



November 8, 2009

An immediate impact, a lifelong example

Retired educator Maurice Pritchett still making children his life's work

By *JENNIFER PRICE*
The News Journal

WILMINGTON -- Nine-year-old Abdullah Brown, wearing his Bancroft Elementary uniform, was munching on fries and chicken nuggets at McDonald's recently when two teenage boys in sagging pants and T-shirts slid into a nearby booth.

They recognized Abdullah from the neighborhood.

"Where's your father?" one of the teenagers said to the boy, taunting him.

"I don't know, in jail," Abdullah said, staring down at his chicken nuggets. His father has been in and out of prison most of Abdullah's life.

As Abdullah tried to disappear into the seat, an arm slid around his shoulder, bringing a slight smile to his face.

The teens, failing to get a rise out of Abdullah, stood up and left the restaurant.

It was a small gesture, but it meant the world to Abdullah.

The arm did not belong to a relative or a neighbor, but to Maurice Pritchett, a retired educator who has been making a difference with Wilmington youth for 40 years, first as a teacher, then as the 30-year principal at Bancroft, where he now mentors Abdullah.

"I want him to know that just because his dad is in jail doesn't mean that he doesn't have anyone," Pritchett said later. "He has me."

Pritchett, 67, grew up on the city's east side without a father. When he wasn't in school, he spent his time playing basketball at the Walnut Street YMCA. As an adolescent, he had attitude problems.

Then two teachers took notice of him and those relationships changed his path.

That's why today, he mentors Abdullah, helps teenagers find college scholarships and delivers groceries when he visits former students who are in college.

"He doesn't believe in letting any child go," said Beatrice "Bebe" Coker, a Wilmington playwright and activist. "Failure is not an option."

Steered onto right path

Pritchett, who led Bancroft for more than three decades, is an icon in Wilmington.

He can't walk a block on the east side without running into former students, colleagues and old friends. When he visits the school, students shout his name and run up for a hug. Parents, many of whom had him as their principal, stop him in the street or honk their horns to say thanks. He always greets them with a smile, and he ends each conversation with a sincere "take care now."

Pritchett, who retired from the Christina School District in 2008, credits his success to his early mentors: Bancroft teachers Clifton "Gator" Lewis and Nathan "Doc" Hill.

"They would talk to me about my attitude, talk to me about who I was hanging around with and tell me I could be something," Pritchett said. "I could have gone the wrong way with no father there. I could have gotten in trouble, but [Lewis] and [Hill] helped guide me down the right path."

Despite Pritchett's talent, Lewis wouldn't let him on the basketball team at Bancroft, then a junior high, until his attitude improved.

"I passed over several good basketball players because they weren't doing what they needed to do in school," Lewis, 80, recalled. "If they changed their school life, then they could get on the team."

Pritchett did that his last year at Bancroft, and his play helped him get a spot on the team at Howard High, where he would later earn All-City basketball honors.

With no way to afford college, Pritchett planned to join the Air Force. But Hill, who had been following Pritchett's basketball career since he left Bancroft, thought the 6-foot, 2-inch forward was college material. He helped Pritchett secure a full scholarship to Delaware State University, where he would meet his wife, Juanita, now a special-education English teacher at Glasgow High.

Pritchett majored in elementary education, graduating in 1965. After four years teaching fifth grade in Cecil County, Md., he returned to Wilmington to teach at Elbert Elementary.

"[Lewis and Hill] are the reasons I'm the way I am," he said. "I know for a fact I wouldn't have made it without them. And that's my driving force for giving back today."

Community connection strong

A rough neighborhood surrounds Bancroft.

Home to one of the city's hot spots for crime, rundown row houses line the streets. A liquor store sits directly behind the school. Dozens of boarded-up homes remain vacant.

About 96 percent of Bancroft's 321 students come from low-income families; 93 percent are black and 6 percent are Hispanic.

Two city parks sit in front and behind the school. Nearby is Peoples Settlement, a social-service agency, and Sarah Pyle Academy, a high school for students at risk for dropping out. Scattered throughout the neighborhood are pockets of public and private revitalization attempts.

Originally built as a junior high school that held 1,200 students, Bancroft is a three-story building with high ceilings, wide hallways and tall windows. Unlike most elementary schools, it has a large gymnasium and auditorium, making it useful for community events.

Even in his early days at Bancroft, Pritchett looked for ways to connect the community to the school.

Like all Wilmington public schools at the time, Bancroft kept its doors open until 10 p.m. and on Saturday mornings, offering programs like sewing, typing and cooking to students, parents and

community members. Pritchett led Bancroft through desegregation in 1978, including the change from a seventh- through ninth-grade junior high school to a fourth- through sixth-grade intermediate school.

Pritchett solicited donations from downtown businesses to build a clothes closet filled with coats, hats and shoes for needy students. He lobbied Wilmington business leaders to serve as one-on-one reading mentors. And he organized a Saturday Academy for students who scored low on state exams.

"He was very supportive of the staff, cared about the students and was extremely active in the community," said Pat Holland, a Bancroft third-grade teacher.

For nearly 30 years, he co-sponsored a basketball league for Wilmington fourth- to sixth-graders. The program expanded to include field trips to University of Delaware football games and annual holiday shopping trips to Value City department store in Claymont, where each child was given \$25 to buy a Christmas gift for their parents.

"The basketball program gave me something to do instead of getting in trouble on the streets," said 19-year-old Dexter Walker, a former student.

Pritchett's teaching philosophy was to teach children, not subjects, Coker said.

"Too often we are just teaching subjects, and that's where a lot gets lost," she said. "If those kids were hungry, they had food. If those kids needed a coat, they had a coat."

A highlight of his career was earning the state's National Distinguished Principal award in 1994, one of more than 20 awards Pritchett received in his career.

Pritchett even caught the attention of two U.S. presidents.

A few years after winning the state's top principal award, Bill Clinton called Pritchett after hearing a White House chef, former student Charlie Redden, continually praise the longtime principal. And soon after taking office, George W. Bush visited Bancroft because he had heard about Pritchett's efforts to make Bancroft more like a community, rather than just a school, and wanted to see for himself.

Today, Pritchett runs an educational consulting firm, Pritchett Associates, which sends retired teachers and administrators into schools to train staff in classroom management, lesson planning and parental involvement.

More than 500 people crowded into the Chase Center on the Riverfront for his 2008 retirement dinner.

"He pushed everyone to be more than what was expected of them," said former student Turquoise Fitzgerald, 20. "He inspired us all."

Reaching beyond classroom

One morning last month, Pritchett walked into the school wearing a pinstriped suit.

"Mr. Pritchett!" Abdullah yelled as he ran across Bancroft's mentoring room and stretched his arms out wide for a hug.

As the two turned to the day's task -- mastering multiplication -- the third-grader confessed, "I'm not good on the times."

"Well, let's do it together," Pritchett said.

Pritchett bumped fists with the 9-year-old when Abdullah answered a question correctly.

"What are you going to get on your report card?" he asked him.

"Nothing but A's, and maybe a couple B's. But no C's, no D's and no F's," the boy replied.

"Well, that's great. I'm really proud of you," Pritchett said. "I think you can go a long way in life. I really do. I see a long future for you."

Pritchett started mentoring Abdullah last school year after the boy's teachers thought a stable male presence would be beneficial. Abdullah had been disrupting class with emotional outbursts.

The results have been remarkable, said Holland, Abdullah's teacher.

"I can usually redirect bad behavior by mentioning that I'll contact Mr. Pritchett," she said. "He doesn't want to disappoint Mr. Pritchett."

Several times a month, Pritchett picks Abdullah up from school to go out to dinner. He tells the boy to call him anytime.

When Abdullah's mother, Myra Brown, couldn't accompany her son on a school trip to Chuck E. Cheese earlier this year, Pritchett took her place.

Money is tight for Brown, who is unemployed, so last month, Pritchett took Abdullah to Party City in Elsmere to pick out a Halloween costume so he could participate in the school's Halloween parade. On Oct. 31, Pritchett's 67th birthday, he took Abdullah to UD's homecoming football game, surprising him with a UD sweat shirt and hat.

"Having a constant, dependable male presence in his life over an extended period of time that is modeling universal values -- it's priceless," said Sue Coffing, Bancroft's mentoring coordinator.

Parents encouraged to help

Abdullah's father, Abdullah Spratling, has been in and out of prison throughout the boy's life, his mother said. He returned to prison in September for violating his parole.

"Mr. Pritchett is like a father to Abdullah," Myra Brown said. "He only gets to see his real father every three to six months."

Abdullah's story points to what Pritchett thinks is a key difference between inner-city and suburban schools -- parental involvement.

"I would like to see more parents come into the school and sit down with their child's teacher to see what they can do to help their child be successful in the classroom," he said. "Parent involvement is the foundation because parents make a big difference in where these youngsters are going to go."

Public schools, however, need to give working parents more flexibility to get involved such as holding parent meetings in the evenings or on the weekends, he said. "Sometimes parents have to work two or three jobs just to put food on the table, so they're not going to be able to make a 2:30 p.m. meeting."

But when children don't have much parental involvement in their lives, a mentor can make a big

difference. Pritchett said he knows not everyone can give as much time as he does but wishes more would at least give an hour a week to mentor a young child.

"People have lost their sense of community. A lot of people won't roll their sleeves up anymore and help," he said.

At Bancroft, there are 100 children waiting for mentors. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Delaware, a statewide mentoring program, is looking for more than 200 adults to mentor in Delaware schools this school year.

"If you want to make it better with these young kids, you've got to get involved," Pritchett said. "You can't just sit back and criticize them and say you don't want to put your time into them."

Involvement spans decades

Though Abdullah is the first child Pritchett has formally mentored, he's been involved in children's lives for decades.

When Fitzgerald was struggling to pay her tuition at DSU, Pritchett helped his former student get a scholarship through Wilmington City Council. When the Christiana High School track team couldn't afford to travel to the outdoor national championship in Greensboro, N.C., he helped them raise more than \$5,000. And when he heard that one of his wife's students, Tiffany Prieto, wasn't going to be able to afford her housing deposit, orientation fee or textbooks at DSU, he gave the freshman a scholarship through his personal foundation, the Maurice Pritchett Education Foundation for Underprivileged New Castle County Children.

"He really loves to help students in poverty that are trying to get somewhere," said Prieto, now 18, who moved to Wilmington in 2006 after her family's Brooklyn, N.Y., home was foreclosed. As a student at Glasgow High, she lived in a Ministry of Caring shelter and then in an apartment through the Wilmington Housing Authority. "He always tells me if I ever need anything to not be afraid to call him."

As a Bancroft student, Ladaye Johnson admired Pritchett's determination and dedication.

"He was always a perfect role model for me," said the 24-year-old, now a senior at Lincoln University in Oxford, Pa. "Seeing what he has accomplished even though he came from this neighborhood, it taught me that no matter where you grow up, if you've got the drive, you can be successful."

Pritchett has paid for Johnson's textbooks and buys him groceries when he comes to visit.

"He wants to see not just himself and not just his family succeed, but he wants to see everyone succeed. He wants to give everyone else a chance," Johnson said.

Pritchett said he's giving back because "people helped me get to where I am, so I want to make sure these kids have a comfortable way of surviving in college.

"I believe what God wants me to do is to provide services to help other people get on their feet so they can become better citizens in this country," he said. "My dream is that they'll come back and help someone else the same way."

Johnson said he'll do that after graduation as a juvenile probation officer, helping youths get back on track.

"I want to give other kids what Mr. Pritchett has given me," he said.

Pritchett said half the battle is convincing inner-city youths that they can do more with their lives than stand on a street corner.

"I tell them that regardless of what their mom and dad did, they can be whatever they want to be," he said.

"A lot of these kids don't do well in school and get suspended all the time so they figure there's no other place to go but the corner, but it's not.

"I try and tell them to please not get in the game because once you get in the game, it's hard to get out of the game," he said. "You know too much and you've seen too much. It's a shame to say that, but it's true. They get in that mess, and they can't get out because people will think they'll snitch."

That's why Pritchett encourages Abdullah to keep his grades up, stay out of trouble and make him proud.

"It's the environment that traps these kids. They need a net they can turn to. They need us. They need a sense of direction," he said. "If we can get more people to do what I'm doing, you'd see a difference in these young men. It would cut down on suspension, dropout and incarceration rates."

But most of all, children just want to hear that they're loved, Pritchett said.

"Every day, someone in the school should tell them that they love them. I think that would make a huge difference because a lot of times, no one tells them that they love them," he said. "Every time I see Abdullah, I tell him how much I love him."

And he thinks Abdullah is starting to believe it.

On a recent afternoon when Pritchett picked up Abdullah in front of Bancroft, children crowded around the pair and asked Abdullah how he got Mr. Pritchett as a mentor.

Abdullah hugged him: "Because he loves me, and I love him."

TO MENTOR

To become a mentor at Bancroft Elementary School, contact Sue Coffing at 429-4102, ext. 218, or coffings@christina.k12.de.us.

To become a mentor at other Delaware public schools, contact Big Brothers Big Sisters of Delaware at 998-3577 (New Castle County), 674-2486 (Kent County) and 856-2918 (Sussex County) or apply online at www.bbbsde.org.

Or contact Rachel Markowitz, program director for Creative Mentoring, at 656-2122, ext. 15, or apply online at www.creativementoring.org.

MAURICE PRITCHETT PROFILE

His education and work

1961 -- graduated from Howard High School

1965 -- graduated from Delaware State University

1965-1969 -- fifth-grade teacher in Cecil County, Md.

1969-1970 -- fifth-grade teacher at Elbert Elementary School in Wilmington

1971-1973 -- community school coordinator at Bancroft Junior High School

1973-1975 -- Bancroft vice principal after completing his master's degree at Villanova University

1975-2005 -- Bancroft principal

2005-2008 -- Director of community engagement at Christina School District

2008 -- started mentoring at Bancroft; opened Pritchett Associates, an educational consulting firm that sends retired teachers and administrators into schools to train staff in classroom management, lesson planning and parental involvement.

His family

Maurice Pritchett and his wife Juanita, a special-education teacher at Glasgow High, have four children: Maurice Jr., Andre, Dwayne and Danielle. All have master's degrees.

Danielle is working toward her doctorate in international women's studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., and Dwayne followed in his father's footsteps, teaching fifth-grade special education in Atlanta. Andre sells insurance in Middletown, and Maurice Jr. trains surgeons in robotic medical equipment.
