

The Reason for the National School Reform Faculty - Students

Michaelann Kelley, Mary Matthews and Paul Cross, Texas

“I have come to the realization that, despite age, we all share the same problems and enjoyments. I found myself talking to an adult who actually knew who Jack White and the White Stripes were. This was eye-opening and an encounter that has taught me that we are all humans and that we all have the common goal of creating a better society.” – *Eisenhower student’s reflection from the Winter Meeting*

The most recent NSRF Winter Meeting began similarly to those winter meetings I had attended in the past: great breakfast, big hotel ballroom and reacquainting myself with old friends while making new ones. The opening seemed to be on track with what everyone was expecting – then the students made an appearance. Thirteen students, from Eisenhower High School and Challenge Early College High School in Houston, all of whom had become CFG Coaches in the summer of 2008 (see *Connections*, fall 2008), took part in the Winter Meeting in a way students never had before. They played a critical part in the opening and closing sessions and joined home groups like other (adult) participants. In doing so, the learning of the entire group of attendees was enriched in ways that we, their teachers and CFG Coaches Seminar facilitators, did not expect.

Jasmine, a senior from Eisenhower High School, welcomed the participants at the opening session and shared a video created by the students from Eisenhower. Vladimir, also from Eisenhower, followed with a poem that caused many to reevaluate what exactly equity, democracy and freedom of speech mean in our current educational system. The poem, entitled “A Moment of Silence Before I Start This Poem,” by Emmanuel Ortiz, first read on September 11, 2002, became a discussion piece for many participants at the conference. Vladimir had leaped a huge crack by just getting up in front of the 250 people in the room (read Vladimir’s story in

the side bar).

Each student was assigned to a home group and participated as any other member in those groups. The students were excited to be heard and to listen to the voices of teachers, administrators and university professors. One home group facilitator and Houston A+ Challenge consultant, Donna Reid, posted in her newsletter an overview of the conference, particularly the impact of the students on their home groups (<http://www.houstonaplus.org/cfg/newsletter/2009-01-27-CFGnewsletter.htm>). The students, as part of their learning, worked on Saturday with their summer facilitator and reflected on the Winter Meeting. The following quotes are from the students’ reflection sheets:

“I really enjoyed my experience here at the Winter Meeting. I refreshed my memory of protocols, reunited with my cohort, and remembered why it is so important that teachers/leaders work with what they have to change lives. I learned a lot

while working with the adults. The problems that I face in my Houston organizations, the people in Vermont face with their faculty members and coworkers everyday.” – *Eisenhower student*

“The conference was an excellent and enlightening experience, mixing and mingling with teachers and administrators never felt strange, we were all here for the same purpose and that connection made it easy to become a “home group.” Age was never an issue, status never mattered, we were here to learn, discuss, and solve.” – *Challenge student*

“In this CFG conference, I was very nervous, I was going to be with teachers, the complete opposite of me, but by the end of the conference there was no difference. They were the same as me, wanting to learn from the dilemmas, experiencing new techniques and eager to take (them) back to our schools. I did, however, realize that teachers have just as much stress as the students.” – *Eisenhower student*



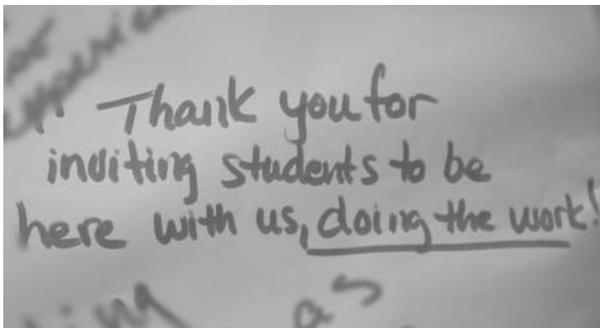
*Alejandro, sophomore at Eisenhower,
Stephanie, senior at Challenge,
Jasmine, senior at Eisenhower*

“The conference was refreshing, insightful and enjoyable.” – Challenge student

The students, with guidance from their teachers, developed a presentation for the closing during their time at the Winter Meeting. The closing was inspired by the children’s book, *Through the Cracks* by Carolyn Sollman, Barbara Emmons, and Judith Paolini. Students were given homework (we know they were mad, too– at a conference and getting homework!) to either write about a time when they were prevented from falling through the cracks, write about their schools or edit their peers essays and practice with them. Each came in the next day with their homework complete and excited about the powerful closing. The following are excerpts from their presentation at the closing session.

“Unlike most schools in the district, Challenge creates a comfortable and almost unique atmosphere for not only its students, but for teachers as well. The school allows its teachers and students to have close-knit, trusting relationships. At this school falling through the cracks is difficult.” - Stephanie

“Eisenhower High School- what do you think when you hear this name? Do you know of the rigorous academic activities and programs that go on in the school? Or do you know the statistics that are posted in the newspaper? Do you recognize us for going to national competitions in history fair,



Reflection from a participant of the Winter Meeting

HOSA, speech and debate and band? Or do you know us as a Title 1 school with 71 percent of our students qualifying for free and reduced lunch? Do you see us for who we are, or do you just see the numbers printed in the newspaper?”- Alejandro

“I am a sophomore at Challenge and a straight-A student. I read, write and am an active member of my community. Though all this is true, I could have and may still fall through the cracks. *(continued on page 10)*

Vladimir’s Story

Michaelann Kelley, Houston, Texas

Vladimir, who read the poem at this year’s Winter Meeting opening session, is one of my students. Here is my perspective on a pivotal moment in Vladimir’s life. He shares his perspective on the same event later in this piece.

I first saw Vladimir in August of 2007. I am not sure when during the hustle and bustle of school and an Art 1 class of almost 40 students I really met Vladimir...or when I started seeking interactions with him.

There was a time when Vladimir never talked– not to me not to the other students, not to ask a question, not to answer a question. He never raised his hand, never asked for help, never even asked to go to the bathroom. I am going



Vladimir, junior at Eisenhower

to be open and honest: at first, I thought it was great. In a class of 40, one kid I hardly had to mess with...but if you know me even a little bit, you know I could not let that go. I made a deliberate effort to ask Vladimir more than yes or no questions but even then, it was a struggle to get answers. He was very tight-lipped about his home life, which made building that relationship even more difficult. I had made some progress by November, but at that point I didn’t even know if Vladimir was falling through the cracks or not.

I knew Vladimir was smart from grading his work, so when a colleague of mine, Mari Glamser, was talking in my room one day about the social studies department moving kids up to honors and Advanced Placement, I suggested moving Vladimir. She asked why his social studies teacher had not suggested moving him. I did not know. After *(continued on page 10)*

During my middle school years, I was reluctant to participate in class and couldn't have cared less. As I was entering high school, my eldest brother was graduating high school at the top of his class and was accepted in a prestigious Ivy League school—the first person to do so in the family. There I sat at my brother's graduation, with his name being called so often for so many honors that the crowd became tired of clapping. That was the moment that my eyes were opened to not only going to school and attending classes, but also excelling to and being involved in my school community. Even though you might not be an older sibling, you can still make a difference in someone's life and that is my goal as a CFG facilitator." — Denise

"I am in the top 5 percent of my class, head drum major of my high school marching band and the only black male left standing in Eisenhower's first class of International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IBDP) students, but who would have guessed at one time I was falling through the cracks? There was a point right after my mom died when everything started to go wrong. My dad, his job, the bills, the mortgage, stress and above all, my education were all tumbling down around me. My grades began to fall and it was evident to a certain teacher, Ms. Candy Core. She saw my grades, my test scores and my attitude take a dramatic drop. "De'Vonta is there something wrong?" she asked over and over again. Being prideful, I would tell her "nothing," and she would leave it there. One day while working on my homework after school in her room, I became frustrated and broke down; I was a mess. Ms. Core came over to me and hugged me. "Everything's okay, De'Vonta," she told me. From there I told her my story, she listened, she understood, and she helped. She helped in improving my test scores to As, and by reminding me how to study. She edited and checked all my homework assignments and ultimately helped reinvent me. If it was not for Ms. Core, I would still be a mess and only the Lord knows where I would be. My name is De'Vonta, I am in the top 5 percent of my class, head drum major, and the only black male left standing in my school's first class of IBDP students, but I was saved by Ms. Candy Core from falling through the cracks." — De'Vonta

These students shared their stories of adults who had made differences in their lives. We are sure each and every teacher, administra-

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investigation into his grades, high 90s, all we could figure out was that he was a quiet, good kid in a sea of rowdy regular students, and his teacher did not want to lose him. So we asked Vladimir if he wanted Mari to change his schedule. He said he didn't know and probably not, and he was wavering on what to do. So, I nudged him to make a decision. He moved to honors, and three weeks later he moved up to AP. Although progress was made academically, Vlad still only spoke minimally.

Months later, an opportunity to be a part of a student CFG raised its head, and I encouraged Vladimir to attend. He did, but just five months ago, I remember instructing (and if you know me, that means telling, demanding, pushing and usually a little "barking" in there) him that his mission during the last three days of the CFG seminar was to initiate a conversation with an adult. He told me he did on the last day.

Fast forward to present day. Vladimir is active in school, taking three Advanced Placement courses. He has joined the speech and debate team and has spoken in front of an international conference — who knew! ■

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My Story

Vladimir, Eisenhower High School
Houston, Texas

I remember sitting in class daydreaming all the time about what I could be, but never actually taking the steps to achieve my dreams. For me it was not until I was given an ultimatum that I actually began my ascent into education. I was sitting in my art class, a sophomore, with no real goals in life. My teacher, Ms. Kelley, came over to my table to talk about what I wanted to do and where I wanted to be 10 or 20 years from now. But that day was different. She called over a fellow teacher, Ms. Glamser, and they told me about challenging myself, and how I could do so much better if I could take more advanced courses. I was

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hesitant and afraid, so I answered with what some might call my catch phrase, "I don't know." That's when I was given a choice, either you do it or you don't, and that was when everything became so clear to me. I could no longer wait for success— I had to work for success. I responded "yes," and from there I was thrown into a jungle full of mysteries that I knew I had to be a part of. That decision changed my life: I found myself learning and working, not because I had to, but because I wanted to. I realized that in order to catch the dream you have to chase it first. Now I challenge and hold myself to higher standards because I have more confidence in what I can do, and that is how Ms. Kelley kept me from falling through the cracks. ■

Any inquiries regarding Vladimir should be directed to his teacher, Michaelann Kelley, at mkelley@aldine.k12.tx.us.

Students at the Center

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tor and professor has impacted a student's life. The students don't always realize the effect an adult educator has had until much later in their lives, by which time making contact to let them know may be impossible. Think of the Vladimirs and De'Vontas in your life. How are you going to make sure that they do not fall through the cracks in your classroom, your school and your community? Reach out and make a difference and a student will thank you someday.

Each of us can think of teachers who have made impressions on our lives. Make contact if you can, and let that person know (if you haven't already) how thankful you are that they crossed your path on your educational journey and maybe prevented you from falling through the cracks. ■

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and electronically, in the passionate pursuit of our mission.

Every day now our membership council task force is learning and imagining. One of the members of the task force, Kevin Fahey from Massachusetts, when asked to respond to an on-line Charette question about the role of a membership council had this to offer:

In general, I would use Sergiovanni's model of "head, hand and heart" to think about this question. I believe that the new Accountability Council would be the head of the organization (tasked with governance), the Executive Director the "hand" (making things work) and the Membership Council the "heart" (guarding the vision and mission of the organization). As such, it would be tasked with clarifying things like the work of a National Facilitator and Centers of Activity, and it would address such questions as what is facilitative leadership, critical friendship, etc.

I believe we are unique as a movement and an organization. There are many worthy school reform and professional development collectives and companies serving schools, teachers and children in multiple ways. Some of their methods we would find encouraging; others would cause us some concern – and my guess is we probably wouldn't all agree on the lens we put on this or that entity or program.

But we are different – we are a FACULTY – our name says as much. And as a faculty, we all believe in a common vision as practiced through our mission. It doesn't matter if we work independently as consultants or in the company of dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of colleagues, students and parents. Many of us are in classrooms every day; a window on the world of schooling and education that reinforces our understanding of the need for our faculty to be successful.

Whether past, present or future – in whatever iteration we imagine ourselves to be in – NSRF was, is and will be a strong voice for collaborative practice, critical friendship and facilitative leadership as adult learners in the service of every single child and teacher we encounter and influence. In turn, our faculty will be influenced by those we touch; those we work with and those we engage with at the deepest critical levels. Our democracy deserves nothing less. ■

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