

Class Notes

Lynda Richardson

Children, culture, learning: Harvard tutors engage minds through shared heritage.

CAMBRIDGE, Mass.

Steve Lissaint, a sixth grader, used to drag his backpack and jacket down the hallways of the Louis Agassiz School, not really interested in class. He averted his eyes. He would not smile.

But in recent months, something has changed. Now, twice a week, he races happily down the stairs to the basement cafeteria with about two dozen others to a mentoring and tutoring program called Basics.

The children are black. Their tutors are mostly black college students from Harvard. The idea is to bring together students and adults of the same race to concentrate on homework, African-American culture and self-esteem.

On a recent afternoon, the children were hunkered over math and reading lessons. If they had no schoolwork, the tutors found some.

On one side of the cafeteria, the children had built a "wall of self." They traced their hands on paper. They wrote about what makes them special. Their stories are tacked up on the wall.

Steve, who is 12, wrote world-wearily in his autobiography that "there have been some bad times and some good times but I've gotten over it all." He recounted how his mother died of a heart problem after giving birth to his sister, when he was 5. "I was very quiet." And how his No. 1 best friend "caught cancer and died" last summer.

For several months, Steve has been paired with Peter Phelps, a Harvard student who is obtaining business and law degrees. Mr. Phelps visits the elementary school twice a week. He and Steve talk about separation and loss. They review class assignments and read books and newspapers. They also hone their chess game.

Last month, Steve won first place in a citywide youth chess tournament at the Cambridge public library. It is the first time that he has seen himself as a winner.

"Kids just need someone to show attention, to show they care," said Earl Phalen, a Harvard Law School graduate who developed Basics in 1992 with a classmate, Andrew Carter. "It's that one-on-one time."

Although many children look up to sports figures, Mr. Phalen said, "role models are the people you touch and know and see on a daily basis. Our parents are our role models; our teachers are our role models. We want the kids to see different options open to them. All people have just tremendous potential, and most successful people have something that has been tapped, and what they have is personal power."

The Basics program sprang from a telephone call made by an anxious parent at the Agassiz School a few years ago: Kathy Reddick, a secretary at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who has had five children attend Agassiz, was worried that too many children of color were faring poorly in a public school system noted for its innovative school-choice and bilingual programs.

Several black parents were doing what they could to lift their children's confidence and test scores, Ms. Reddick said, as well as teach them about their rich African heritage. But, she said, she felt something

more was needed. So she flipped through the Yellow Pages and randomly called the Harvard Black Law Student Association, where Mr. Phalen headed community affairs.

Soon, Basics was born.

Mr. Phalen, who is 28 and graduated from Harvard Law School in 1993, is the driving force behind Basics, part of a foundation called Building Enterprises for Learning and Living. The Basics program has about 90 college mentors who volunteer in the Agassiz and Maurice J. Tobin elementary and junior high schools.

A tall, energetic man, Mr. Phalen seems to light up the room when he saunters in. He calls out greetings to students, giving high fives to some.

Mr. Phalen helps recruit volunteers from Boston colleges. And when they show up, he hugs them with the enthusiasm of a glad-handing politician. He also seeks financial support from local foundations.

After receiving his bachelor's degree in political science from Yale University, Mr. Phalen went to Harvard Law with the notion of becoming a mayor. Now his plans have changed. "I want to take the BELL Foundation as far as it can go," he said. Some people who know Mr. Phalen suggest that he is driven because he is looking for that little Earl Phalen out there — the child who might have been lost without encouragement and support.

Mr. Phalen left the Massachusetts foster care system at age 2 and was adopted by an all-white family that included seven sisters and brothers.

"I had a tremendously loving home and tremendous role models in my brothers and sisters," he said.

Though his family helped him develop an inner strength, Mr. Phalen said, there were some things he had to learn how to deal with alone. He remembers a church member whispering a racial slur after he received Communion when he was 6. He also has bitter memories of disparaging remarks hurled when he was out with his white sisters.

"Until the beginning of college," he said, "I looked at my blackness as being a negative burden that I had to carry. It wasn't until I was older that I understood that the people who said it were weak and frail and tried to build themselves up by stepping on others."

Mr. Phalen also attributes much of his academic success to his family, who he said expected nothing but the best from him. He was always a good student, making A's and B's. But he says he believes it was when he went to college that he tapped into his full potential. His self-esteem rose, and so did his grades, as he gained a greater appreciation of African-American history by reading literature and meeting other black college students, he said.

The principal at the Agassiz School, Eva Paddock, said Basics boosts black students in much the way that Chinese language schools strengthen Chinese students.

"A community needs to provide all sorts of after-school programs to support various needs and interests. It all comes back to supporting the school culture," she said.

Mr. Phalen put it another way: "I want our kids to know from the jump-start how many great African-Americans have come before them."

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City of Cambridge

15.

IN CITY COUNCIL

May 1, 1995

COUNCILLOR DUEHAY
COUNCILLOR BORN
COUNCILLOR GALLUCCIO
COUNCILLOR MYERS
MAYOR REEVES
VICE MAYOR RUSSELL
COUNCILLOR SULLIVAN
COUNCILLOR TOOMEY
COUNCILLOR TRIANTAFILLOU

WHEREAS: The BASICS program, part of a foundation called Building Enterprises for Learning and Living, established in 1992 by Earl Phalen and Andrew Carter, graduates of Harvard Law School, has achieved astounding success with students at the Agassiz and Tobin Schools in developing the self-esteem of children by bringing together students and adults of the same race to concentrate on homework, African-American culture and self-esteem; and

WHEREAS: This program was recently featured in an article in the **New York Times**; now therefore be it

RESOLVED: That the Cambridge City Council commend all those persons who have helped found and operate the BASICS program for their positive achievements on behalf of Cambridge youth, especially Earl Phalen, the driving force behind the program and Kathy Reddick, a parent, upon whose initiative the program was conceived.

In City Council May 1, 1995

Adopted by the affirmative vote of nine members.

Attest:- D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:-

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City Clerk

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Entire merchandise

R-398

Consent Order #15

Councillor Duehay re: Commendation to the
founders of the BASICS Program as featured
in an article in the New York Times.

In City Council May 1, 1995

Order adopted