of San Francisco.
"I plan on taking the exit exam. I feel very prepared."

Row 3

Ursula Mitchell, teacher's aide
Died in 2008 because of complications from a stroke.

D'Lynn Seymore
Graduated from the International Studies Academy in San Francisco. Wants to move to Los Angeles and be an actress.
"People make the Bayview out to be so bad, but it's not really that tough."

Jerrell J. Green
Attempts to locate Jerrell were unsuccessful.

Charles Gulley Jr.
Attended O'Connell High in San Francisco. Must pass math portion of the state Exit Exam to graduate.
"When I was younger and they were shooting in the projects, I got all excited. Now, I don't trip on it."

Vincent Fisher-Hendricks
Graduated from Deer Valley High School in Antioch. Plays football for Los Medanos College in Pittsburg.
"If people have trouble, they can come talk to me. ... You've just got to walk away."

Daniel Lindsey
Graduated from Burton High School in San Francisco. Attending Skyline College in San Bruno.
"My community shaped me into the man I am today."

Mark Richardson
Graduated from Oakland Tech High School and is attending community college in Weed (Siskiyou County).
"I was accepted into Sacramento State, but I'm on my own, and I don't have that much money so I decided to do something a little more laid back."

Latasha Allston
Graduated from Lowell High in San Francisco. Attends Jackson State University in Mississippi.
"I've been to 25 states and Ethiopia. Traveling has helped me understand life."

Kanikah LeMon, teacher
Substitute teacher in San Francisco.
"Our children are our irreplaceable treasures."

Row 2

A'Nesha Blankenship
Graduated from Deer Valley High in Antioch and attends Los Medanos Community College. The family moved to the suburbs to "not get caught up in the madness of the Bayview," said Cheryl Fields, A'Nesha's mother.

LaBorrah Sims
Will graduate from Centennial Learning Academy in Portland, Ore., in June.
"When I tell people in Portland that I went to a school named after George Washington Carver, they don't believe me."

George Washington Jr.
Graduated from Log Cabin court school in San Francisco. Hopes to study nursing.
"He wanted to be a lawyer until he came

into this situation," said his mother Sharonda Beasley, adding he previously was an honor student. "He was an awesome kid."

Raymond Twine
Reportedly has not finished high school. His family lives in the East Bay.

Mager Webb
Graduated from O'Connell High in San Francisco. Handles packages for UPS and plays gospel trombone.
"I'm proud of graduating from high school. Where I come from, you don't see too many people my age graduating from high school."

Kenetta Hampton
Graduated from Mountain View High. Attending Cal State East Bay.
"I loved Carver. But in Hunters Point there were a lot of fights, killings."

1_5

Row 1

Ja'Bar Gibson
Graduated from Live Oak High in Antioch. Hopes to enroll at Los Medanos College in Pittsburg.
"I'm optimistic about the future."

Carl Antonio Craig Jr.
Graduated from John O'Connell High in San Francisco.

Gerrine Washington
Graduated from John Muir Charter School in San Francisco. Enrolled in a medical assistant program at Everett College.
"When you're little, you think, 'Oh, you're going to do stuff and things happen.'"

Jeremy Beasley
Graduated from Heritage High in Brentwood. Attending the University of Nevada, Reno.
"(My mom) really helped me get through it and everything and told me I could do it and it was possible. Hearing that all the time kind of sticks."

Sylvia Johnson
Graduated from Downtown High in San Francisco. Hopes to open her own day care center someday.
"If I've gotten through what I've been through, I can get through anything."

Briana Anderson
Graduated from Thurgood Marshall High in San Francisco. Attending California State University, East Bay.
"The kids didn't really have time to get bored with the

curriculum" at Carver, said Briana's mother, Roslyn Gillis.
"It was a kind of no-nonsense school to me."

Nikeith Rodgers
Reportedly has not finished high school. Recently served a 51-day sentence in a Solano County jail.

Zene Peterson
Reportedly has not finished high school. She declined to speak with reporters.

Terrell Gunn
Graduated from Burton High in San Francisco.
"Having just great parents through it all, I think that was very important. ... To me it was just a matter of great people to look up to."

Bayview school key to bold plan for black youth

**By Nanette Asimov
and Jill Tucker**

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITERS

Amid the thousands of students who have graduated from California high schools since last spring are 21 who once shared a kindergarten class at Carver Elementary in San Francisco's distressed Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood.

Not all of the 28 children who entered teacher Kanikah LeMon's kindergarten class in 1995 earned a diploma. But all were part of a new approach to urban education that emerged from the city's desegregation battles of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Named for the brilliant African American botanist Dr. George Washington Carver, the school quickly became one of the city's most segregated after it opened in 1974. Nearly every child was black and poor, and resources lagged.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People demanded a solution that would do more than just mix up the races at city schools.

"At the heart of what we attempted to do was dramatic educational reform," said Peter Graham Cohn, one of the NAACP lawyers who sued the state and district in 1978.

A federal court order in 1983 set racial quotas for desegregating all city schools. But the order went further, creating a "Special Plan for Bayview-Hunters Point

Schools" to improve academics at Carver, Sir Francis Drake and Charles R. Drew elementary schools, Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School, and Phillip and Sala Burton High School.

"The educational plan for Dr. George Washington Carver shall extend to all elements of the school's program, organization, staffing, community and parent relationship, curricular and extra-curricular activities, and relationship with other parts of the public school system," the court decreed.

A veteran principal named Louise Jones was tapped to lead Carver. She and the other Special Plan principals won the rare authority to choose their own teachers.

"I wouldn't call it an experiment," Jones recalled. "It was an initiative to improve the education of the children."

That initiative provided millions of dollars every year for the schools in the neighborhood.

It paid for new curriculum and technology. While most elementary schools had no counselor, Carver did. Class size in upper grades dropped from 28 to 26 students. All teachers got extra training. All got classroom aides. And everyone abided by 11 "philosophical tenets" meant to codify a culture of high expectations, beginning with "all individuals can learn."

"The one thing I tried to instill in the children was that they had options," Jones remembered. "I said, 'You need



Kim Komenich / The Chronicle

Louise Jones, who is now retired, was chosen to be principal of Carver in 1983, after the court crafted a plan to improve academics at the most segregated schools in San Francisco.

"I wouldn't call it an experiment. It was an initiative to improve the education of the children."

Louise Jones, former principal

to make good grades not for your parents, but for you.' I told the kids, 'This is your job. Your pay day is your report card.'

"This was demonstrating to the students that I had high expectations for them. *High expectations.*"

It was an uncommon environment for children with uncommon burdens.

"I went into homes where they didn't even have a table and chair," Jones said. "It opened my eyes to hardships. But I haven't seen a parent yet who does not want the best for their children."

So Jones went further, asking teachers always to speak

to the children in an even tone of voice. "They hear a lot of yelling, and they don't need to hear it at school," Jones said.

She created a school library and brought in artists. She held mock elections each year at which her husband, Lloyd Jones, served as registrar. (He still does.) And she insisted that the children learn standard English by conjugating verbs aloud.

By the time LeMon and her assistant, Ursula Mitchell, welcomed their kindergartners in 1995, it had been a long time since parents had complained about inferior education at Carver.

Third-graders that year scored 10 percentage points higher in reading than they had at the start of the Special Plan in 1983, rising from the 31st to the 41st percentile. In math, they scored 4 percentage points higher, moving from the 37th to the 41st percentile.

"People knew why they

were at the school, as opposed to before, when (Bayview-Hunters Point) schools were the least-achieving, and morale was low," said Hoover Liddell, a district consultant on race issues.

Among the graduates, did Carver make a difference?

Ja'Bar Gibson says it did. He remembers the firm kindness of caring adults more than any program or policy. He says he received lifelong gifts from the principal.

"She called us all achievers," Ja'Bar said. "She didn't allow fighting. She made me feel that anyone could learn, and that we were all smart. She believed in all of us."

And in the end, the success of the effort may lie in just those gifts — untestable, impossible to measure, but genuine nonetheless.

"It's clear that many kids benefited from the Special Plan for Bayview-Hunters Point," agreed Stuart Biegel, who served as the plan's court-appointed monitor. "It

was real and palpable for many kids over time."

As for the Special Plan itself, few remember it today. The NAACP brought other schools under its umbrella, but the momentum was lost.

"It did not happen," attorney Cohn said of the NAACP's dream of creating a new generation of successful urban schools.

Jones left Carver after 15 years. She was succeeded in 1998 by teacher Emily Wade-Thompson, who remains at the helm today. Many other Carver teachers went on to lead schools throughout the Bay Area.

Carver still gets \$318,359 in extra funding for aides, a counselor and more. But the court ended desegregation a decade ago, and Carver is again racially isolated. More than two-thirds of the children are black, up from less than half in 1996. The number of students in foster care is also up, and the principal may no longer hand-pick her staff. Scores are low again, with the school ranking just "1" on the state's 10-point achievement scale. (Compared with schools with similar demographics, however, its ranking rises to "5.") Carver has room for 68 kindergartners next fall, but only 38 parents requested the school during the recent sign-up period.

Wade-Thompson acknowledges those hard facts. But she says they make her more determined to keep Carver a caring environment for the children who need one most.

"We call ourselves the Carver village," she said. "It takes all of us — from the custodian to myself — to instill values in our children. To help them understand that learning is a lifelong goal. We try to nurture our students, to let them know this is a safe haven."

E-mail the writers at metro@sfgchronicle.com.

SFGate**Briana Anderson**

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer
Sunday, May 31, 2009

Briana Anderson had a busy childhood. Her mother made sure of it.

It was a schedule that kept her focused on her future rather than the fighting and trouble on the streets outside her family's home in Hunters Point.

Her mother, Roslyn Gillis, can recall Briana's first year in kindergarten at Carver Elementary, where Briana stayed until moving up to middle school.

"It was a kind of no-nonsense school to me," Gillis said. "That's why I picked it. The kids didn't really have time to get bored with the curriculum. It was like a little community there."

Her daughter, she said, was a "pretty easy kid."

"The teachers knew her," Gillis said with a chuckle. "She wasn't quiet."

Briana stayed on course through school, making the honor roll a couple of times in high school and mentoring younger children at the Boys and Girls Club, said Roslyn Gillis, a single mother to Briana and Briana's older sister.

"I just tried to keep them busy," Gillis said.

Briana graduated from Thurgood Marshall Academic High School last June and just finished her freshman year at Cal State East Bay, where she hopes to study criminal justice.

Someday, she would like to work with children, her mother said.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNOF16R34C.DTL>

SFGate.com**A'nesha Blankenship**

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Four years ago, A'nesha Blankenship's mother Cheryl Fields moved the family to the suburbs from San Francisco's Bayview neighborhood.

Her children, including A'nesha's two brothers and sister, were growing up, and Fields was determined her children would "not get caught up in the madness of the Bayview."

The single mother saw them lose friends and acquaintances to violence and she saw how they started to become desensitized to the shootings.

The deaths and violence were becoming "matter of fact," she recalled the other day.

She worried that her children, like so many youth in the community, would lose empathy, hope, respect or feelings in general.

"They lose all of that just because they're trying to mask the pain," Fields said.

A'nesha graduated from Antioch's Deer Valley High School, her mother said. She still shares her time between her father's home in Sacramento and her mother's in Pittsburg.

A'nesha now attends Los Medanos Community College in Pittsburg and wants to become a social worker like her mother.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MN7G16QVDI.DTL>

SFGate.com

Carl Antonio Craig Jr.

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Carl Antonio Craig Jr. graduated from John O'Connell School of Technology in June last year. He still lives in the Bayview neighborhood where he grew up.

He sees his kindergarten friends Sylvia Johnson and Charles Gulley Jr. nearly every day.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNOF16R35U.DTL>

Vincent Fisher-Hendricks

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009

At first, Deer Valley High School Vice Principal Dan Mahoney didn't recognize the name. "Vincent Fisher-Hendricks?"

"Oh! You mean Big Hungry!" Mahoney said. "We called him Big Hungry. He's a great, big guy, and he played football - and he ate everything."

Not only that, "the kids loved him, the coaches loved him, and the teachers loved him," Mahoney said.

And now they love him at Los Medanos College in Pittsburg, where the 6-foot-4, 350-pound offensive and defensive lineman plays for the Mustangs.

It wasn't always that way.

Before Deer Valley, when Hungry was still Vincent and living in San Francisco, he was the biggest kid at Everett Middle School. He was so big that the Pop Warner Youth Football League wouldn't let him play.

"People liked to tease me and make me mad," he recalled the other day. "It was hard for me. I had fights every day."

He was often sent home or suspended.

His mom, Helen Hendricks, would look him in the eye and say, "I feel your pain, but blow it off. Keep moving on. Just be yourself."

"It helped," he remembered.

What also helped was moving to Antioch, and he was glad when his mother suggested it.

Yet the teasing started again when he began at Deer Valley in 10th grade. Then he met Coach Rich Woods. Woods had recently dubbed one of his larger players "Big Hungry," but the guy didn't pan out.

When Woods saw Vincent, he smiled. "Big Hungry" was back.

He didn't actually know much about football, Vincent said. "But the varsity treated me like a brother and showed me how to play, and how to lift weights."

"He won our coach's award for teamwork, dedication and commitment," Woods said. "When we needed some leadership, he was that guy."

In turn, the young football player said Coach Woods changed his life.

"You know how a coach treats you like their son? He treated me like I was his," he said. "He wanted me to be my best at football, do my best at going to school, and staying out of trouble. Like he'd call and check on me."

Vincent prefers not to talk about his real father. In any case, it was Coach Woods who showed up at his home, a house filled with sleeping bags and children, to help him with his schoolwork.

It paid off.

And the days of being teased are long gone. He helps others now.

"I know how it feels to be bullied on," Vincent said. "I just tell them it's hard, but you've just got to walk away."

He's earned a reputation of sorts in Antioch. "I'm known here," he said. "Everyone I see calls me Hungry - even parents. They say, 'Didn't you go to school with my son?' "

At Los Medanos, Vincent isn't sure what his academic focus will be. But he knows what holds his heart.

"I love football to death," he said. "I love it."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/BA7G16QVCQ.DTL>

SFGate.com**Charles Gulley**

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Charles Gulley has a smile that won't quit.

It's not so noticeable when he's walking down the street, with his tough teen exterior, black baggy clothes and a shiny grill covering his teeth.

But when the guard comes down, he's a regular kid with impeccable manners, a good relationship with his parents, a day job and a strong desire to get his high school diploma.

Charles was on the road to college. He participated in Upward Bound, a college preparatory program. And he finished all the required high school course work, but the exit exam held him up.

"I haven't been able to pass the math part," he said. "I'm determined to get my diploma. I just turned 19 and I can retake the test.

"I will take it over and over until I pass."

Charles currently works in his mother's day care program, but he wants a job working for the city, as an apprentice, or for Comcast or as a security guard.

"I will go to college one day, but I want to make some money first."

- Leslie Fulbright

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNAG16QCC3.DTL>

SFGate.com**Jerrell J. Green**

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009



The thing people remember today about the boy with cherubic cheeks and a widow's peak is that he had a twin brother and their names rhymed. Jerrell and Derrell.

Beyond that, neither his teacher nor his classmates remember much about Jerrell J. Green, who spent his days in Ms. Kanikah LeMon's kindergarten class more than a dozen years ago. Jerrell has so thoroughly vanished that even a reporter's best efforts have yet to yield a clue about where he is.

But Veronica Lightfoot remembers Jerrell. The former school counselor at Carver knows he was a fraternal twin, and that brother Derrell also went to Carver. But it was Jerrell she got to know.

"Sensitive children who have issues wind up in the counselor's office with me," Lightfoot said. "I have a tendency to gravitate to students who have the most issues. He was one of my favorites."

The precise details of Jerrell's story may never be known. But they matter less than the equation of his life as Lightfoot remembers it: A missing father. Removed from his mother. Living with an older woman not well known to his teachers and school administrators. Fury.

"One thing about him," Lightfoot said. "He wouldn't let people get close to him or touch him."

But he let Lightfoot hug him.

On the days when Jerrell acted out in class, talking back and refusing to pay attention, he was not sent to the principal's office. Instead, Jerrell got therapy with Lightfoot.

"We'd talk and play games," his counselor recalled. "And sometimes we'd take a walk to McDonald's. He would talk about the things that made him angry, and the things that he wanted.

"I know something had happened in his life."

He lightened up under the loving attention, she remembered.

Lightfoot's hugs and Jerrell's smile are captured in a rare photo someone snapped at Carver.

But even district officials have no record of him, or when he left the city's schools.

Yet Jerrell, a boy largely forgotten, left a legacy.

"I really loved him," Lightfoot said.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNCG17RE7N.DTL>

SFGate.com**Kenetta Hampton**Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer
Sunday, May 31, 2009

Ask Kenetta Hampton where she sees herself 10 years from now, and the college freshman answers with confidence: "In the courtroom. I want to be a lawyer."

Kenetta, a student at Cal State East Bay, said, "I like to protest. I like to debate against stuff and make change."

There's a lot Kenetta says she'd like to change if she had the chance. Things like violence and racism and poor health care and injustice. She's seen them all.

It was the violence of Hunters Point that drove her family to the suburbs of Santa Clara County when Kenetta was 12.

"Two of my brother's friends were killed - shot - in a car," she said. "So we knew we had to get him out of there."

After that it was racism, she said.

"Do your skin hold heat?" is how she remembers one of several thoughtless comments from a group of white classmates.

Injustice can be found everywhere, Kenetta learned during a high school trip to Peru in which students helped homeless youth.

"Prostitution - they start at 9 years old," she said. "You see mansions and soldiers with guns, then you turn around and there are all these street kids."

These and other experiences gave Kenetta a focus for college and career plans. But as a student at Mountain View High School, something wasn't working. Kenetta says it was hard to get academic help in the school of nearly 1,800 students. Rather than quit, she enrolled in her school's "Middle College" program at nearby Foothill College, which allowed her to finish high school and take college courses at the same time.

"I picked up my grades a lot," Kenetta said.

And now that she's at Cal State East Bay, she's focused on her future but remembering her past.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MN5716LMTS.DTL>

Phillip M. Jones

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Phillip M. Jones is the first to admit it was his own fault that he ended up a high school senior staring at too many F's.

"I messed around a lot," he said. "There were too many opportunities for me to not be in class. Sometimes I'd leave at lunchtime."

But Phillip -or Big Phil if you go just by his e-mail address and his height, which is 6-foot-3 - is also the one who decided to buckle down, find the academic help he needed, and graduate on time.

It was a decision made with four months left in his high school career and came not a moment too soon.

The trouble began when Phil was a sophomore at Skyline High in Oakland, where he'd lived with his parents since the first grade.

Skyline offered many opportunities, but they were "opportunities to do stuff I knew myself wasn't right," Phil said. "I was never hurt. But I knew too many people at the school. It was a bad influence."

So he transferred to Oakland High School. But he'd gotten out of the studying habit. His last semester crept up on him, and suddenly the idea of having a diploma - or not having one - loomed large. Plus he'd started playing football and wanted to keep his spot on the team.

"Grades had become real important to me," Phil said. "I talked to the teachers and the principal and the assistant principal, but they weren't really helping."

His parents encouraged him not to give up. His mom, an accountant, "was still there trying to put me on the right track," Phil said. His dad, a warehouseman, "has always been supportive. He's like a big brother."

It was time to change schools again. This time, at Oakland Tech, "they were helpful and gave me the opportunities to get more credits so I could graduate on time."

Which is what happened.

"It was the best feeling I ever felt," Phil said. "I felt like I really accomplished something in my life."

Today, Phil attends two colleges, the College of Alameda and Laney College, where he takes classes

in criminal justice and engineering.

"For some reason," Phil said, "I want to be a lawyer."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MN9F16PKH4.DTL>

SFGate.com**Louise Jones**

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

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In Thibodaux, Louisiana in the 1930s and 1940s, Louise Jones was barred from the local public schools because she was black.

She went to the Corporation Graded School, where black students got to read every book from Thibodaux Elementary and Thibodaux High - after the white kids were done with them.

"We got them when they were tattered and torn," Jones said.

Jones remembers something else about her old school: "I got an excellent education there."

"Of course, they were all African American teachers," she said. "They instilled something in me that I didn't realize was being instilled - just to believe in every child, and make sure they got the very best.

"The teachers spent hours at that school, and allowed us to go to their homes on the weekends. There was a lot of love and caring."

Beyond the math, literature and history that Jones learned so well there - she was class valedictorian - it was the more subtle lesson about how educators can nurture achievement that Jones carried with her to Carver Elementary School in San Francisco, where she was its principal from 1983 to 1998.

Jones identified with many of the experiences of her students, who were mostly black and mostly poor. Reared by her aunt, Elnora Thomas, and older cousin, Florence Smith, Jones remembers Christmases with no money for presents.

"But I had love," she said. And though her aunt never learned to read, and her cousin hadn't yet learned when Jones was growing up, "there was the expectation that I was going to college."

"So it was in me to be that way with the children and staff of Carver," Jones said.

When the son of the church pianist in Thibodaux moved to San Francisco, she followed. They married. She and Lloyd Jones celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in January.

Jones earned her B.A. and master's degree in education from San Francisco State. She began teaching in San Francisco schools in 1958, and rose to become the district's assistant superintendent for elementary instruction. Jones retired in 2001.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/BARJ17OQMQ.DTL>

Daniel Lindsey

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Daniel Lindsey's toughest challenge was also his greatest triumph: "My neighborhood," he said. "Making it to school and home again late, like after basketball practice."

Street gangs and shady characters can intimidate a young man catching a bus home at night in Bayview Hunters Point. Daniel survived the daily gauntlet between home and Burton High, and survived it once and for all when he accepted his diploma last June.

He credits his parents, Loretta and Thomas Lindsey, with keeping him focused on school and off the streets. Thomas Lindsey works in construction and is pastor of the Greater Abundant Life Church on Third Street.

"My father told me not to be scared of anybody," Daniel said. "But he also told me, don't start anything."

He's the youngest of seven children.

Daniel is enrolled at Skyline College in San Bruno, where he is a point guard on the basketball team and is leaning toward a concentration in math or sociology.

He said the best thing about being the youngest of seven was being properly spoiled. "I was always able to get whatever I wanted," he chuckled. His oldest brothers, Thomas, Jr. and Charles, also took the time to insist that Daniel focus on the positive.

It apparently worked. Asked to describe himself, Daniel pauses a moment.

"Honest, caring and loving," he said. "A hard-working man."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MN1S17D4LN.DTL>

SFGate.com**Tiara Mitchell**

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

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It's like Tiara Mitchell grew up in two different lives.

One of them went like this:

Born in Oakland, Tiara moved to San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point at age 4 with her mom, an airport worker, and her dad, unemployed. Her dad went to jail when Tiara was about 8. Her parents divorced.

When her younger brother went to the hospital with a spider bite, doctors discovered leukemia. It split up the family for nearly a year, as Tiara was dispatched to stay with a relative in Hayward while her brother recovered. She only saw her mother every couple of weeks.

Tiara's other life went like this:

A quiet girl at Carver Elementary, Tiara got her work done. She earned straight A's at Everett Middle School but longed to go to the higher-scoring Giannini Middle School with her brother and friends. She transferred there in the eighth grade, and her scores dipped - but not enough to keep her out of one of the nation's most academically selective public schools: Lowell High School.

She remembers the day her mother and stepfather gave her the news about Lowell.

"They took me into their arms - I was happy," Tiara said.

But two warring histories can be hard to reconcile inside one kid trying to grow up.

Her father, out of jail, is present and not present in Tiara's life. She saw him for the first time in many years when she was a freshman. "It was kind of awkward, but exciting at the same time." Today he works in Concord, but Tiara isn't sure what he does.

The promise of Lowell also dimmed, as Tiara found her mind wandering in class. She often chose TV over books, she said, and her grades went down.

Then one day, Tiara's mother and stepfather bought a house in Antioch and moved the family there. It meant that Tiara graduated not from Lowell, but from Deer Valley High. The experiment

with suburbia lasted less than three years, ending in January when the family returned to San Francisco.

For all the volatility of Tiara's life, she's on a steady path today.

Since fall, she's been enrolled in a nursing program first at Los Medanos College in Pittsburg and now at City College of San Francisco.

"I care about my family, my future, being successful and my close friends," Tiara said. She's aiming for a UC campus or a private four-year school and says she's intent on getting good grades. "I barely watch TV anymore," she said.

She talks about getting a master's degree and sees herself married with a child or two.

"I want to be a role model for them," she said. "I don't want my kids to go through what I went through."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MN9F16PKHQ.DTL>

Ursula Mitchell

Leslie Fulbright

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Ursula Mitchell, remembered for her passion for penmanship and her love for children, was a teacher's aide for more than two decades at Carver Elementary.

Her children attended the school. Her mother and grandmother volunteered at Carver, and Mrs. Mitchell, also known as Auntie Mitchell, spent most of her career there.

Mrs. Mitchell died last year at the age of 53 of cancer and complications from a stroke. She had a seizure six years earlier in a Carver classroom (before the students arrived) and was never able to return to the school. Carver Principal Emily Wade-Thompson delivered a eulogy at her funeral.

"Her gentle nature, radiant love, her patience and her kindness could be seen in the classroom," Wade-Thompson recalled saying. "She guided students to gain a deeper understanding of how to read and write."

A well-known political activist in the community, Mrs. Mitchell's mother spent a lot of time away from home. Mrs. Mitchell grew up taking care of her siblings and then moved that teaching spirit into the classroom.

"Ursula was a mother to me and my brothers," said her sister, Antoinette Commer. "She was an extension of my mother to me."

Mrs. Mitchell was focused on penmanship and taught her siblings and later her students the importance of reading and writing. "She knew that education was the key to getting out of the community, and she stressed that upon us," Commer said.

Mrs. Mitchell married her high school sweetheart at 19. She and her husband had two children who both started at Carver and have since gone to college. Her daughter is a nurse, and her son will soon graduate with a degree in computer graphics.

"She understood the culture of the school," Wade-Thompson said. "She was an asset. She would see what needed to be done and do it. She had a caring air, listened well, and the kids knew she was someone they could talk to."

Zene Peterson

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Zene Peterson hasn't finished high school - yet.

The former Carver kindergartener dropped out of high school after spending time over the course of three years in a juvenile detention facility.

But she didn't give up.

She completed three classes at City College last summer, including a "College Success" course and two classes on study strategies, records show.

The year before, she finished two noncredit courses that help students with reading and writing.

Zene declined to speak to The Chronicle for the story about her Carver kindergarten class, according to her grandmother, Wanda Elston. It's not known why she was incarcerated.

When Zene was 14, her cousin Scharod Fleming was shot and killed after leaving a dance party at the Tenderloin YMCA. He was 15.

"He'd knock on the door. We'd say, 'Who's there? Scharod? The party's begun!' " Zene told a Chronicle reporter in 2004. "Now, everything's been spread apart."

Zene said at the time she began to stay home a lot more than she used to, that it was too scary to ride the Muni or go much of anywhere in her neighborhood. She had already seen a few dead bodies in her short life.

Two months later, she started high school.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNOF16QSG4.DTL>

SFGate.com**Mark Richardson**

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Mark Richardson doesn't remember too much about kindergarten. It's all a bit of a blur, he said.

But he remembers that he was just about to turn 7 when his father died of a stroke. After that life was tough.

His family, including his mom and two sisters, moved to Oakland, settling in public housing in East Oakland.

They struggled financially.

That's about when Mark discovered football.

He played for seven years, a sport that kept him focused on a future and on school.

"That always kept me out of trouble," he said from his home in Oakland where he'll spend the summer break. He said he's looking for a summer job.

He attended Oakland Technical High School where he played strong safety for the team and studied in the school's health academy.

He graduated last year.

Mark now attends College of the Siskiyous in Weed (Siskiyou County), working on his general education requirements before he transfers to a four-year college.

He wants to be an optometrist.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MN7G16QVDE.DTL>

Nikeith (Keith) Rodgers

Jill Tucker, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Nikeith (Keith) Rodgers was one of the last students from the Carver kindergarten class that The Chronicle found.

His teacher, Kanikah LeMon, remembers him as eager and very ready to learn.

"He was really busy," she said. "Very energetic."

As a teenager, he attended five high schools from 2004 to 2008, including semesters spent at Woodside Learning Center, a court school for students in the juvenile justice system.

He fell well short of the necessary graduation requirements.

In February, Keith was arrested by Vallejo police. He was sentenced to 51 days in a Fairfield jail for driving without a license. A charge of vehicle theft was dropped.

His grandmother Linda Rodgers, who raised him, said both Keith's parents spent time behind bars.

She holds out hope that her grandson will find his way.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNOF16QTJH.DTL>

SFGate.com**D'Lynn Seymore**

Leslie Fulbright, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009



When D'Lynn Seymore recalls her high school years, she says shopping came before study.

"It's a wonder I graduated," she said recently over lunch at a Third Street cafe, a couple of miles from Carver Elementary. "I barely went to class. After lunch, I was gone."

She put off her senior project until days before it was due, but managed to pull it together and address a tough issue - the United Nation's handling of the genocide in Darfur.

A passing grade on the project meant she graduated from the International Studies Academy.

As for life after high school, she still lives at home, has dreams for her future, but is taking it easy, figuring life out.

She lives across the street from where she grew up in the Bayview. She plans to move to Los Angeles soon. She wants to attend the American Academy for Dramatic Arts and study to be an actress. In high school, she was pretty good at basketball, but she preferred the theater.

"I love the attention," she says. "I was in a play at the Bayview Opera House, and it was great."

She hopes to save the money to move within a year. Until then, she lives with her mom and talks daily to her dad, who lives in Pacifica.

"I want to move, I've seen it all and I'm tired of it all," she said. "If I can't be an actress, I want to work with animals. If I am not going to school, I'm going to get a job. But I want to do it in L.A."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNOL16PGJR.DTL>

SFGate.com**Keana Shepard-Gardner**

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

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It's been the women in Keana Shepard-Gardner's life who've shown her the way.

Little things like sharpening a pencil with a knife. How to fry chicken. And especially doing hair and makeup. Those came from her grandmother, Mary Eddie Shepard.

"I started practicing on her," Keana said. "That's how I got started doing hair and makeup. I want to have a shop of my own."

Keana's mother taught her perseverance, a useful skill if you're going to start your own business.

"She raised me and my brother by herself," Keana said of her mother, Lynda Shepard. Keana's brother, Marcel, runs track in college.

If her father has influenced her, it's been largely through his absence. Keana said she didn't see him for 14 years, from the time she was 3 years old until the day in 2007 when he called to take her shopping for his mother's funeral.

"It was weird," Keana said. She isn't sure where he is now or what he does.

Keana was 13 when her mother decided their Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood had become too dangerous. Her mother moved the family to Pacifica, a town that's usually as peaceful as its name.

"I try to show Keana that any situation that you're in, negative or positive, you can still overcome," her mother said. "This is what I learned from my mother. Her motto was never give up."

Keana graduated from Oceana High in Pacifica last June, and says her future is on track. She plans to enroll in the cosmetology program at Skyline College in San Bruno next semester.

Lynda Shepard hopes her daughter's dreams come true, and that she is the next in a line of strong women.

"I look at Keana, and I can see that she will go far in life. She's had good role models. You plant a seed, and it always comes back."

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNAH16NODT.DTL>

Laborrah Sims

Leslie Fulbright, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, May 31, 2009

Laborrah Sims moved with her father from the Bayview district to Portland, Ore., when she was 7.

She is on track to graduate from the Centennial Learning Center, an alternative high school, in June.

She ran track in middle school and was planning on pursuing running in college but had a change of heart and decided she wants to be an attorney.

She is a full time student at Mount Hood Community College and hopes to eventually attend law school.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MN7G16QVCI.DTL>

George Washington

Jill Tucker

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While attending Carver Elementary, George Washington was a goofy kid, a bit of a class clown.

That's what his mom, Sharonda Beasley, remembers.

Later, he would do well in school, making the honor roll. But that changed when people started getting shot.

The first was his father, who survived eight bullets before he decided to move to another state. Then his cousin was killed. Then a close family friend, Beasley said.

"That took a lot out of him," his mother said.

Some months later, George stood on a street and witnessed a gunman shoot a friend in the abdomen. The friend survived.

But after the incident, George was caught with a gun and placed on probation, according to his mother.

A month before his probation ended, George was shot twice in the leg. He survived, but he started to live in constant fear, Beasley said.

His grades dropped.

"School wasn't important," he said. "I had to get a grip on everything that happened."

So he started to bring a gun with him, a 32-caliber loaded pistol on the bus, on the streets and to his school, Thornton High School in Daly City.

"I was scared I was going to get hurt," he said, offering an explanation for the gun. "I felt safer. I felt better about life."

He said he felt untouchable - "Mr. I Can't Get Caught."

One day, the gun fell out of his pocket in the hallway at school. The offense resulted in 14 months at a juvenile detention center. He was released in April.

Because George was a juvenile at the time of his arrest, his legal records were unavailable. He and his mother provided the account of his past.

Records show that he finished high school at the residential center.

He now wants to study nursing.

He took the San Francisco City College placement test and said he did very well.

George said he has a better idea of what it takes to get to the future he sees for himself - a future that isn't behind bars.

"I can't do that again," George said.

- Jill Tucker

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MNGD16AQ41.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 17** of the San Francisco Chronicle

SFGate.com

Mager Webb

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

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"Where I come from, you don't see too many people my age graduating from high school," said Mager Webb, who graduated from John O'Connell High School last June.

He's vague about why so many guys from Bayview-Hunters Point quit school.

"It's not for them," was as deep as he cared to go.

But he's clear about why he managed to earn a diploma, despite a distaste for what school had to offer.

"Mostly my mom was on my back," Mager said. "I didn't really trip on it, but she was always on me about going to school. She really wanted me to graduate from high school on stage. She really cares about my well-being."

Mager was raised by his parents, Cynthia and Mager Webb Sr., both school security guards, instead of the streets, he said. That's not to say Mager doesn't know the streets. He knows enough to "not be a mess-up in society."

He gave another reason for staying in school. "I didn't have to sell drugs to put food on the table." That's what some kids of his acquaintance did at age 12, maybe 13.

"I had both parents. I still had to suffer - but not as hard as some."

Mager saw a man gunned down in Hunters Point. He's seen drug sales, drug use and gang violence.

"If I was a younger kid, I'd probably be traumatized. But I'm immune to the killing," Mager said. Except one.

Antwanisha Morgan, 17, was an innocent bystander when she was shot to death two years ago.

"She was just so special to everybody," Mager said. "It woke people's eyes up to being immune. That was one of the ones I just didn't get over."

Yet Mager wants to stay local, aiming for nothing more than a "regular, basic life."

"I love where I live. I love the people around here." He found a job as a package handler, a search that was harder than he imagined for a guy with a high school diploma.

Mager also knows what makes him happy.

Tia Wilson

Nanette Asimov, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Tia Wilson has short, wavy hair cropped close to her head. Without makeup, her tortoise-shell glasses and confident manner give her the look of a young executive - but hip. She's wearing clunky bracelets (pink and green), a black butterfly around her neck, and skinny black tights. Large pink hooks dangle from her earlobes.

As Tia slides into a lunch booth on the west side of town, she's got a look that matches her goals.

"I plan to go to cosmetology school, then go to school for my business degree," she tells a reporter.

But Tia has to leap one large hurdle first. She has to graduate from high school.

All she needs to do is pass the math portion of the High School Exit Exam.

"I feel very prepared, actually," Tia said. "Yeah."

She's been studying from a test-prep book and taking courses in psychology and law this semester at City College of San Francisco. Before that, she worked in a vitamin store on Van Ness Avenue.

Despite Tia's ambitions, the state of California counts her officially as a dropout. That's because when Tia finished her senior year at June Jordan High School last spring, she hadn't passed the exit exam and hadn't yet enrolled in a community college or other educational program. That's a "Code 140" in education parlance. A dropout code.

But that statistic doesn't begin to tell Tia's story.

"I'm smart," she said over lunch. "I'm determined. I'm adamant about what I want to do. I just keep in the back of my mind, live your life for you. Take advantage of your time. Use it wisely."

The Exit Exam is given only a few times a year, and Tia took it on May 13.

Results arrive in early July.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/05/31/MN9A16MS31.DTL>