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Education from cradle to college curbs poverty, produces Gates scholars

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Jeffrey Johnson had better odds of going to prison in handcuffs than to college on scholarship.

Yet, today, at 19, he is a carefree sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania -- an alternate reality from his childhood in southeast Atlanta. In the hard-scrabble hood where Johnson grew up, high fives swapped cash for crack, gunfire settled gang beefs and poverty was the heirloom passed down to generations.

For Jeff Johnson, not even home offered much refuge.

"I would have to get up at 12 at night to go and walk around the corner with my mother as she tried to get a fix," he said of his childhood. "My dad and I would go to even worse neighborhoods where he would shake someone's hand and I would later find out that it was a drug transaction. It's a life not many people are able to come out of."

But Johnson came out of it, in large part because of the "cradle to college pipeline" at Charles Drew Charter School -- an academic haven where student test scores have zoomed 200 percent in 10 years and circumstance is no predictor of failure.

Drew Charter School is a central part of the \$103 million renewal of the East Lake neighborhood that began in the mid-1990s. The project replaced the squalid East Lake Meadows housing project -- long described by police as a war zone -- with stylish apartments, a renovated golf course, an upgraded YMCA and Drew, which has 880 students from preschool to eighth grade.

"That is a stunning example of how a community can come together to create an environment and do what it takes to get all kids to college," said Sara Johnson, spokeswoman for the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, who calls Drew a model of innovation.

Once Drew students complete eighth grade, the school remains open to them, from the computer lab to the teachers. Alumni are steered toward top metro Atlanta public and private high schools. They are invited back for free tutoring. They are swept away on college tours. They are offered complimentary coaching on financial aid and scholarship applications.

Cerise Clarke, a bubbly teen who relocated from Chicago to Atlanta, spent just one year at Drew -- eighth grade -- but it was a transformative year.

"Drew is the first who opened my eyes to see that I can be someone great," said Clarke, 18, salutatorian of New Schools of Carver Early College. "People were constantly pushing me and making me think about my future. They were invested in me."

Johnson says that Drew provided a quiet getaway for him after his high school day ended. He could talk to a teacher about a problem or start his homework on a computer without worrying about interruptions at home.

"What they are doing at Drew is what all schools should be doing," Johnson said. "For some kids, mom and dad aren't home."

The hands-on approach has brought Drew success. Since the campus opened, state standardized test scores for fourth graders have improved by an average of 200 percent between 2000 and 2010 and alumni are attending more than 30 colleges. Last school year, the majority of students in grades 1 to 8 met or exceeded state standards on the Georgia Criterion-Referenced Competency Test in math and reading.

Drew's "cradle to college pipeline" is being duplicated in at least seven cities throughout the Southeast with plans for schools and communities inspired by East Lake, including Charlotte, Birmingham, New Orleans and, in Georgia, Rome and West Point.

But is Drew's revolutionary approach practical? Many traditional Georgia secondary schools already have graduation coaches steering kids on the path to college. Can metro Atlanta public schools afford to focus on alumni?

Patti Kinney, an associate director with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, says the program is a "great idea," but not easily done on a large scale. "The reality is most middle schools are so consumed with helping the students they currently have to succeed that it is difficult for them to provide additional help for former students coming back."

While the average Georgia public school receives about \$8,000 per pupil, Drew gets nearly \$12,000 including the \$10,500 local share from Atlanta Public Schools. A chunk of its \$9.2 million budget last year was spent on alumni and reimbursed by the East Lake Foundation. Last school year, about \$364,000 funded programs like High Prep, which offers homework help for high school students and CREW (Creating Responsible, Educated and Working) Teens, which gets them college-ready.

In 2009, 85 percent of CREW Teens graduated high school in four years or less and 84 percent of them landed in college, according to program director Jana Broadie. The Atlanta Public Schools graduation rate was 68.9 percent.

Caring about kids outside of the test scores they make or the homework assignments they miss is part of the culture at Drew, says Robert Waller, a former teacher. Drew wasn't at all what he had expected when he took the job. He figured a charter school was for gifted students. What he found were kids who required more than what he could teach them from a book.

So he started an academic support club, the Waller Scholars, where kids could talk about their feelings, improve their grades and get exposure to life outside East Lake -- before and after their time at Drew.

"I discovered that so many of the kids were victims of broken homes, they just needed someone to say everything was going to be OK," said Waller. "Many of them came from a background where people were not exuding scholarship. I wanted them to be the antithesis of the statistics expected of them."

Randie Henderson remembers that when she transferred from East Lake Elementary to Drew, she still used her fingers to count.

"I was really stupid," said Henderson, 18. "I didn't know my times tables. When I would hand [in] my tests, on the back it had all of these tally marks."

Soon she became a Waller Scholar who stayed after school for tutoring, attended Saturday classes and traveled. During the summers, Waller would charter a bus to whisk students away to see the beach for the first time or ride roller coasters.

When Henderson left Drew in 2006, she was an honor student bound for Carver Early College and success.

"Without Drew's help, it would have been difficult for me to pay for some of the opportunities my daughter received," said Nottra Henderson, Randie's mother. "I am proud of her."

The academic program at Drew offers students a foundation in writing, science, math and technology plus exposure to the arts. Students take dance and travel to Atlanta Symphony Orchestra concerts. Every third grader takes violin on a school instrument. Students also learn to swim at the YMCA connected to the building and golf at the club nearby.

"Poverty is not an excuse here," said principal Don Doran. "Our commitment is to make sure a Drew student, when they roll into high school, is the best they can be."

The East Lake experiment made neighbors out of families who may otherwise have avoided each other. Middle-class transplants were attracted to the charter school with national acclaim, and spacious East Lake Village homes nestled near a golf course. And poor families returned. Some could point to the spots where hookers once strolled, weed was sold and crack heads squatted between trips to utopia.

Jeffrey Johnson was among those who came to Drew on free lunch toting burdens from home. He was shy and self-conscious. He wondered whether anyone would show up for teacher conferences.

In the spirit of the cradle to college pipeline that welcomed him, Fay Martin, Johnson's next door neighbor, came forward to support his education at Drew and beyond. Johnson was given meals, new school uniforms, supplies and a place to sleep uninterrupted before returning home at midnight. Johnson would spread out on Martin's white living room carpet and study until he fell asleep in his books under the steady gaze of an army of black porcelain angels perched on a piano. He was driven to succeed.

"When Jeff went to Drew, he had some really, really good teachers," said Martin, who took care of Johnson when his mother moved to New York during his junior year. "He always said he had to get his education to get out of his situation. If you see a kid like that who is trying, you have to step up."

Johnson's mother, Nellie Johnson, still lives in New York with regrets about the impact of drugs on her family. But she is happy she followed Martin's advice and enrolled her son at Drew.

"I have always been an addict, but I always knew the importance of education," she said in a phone interview. "I tried to keep Jeffrey away from that, but I'm only human ... At the end it got out of hand. Even though he thought I was doing ugly things, he loved me. I checked homework, I nurtured him. It is because of me and many others, that my son is soaring."

Johnson found a mentor at Drew in Waller and quickly became student president of Waller Scholars.

He was valedictorian of the eighth-grade class of 2005 -- confident and charismatic, with a polite manner, a deep smile that opened doors. Paideia School, one of Atlanta's top private academies, snapped him up, offering financial aid and musical roles. An appearance as a Jet in West Side Story, was the closest Johnson ever got to gang membership.

But Johnson did become a statistic:

He is part of Drew's class of Gates Millennium Scholars. Randie Henderson, now an English major at Wooster College in Ohio, and Cerise Clarke, a psychology major at Ohio State, joined him in the honor of landing a free education. Among them they will receive about a half-million dollars to cover their undergraduate college years and more if they go to graduate school.

When the thick scholarship letter came giving Henderson the chance to attend college out of state she was ecstatic. "I screamed!" she said. "It was great. It will pay for my master's and doctorate. I want to be the next Toni Morrison."

Johnson is also the first CREW Teen in the Ivy League. He had his pick of Dartmouth, Brown and Penn. He chose the latter and won a \$20,000 national Horatio Alger scholarship as a tribute to his triumphs. Still, when Johnson walks the halls of the Wharton School -- Penn's celebrated business college -- he says it all seems like a dream.

"I actually don't believe I go to the school," says Johnson, even though his face is on the website . "All of this seems so surreal. I can say I'm at the happiest point in my life. Ten years ago, I didn't think I'd be where I am right now."