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 you’re 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 focus 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 Lakweshia’s poem on the following page. For more information about her work, you may contact her at hibbi@hotmail.com

The mission of the National School Reform Faculty is to foster educational and social equity by empowering all people involved with schools to work collaboratively in reflective democratic communities that create and support powerful learning experiences for everyone. adopted June 2001

The National School Reform Faculty is rooted in four beliefs:

• 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.

The Renaissance Across Difference: Engaging African American, Latino and Mainstream High School Students in the Italian Renaissance and a Tribute to Gordon Parks
Camilla Greene, Connecticut

Last week in an urban high school, a young white teacher came into the faculty area of a small urban conversion high school and plumped down. She was disgusted. Her seniors, all of whom were African American were uncooperative, if not outright defiant about learning about the Italian Renaissance. Her response was to have them read a two page contract she had written. Her students were to come and get her when they finished reading her contract and had decided how they were going to behave in her English class. In other words she was doing her job. The students were being uncooperative. The students needed to change.

On Tuesday, March 7, 2006, Gordon Parks, a giant of a man, a Renaissance man by all counts, died. Gordon Parks was an acquaintance of mine and a person my daughter, who worked at the Time Photography Lab in NYC, got to know and treasure on a personal level. We are both saddened by his death. My favorite picture is of my daughter with Gordon Parks.

In my classroom, we used the internet, Gordon Parks’ vast work, and his movies, his videos and particularly his latest work “Half Past Autumn,” to discover what it means to be a Renaissance man and to explore the notion of a Renaissance.

We used his in-depth study of Gordon Parks to bridge to the Harlem Renaissance and then to study the Italian Renaissance. My students and I now had a lens to use, a reason and a will to look at the Italian Renaissance.

How do I, as an African American school Counsel, help a young, white teacher and other teachers both black and white discover how to engage African American students in wanting to learn about the Italian Renaissance? I learned as a teacher how to surround myself and my students with the cultures of our heritages; the African American, Asian and Latino heritages. We used that cloak of personal cultural knowledge to bridge to the dominant European culture. This is the only way I know to engage students who do not look like the dominant American culture in learning about the European culture. Without using a similar approach with high school students who represent cultures other than the dominant culture, you get compliance at best and/or classroom management issues with disruptive, defiant behaviors. I feel privileged to have been able to explore deeply the life and works of Gordon Parks with my students. I will miss Gordon Parks’ presence, but I will always be grateful for having known him, grateful for his works and grateful for the time I spent with my students exploring his genius.

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Gordon Parks
November 30, 1912 - March 7, 2006
African American Renaissance man

• First African American photographer hired by Life magazine
• Author of over 15 books
• Essayist
• Poet
• Director of more than 11 films, including “Shaft”

“I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, racism, against all sorts of social wrongs...From that day on, I began singing a song called Hope. I still sing it loud. I see the waves, fire, darkness and mud.”

- excerpt from “Come Sing With Me”

The European culture. Without using a similar approach...