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Young teachers push kids to achieve

Volunteers bent on cultivating brighter futures

By *JENNIFER PRICE*
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Shaun Murphy walked past drug dealers and prostitutes to go to school in Brooklyn.

He first met his father when he was 7. A week later, his father was killed.

Murphy persevered. He went to college, joined the Army, then started an event-planning company.

Today, the 30-year-old is helping boys in Wilmington as part of Teach for America, the national nonprofit that recruits top college graduates and others to teach in urban and rural schools to help close the achievement gap.

"I'm not going to let them use where they grew up as a crutch. They're not going to get sympathy out of me. I expect greatness out of all of them," said Murphy, who is teaching special education at Prestige Academy, an all-boy charter school where 75 percent of students are low-income and 95 percent are black. "I'm proof that you can make it out. No matter where you come from, you can succeed."

Teach for America recruits must make a two-year commitment and are given their own classrooms after completing a nine-week summer training program. In addition to Prestige, Delaware College Preparatory, East Side Charter, Edison Charter, Kuumba Academy and Warner Elementary are using Teach for America. All of the schools are in Wilmington.

Mike Wang, executive director of Teach for America's mid-Atlantic region, said about 2 percent of corps members leave the program during training. Delaware's first class of recruits has lost three of the 23 corps members who began the year. One was transferred to a Philadelphia public school after not being placed here. Two who were supposed to teach at Red Clay Consolidated's Warner Elementary and Kuumba Academy charter school left the program shortly into the school year, citing personal reasons.

"The summer training is very rigorous and highly challenging. For some folks, they come to find out that they are not ready to take on this responsibility," he said.

All are working toward a master's degree in education by taking classes at Wilmington University on Tuesday evenings. They are each assigned to a program director, who helps them set goals for their classrooms.

Kimberly Brown, program director for most of the Wilmington recruits, observes them teaching and offers feedback. She's looking for two main components: meaningful instruction and classroom management.

Brown said she's seen what's typical for a first-year teacher.

"They're learning what it means to teach the specific age group they're teaching. A 5-year-old is completely different from a 12-year-old," she said.

Once the corps members have test results from their students, Brown will help them analyze the data and adjust instruction.

"We want these kids to experience life-changing gains in the classroom as a result of our corps members' hard work," Wang said.

Few have teaching degree

Most Teach for America recruits are in their early 20s and have just graduated -- usually at the top of their class -- from some of the nation's top colleges and universities. But most do not have a teaching degree -- a fact that bothered some veteran Delaware teachers, including union members at Red Clay, who said they worried the recruits would not be prepared.

Sondra Shippen, head of Kuumba Academy, which is employing two corps members this year, disagrees.

"I think they are equally as prepared as any first-year teacher," she said. "We're finding them to be a valuable asset to the school."

Samantha Connell, who teaches fourth-grade English and social studies at Kuumba, doesn't think her bachelor's degree in history and European studies from the University of Pittsburgh puts her at a disadvantage compared with first-year teachers with education degrees.

Connell, 22, said the Teach for America program has been the most emotionally, physically and mentally exhausting thing she's ever done. It's also been the most rewarding.

"There might be a different struggle each day, but at the end of the day, there's so much good to look back on," said Connell, who plans to continue teaching after completing the program. "There's no profession I'd rather be in."

Murphy said the summer program prepared him for the classroom. "They push you to the max on purpose," said Murphy, who wakes up at 4:30 a.m. to prepare his lesson plans and get motivated for the day.

Unlike other recruits, Murphy earned his bachelor's degree at age 30, two days before he was accepted into the program.

But he learned the value of a good education at a young age.

Despite being a single mother, Sylvia Murphy always made sure she was home when her children got home from school.

"My mother sacrificed everything to ensure we had better education than she had [growing up in Barbados]," he said.

While many of his peers spent evenings on street corners, Murphy had an early curfew. And despite his talent, his mother didn't allow him to play football because when tryouts came, he had a C average.

After graduating from high school, Murphy enrolled at Binghamton University in Binghamton, N.Y., but left after two years to join the Army.

"I didn't go to class. I was focused on everything but my academics, and my G.P.A. was trash," he said.

In 2003, he started taking classes part time at Drury University in Springfield, Mo., where he later earned an associate degree. Murphy left the Army in 2006 but went to Iraq two years later as a contractor.

It was in Iraq that Murphy first heard about the Teach for America program.

Prestige Principal Jack Perry said Murphy is the perfect fit for his school.

"What came across instantly was his sense of commitment to why this work is so important," said Perry, who opened the all-boys college preparatory charter school serving grades five through eight last year. "The mission of Prestige Academy is to equal the playing field for low-income, black and Latino boys who are on average two to three grade levels behind where they should be. If we can erase the achievement gap for these young men, we can put them on the pathway for success."

Role model

"Where we come from, they don't really see many black teachers," said Erica Jenkins, whose 11-year-old son, Jaquire, is a sixth-grader at Prestige. "But when they see Mr. Murphy, they think, 'Well, if Mr. Murphy can do it and he came from the same type of neighborhood that I come from, then I can do it, too.' [Jaquire] looks at Mr. Murphy as a role model."

"Failure is not an option," Murphy said. "I tell them that if they're not educated, they are losing the battle. I try to convey to them that being smart is cool. I tell them to look at everyone that runs this country -- they're educated."

Last week, Murphy made his way around the classroom helping students on a worksheet about the Articles of Confederation. When students started to talk without being called on, he sternly gave them a demerit. But when struggling students got answers right, he rewarded them with big smiles and pats on the back.

Perry said it's refreshing to have people like Murphy in a school.

"Not all teachers believe that every kid, regardless of income level or race, can succeed," he said. "But at Teach for America, they recruit folks that believe that no matter where the child is coming from, they have the potential to be college material."
