

THE Strengthening Vulnerable Families COLUMN

School of Social Work University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Fall 2007



IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURE: SCHOOL PUBLICATIONS IMPACT THE PROFESSION

Despite a smaller faculty than some of its peers, the School of Social Work finishes first for scholarly productivity.

Read more on page 3.

- 2 Message from the Dean
- 4 Children and Family Research Center
- 6 Lessons from Freedom School
- 7 Spanish Newspaper a Local Success
- 8 Social Work Around the World
- 12 Alumni Highlights
- 15 Calendar of Events
- 16 Donors
- 18 Faculty Highlights
- 19 Award Nominations
- 20 Development Update



www.socialwork.uiuc.edu

HARAMBEE: PULLING TOGETHER AT FREEDOM SCHOOL



Assistant Professor Jan Carter-Black accompanied her Generalist Practice class to the Champaign-based Freedom School Summer Program. Here she reflects on their experience.

On a July morning that promised to be yet another scorcher, a group of MSW students and I piled into vehicles and headed over to Columbia School in Champaign. The oldest elementary school in the Champaign Unit 4 School District, Columbia houses the 2007 Freedom School Reading Enrichment Program.

We rolled out of our cars and vans in the school's parking lot where Regina Parnell gave us a brief orientation. She taught us the appropriate protocol for requesting permission to enter the school's gymnasium and the words to the opening call and response that was part of the morning *Harambee*. Regina is an MSW student, volunteers as a Freedom School intern, and is the mother of a Freedom School scholar. In fact, it was Regina who invited our class to visit and participate in the Freedom School's *Harambee*—a rare and privileged opportunity. The 90 or so Freedom School scholars (K-8th graders) and

interns (local college students) engage in a *Harambee* each morning before the individual classes begin.

Taken from the Kiswahili language, *Harambee* is a word that means "let's pull together." It seemed this unique and highly energizing activity served as a means of pulling together all the talent, energy, commitment, and strengths of the young scholars and their teachers for a day of learning and sharing in the truest sense of the words.

Around the walls of the gymnasium were brightly colored posters that espoused the importance of learning, helping others, community, and self-respect. The *Harambee* agenda included a time for interactive reading, singing the theme song for the day, a series of motivating and uplifting cheers and chants, opportunities to give and receive recognition for accomplishments and special occasions, followed by moments of silence and finally daily announcements.

For the next hour the scholars and our graduate students alternately stood and sat on the floor around the perimeter of the gym in a large circle while the interns moved around the inside of the circle leaping into the air, running across the expanse of gymnasium floor, twirling, and encouraging the scholars to put their hearts and souls into the songs, cheers, and chants.

I was honored to be asked to serve as the guest reader for the day. I read the story of “Tappin’ the Turtle” while several scholars and interns acted out the parts of the various characters. The music, storytelling, cheers, chants, and recognitions seemed to empower the scholars to rise to the occasion in a most amazing manner.

Vernessa Gipson, the program’s director and a Social Work alumna (MSW 1988), then graciously escorted us on a tour where we glimpsed some of the scholars’ artwork and visited two classes in session. We observed the young intern teachers guiding the scholars through

AN EMPOWERING MISSION

According to the program’s director, Vernessa Gipson, the Freedom Schools are part of a national initiative of the Children’s Defense Fund. Its mission is:

[T]o encourage and motivate children and youth to develop a love and enjoyment for reading...Built around the concept of the Freedom Schools of 1964...[it is] a literacy-based program that uses books and best practice strategies known to be effective and culturally relevant to African-American and Latino youth...[and ties] into projects related to conflict resolution and/or social action.

It is a program steeped in the history and traditions forged during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Based in strength and empowerment, Freedom School takes seriously the charge to participate in social action.

structured reading and processing exercises that promoted a deeper understanding of historical events such as the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott and the integration of Central High School in Arkansas by the African-American students who came to be known as the Little Rock Nine.

As we left Columbia School and had a chance to reflect on our experience, we realized Freedom School is much more than a reading enrichment program. It was a most enlightening excursion to

the tradition-rich community in which our School of Social Work has the good fortune to be inextricably embedded.

The MSW students, inspired by these young scholars, chose to provide backpacks filled with needed school supplies for Freedom School scholars’ fall term as the final Generalist Practice class project.

This is how strength, empowerment, and engagement with the community come alive.

SPANISH NEWSPAPER PROVES VITAL SOCIAL SERVICE

Just as she was finishing her MSW at Illinois in 2001, Paola León, now a doctoral student, received a phone call from a friend asking if she would like to take part in a grassroots effort to address the needs of a growing Spanish-speaking community in the Champaign-Urbana area. This concerned group of citizens discussed ways in which they could bridge the gap between the existing community and its new neighbors. Practical issues at schools including lunch menus, early dismissals, and holidays, along with access to social services and police interaction, were all part of the discussion.

That initial meeting resulted in a group of 10 core volunteers, including a journalist, and the creation of *El Informador de Champaign-Urbana*, a Spanish-language newspaper that has provided a voice for the Spanish-speaking community in the region for the last six years. Much of the paper’s success can be attributed to the dedicated efforts of León, who has been the editor for the duration of the monthly paper’s approximately 67 issues.

“I always saw the paper as a social service project,” said León, who has been responsible for finding volunteers, working with advertisers, editing articles, and designing the layout. Daniel Velez Ortiz (MSW 2004), also a doc-

toral student at the School, has been one of the many volunteer columnists. “My work as a volunteer writer intersects directly with social work. Writing allows me to reach further and address the needs of a greater number of people. It is very much community focused, but it is expressed through a different medium,” Ortiz said.

León said that much of the newspaper, which has a circulation of about 3,000, has been tailored to address issues important to its readers. The newspaper’s sections are dedicated to topics such as immigration issues, bilingual social services, cultural topics, local anniversaries, baptism and marriage announcements, and games for parent-child interaction. She noted that the newspaper has also become an educational tool for Spanish classes at Parkland Community College and local high schools.

Start-up funding for the newspaper was provided by *El Informador’s* volunteers and groups such as the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, local Spanish clubs, and service organizations. Continued funding has been provided by business advertising.

A semester away from her field work for her dissertation, León had been considering the



future of the newspaper. But she and the other volunteers have no worries about the paper’s continued success. The *News-Gazette* approached León this past summer and has now officially taken over the publication, with plans for it to become a free weekly publication. The volunteers will act as an advisory board and freelance writers under the guidance of an editor, reporter, and business manager provided by the *News-Gazette*.

“This is a real testament to the changing demographics of our community,” said León. “Businesses and services are now actively looking for avenues to advertise to Spanish-speaking customers and clients.”