

# NSRF's Living History: An Interview with Lakweisha Tibbs

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

*NSRF's Living History is a series of interviews with members about our past, present and hopes for the future. In this issue we're hearing from Lakweisha Tibbs, a Family Partnership Specialist from Greater Chattanooga, Tennessee, who shares the story of her collaborative work with parents and teachers in her conversation with Debbie Bambino.*

## **L**akweisha, can you tell me about your job and how you use your coaching skills in your work with parents and family members?

My official job description is Family Partnership Specialist. Due to rising attention about the parental role in support of student achievement, the Chattanooga non-profit community, in my case the Urban League, joined forces with the Hamilton County School System to design a program that would place point people in nine urban elementary schools to address parental engagement. I'm one of those point people.

In terms of what I do, do you have about 72 hours? Because it may take that long for me to describe my job. No, seriously, I'll just give you some highlights. One of my responsibilities is the identification and organization of an Action Team of parents/family members and school staff, who will put the school's Family-Community Partnership Plan into action.

## **What's the Family-Community Partnership Plan?**

The Family-Community Partnership Plan brings staff and families together in order to achieve the school improvement plan's goals. My role in this process is all about facilitating collaboration and communication. My Coaches' training gave me some skills for my toolbox that help me approach issues with parents and teachers so that we can have real conversations about concerns both groups have.

## **What are some of the challenges you've faced?**

It's been rough. One of the first things I had to do was find out how interested the staff really was in parental input. Lots of times parents are invited to meetings where presenters talk at them and then the parents don't come back. Since my job was about creating a partnership, I wanted to guarantee that a consistent parental base would be present at the table.

Using text-based and other protocols has helped me hold a place at the table for everyone's



Lakweisha Tibbs

voice, especially the missing voice of the parents.

## **What steps have you taken to get a base of parents engaged?**

I felt I needed a dominant parent voice in the group, not just one or two folks who are totally outnumbered by teachers and administrators. I knew that parents would find safety in numbers and would be more willing to

speak up if they came as a group.

I also wanted to make sure that our meetings went beyond the traditional one-way transmission model where schools tell parents how to help with homework at home but parents don't get to tell schools what they need.

But back to your question, I make home visits. I meet with groups of parents at our school. I coordinate an after school/before school/weekend literacy tutorial program that works with community organizations and resources along with teacher consultants to yield measurable academic improvements for students.

Basically, I communicate with families. I use student and school data to ask parents my number one question, If you don't defend your kids, who will? I don't stop there though, I also work to give parents the skills and opportunities they need to speak up and be heard.

## **I remember when we met last summer, you told me about parents lobbying and holding a press conference. Can you refresh my memory about these actions?**

Sure, the first thing was the press conference. Here in Chattanooga, we've been working really hard to improve the student scores. We've been under the gun at schools like mine and we've made a tremendous gain of ten points in just one year, the highest gain

in the state. Well, after *(continued on page 16)*

we found out our results a county commissioner said the praise of our progress wasn't earned. He said, at the end of the day, we were still failing. It was a gut punch to all of us, staff, parents and the community. Here we were holding Early Bird sessions from 6:30-7:30 every morning, organizing Saturday school etc., and he said we were failures.

Everybody was upset, but the parents were up in arms and wanted to respond. We had a meeting to prepare and the parents went on to advocate for themselves. The parents got listed on the docket at the next school board meeting and they called a press conference before the meeting. Parents demanded an apology from the County Commissioner, and they got it!

**How about the family members who went to lobby? I remember you telling me about them too.**

The parents who went to lobby were upset with possible plans to cut back funding for a Pre-K initiative called Stand for Children Chattanooga. I think these parents were empowered to make their voices heard because of their participation on the Action Team.

**It sounds like your work has fostered some truly meaningful collaboration. What's next on your agenda?**

The Associate Superintendent of Elementary Education has noticed the way parents are stepping up at my school and has asked me to organize a conference across the nine targeted schools. The conference will be a chance for a broader group of concerned parents to pool their questions and their skills in support of their kids. I'm really excited about this opportunity and the respect for parental engagement that it represents.

**All of your work sounds exciting to me! It's refreshing to hear from a young professional who hasn't been infected with the "these parents don't care" bias that is so widespread among teachers and school staff. How have you avoided the common, deficit view of parents, especially poor parents of color?**

I don't know. I just never felt, never believed, that most parents did not want to be involved in their children's education. I started my job with lots of observations. I observed teachers and students, parents and students, and teachers and parents. I always figured that the kids were the center, the locus of all we do and I set out to build bridges so

we could work together.

**In addition to your work with parents and teachers I know that you are also a spoken word poet. Do these two sides of your talents ever come together?**

As a matter of fact, I once shared my poem, "Your Babies Are Crying", at a Parents' meeting. I wrote it when I started this job. ■

*Read Lakweisha's poem on the following page. For more information about her work, you may contact her at ltibbs@hotmail.com*

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- School people, working together, can make real and lasting improvements in their own schools;
- Teachers and administrators must help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning;
- The key to this effort is the development of a "learning community" based on public, collaborative examination of both adult and student work;
- To create this community, practitioners need high-quality training and sustained support.