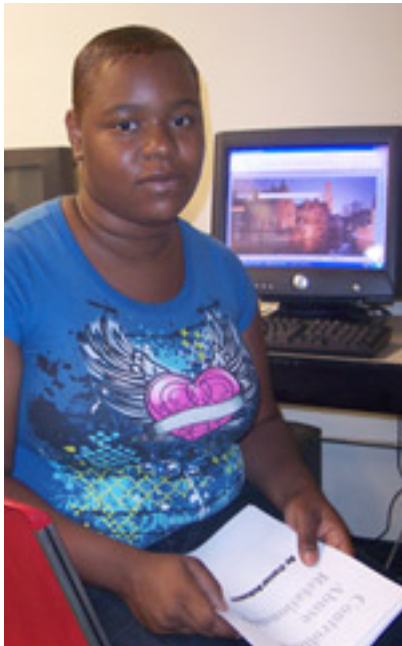


A dreamer not deferred + a devoted charter school = a good pair

Written by

Monday, 21 September 2009 15:07



What do a visionary and a bound and determined south Minneapolis charter school have in common? They are joined at the hips. Chrystal Deramus, a 21-year-old mother of three, said before her five-year-old daughter and two younger sons graduate from high school, she will be a pediatrician. The Minnesota Internship Center (MNIC - pronounced "min-nic") is steadfastly fixed on helping Deramus' dream come true.

Deramus is a single mother, and must manage a synchronized routine that will allow her time to care for her children as well as find time alone to solve algebra problems and explore Black history. With few exceptions, she's up before six in the morning, orchestrating a process to wash, dress, and feed her children and board a bus to the baby sitter. She catches another bus to get to her school which is located at the Sabathani Center, 310 38th Street before 9 am. She's usually the first to arrive.

"I have to leave home with plenty of time to spare in case of heavy traffic," said Janet White, who's been employed with MNIC for five years. "I usually get here ahead of Chrystal, but there were a couple of times when she was standing at the door waiting to get in. I can literally set my watch by her."

Determined and driven, it's not surprising that Deramus, who grew up on the south side Chicago - in one of nation's most troubled neighborhoods - had a panoramic view of the crippling effects of crime, violence, and poverty. As she played on the front porch of her grandmother's south side Chicago home, the world marched by. She easily admits that she was heavily influenced by her environment. And conventional wisdom would conclude given the circumstances, her chances of becoming a pediatrician are very unlikely. However, Deramus argues that what happened in her past will not be the sum total of her destiny.

"I know I am too young to be a mother; having three kids at my age is not what I intended. But my kids are not mistakes --they are the joy of my life, and who knows. I will be a doctor, maybe I'll even be their doctor," laughed Deramus, but meaning every word.

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No doubt, when Deramus looks back over her life, she wonders where she would have been if things had been different. Arguably, America has two prevalent societies: privileged and under privileged, and many layers in between. Privileged youths are more likely to grow up with both parents present, and are afforded greater opportunities to attend financially-secured schools with smaller classrooms, better paid teachers, well-supplied science and computer labs, and the ardent participation of parents and volunteers.

For under privileged children, African Americans specifically, the social divide is even more pervasive: the unemployment rate for African Americans is twice that of the national unemployment rate; nearly 60 percent of all African American students will drop out of school before reaching the tenth grade; 60 percent of all African American children grow up in single parent homes; at any given time, as many as one in four of young African American men are in the criminal justice system, prison, jail or on probation or parole; roughly 70 percent of all African American babies are born each year to single mothers; nearly 80 percent of single African American mothers will never marry.

"I can get mad, stop caring and do nothing, but I choose to raise my three babies, graduate, go to college and become a doctor," said Deramus. With her teacher's assistance, she is seeking a scholarship to attend the University of Minnesota after she graduates this January. She needs three credits to graduate, must complete two classes this summer and one this fall in order to graduate.

Deramus' school, founded in 2003, is known for working with hundreds of students like her...students who have trouble prevailing in traditional school settings. The first paragraph of the school's mission statement explains: MNIC's target age group is 16 through 20. By building learning plans within the context of their own personal/career interests our students have renewed hope for the future. An ever-increasing number of MNIC graduates are moving on to post secondary opportunities.

Sponsored by Pillsbury, MNIC has five sites, located in south and north Minneapolis. The enrollment is usually around 400. Last May, the school observed its largest graduation, as 120 students received diplomas. Minnesota Supreme Court Justice Alan Page, who personally awarded 12 scholarships, was the commencement speaker.

"We recruit students from their couches, the streets, and from shelters. We go where they are and we respect their needs," said Kevin Byrne, the school's founder and executive director, who insists that the MNIC staff remain alert to internship possibilities. "Many of our students need to understand what it means to be productively employed."

One 2008 graduate who was offered a full time job at a bakery frequents the school, each time bearing several boxes of huge chocolate chip cookies that he always shares with teachers and students. It's his first job, and he's earning \$15.00 an hour, not too shabby for an 18-year-old.

MNIC like many public and private schools across Minnesota, urban, suburban, and rural alike was forced to make major budget adjustments because of deep slashes in state funding for education.

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"We are not without our share of problems," lamented Don Link, a MNIC administrator. When state legislators were unable to reach a budget agreement last summer, Gov. Tim Pawlenty imposed a 27 per cent holdback on public school funding. This has led to a scurry of charter school closings. Other schools were forced to wait months for funding. "We had to lay off staff and reduce salaries by 10 percent, and ask several of our major vendors for a 27 percent deferment," explained Link, crossing his fingers.

Nevertheless, the enthusiasm to make a difference in young adult lives has not diminished. "Students not only need to feel good about who they are and what they can accomplish, but they also need to understand that they occupy an important place in the world," explained White. "Once I get this over to them, they're more ready to learn as opposed to entertaining each other."

Students who haven't graduated before reaching the age of 21, are also offered Adult Basic Education (ABE) at the school's Sabathani site, located in south Minneapolis, 310 38th Street. Applications for enrollment are now being received. For more information on Minnesota Internship Center, (612) 238-0905.