

The Enquirer-Gazette

Vol. 168, No. 10

Thursday, March 7, 2019

25 cents



STAFF PHOTO BY BOBBY JONES

Jeffrey Paylor, right, a volunteer at the Gateway Boarding Academy, assists Yared Zeleke, 13, with the old-school way of problem solving with pencil and paper prior to submitting the answer online in the Math 180 class.

Foundation advocates for underserved youth

Second Chance delivers academics to rescue under-served boys from 'pipeline-to-prison'

By **BOBBY JONES**
Staff Photojournalist

Clarence R. Carter and his wife, Donna Jean, actively champion the task of educating the under-served youth of Prince George's County through the

power of academics, life skills and mentoring under the leadership platform of the Gateway Second Chance Foundation, which is

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the fundraising arm of the Gateway Boarding Academy in Marlow Heights.

Serving as chairman of the GSC board of directors and president, respectively, the founding members are strong believers in the power of academics, which is evidenced by the couple's combined 60 years of academic achievements and professional history. Their skill sets include classroom teaching, reading disability specialist, K-12 school principal, superintendent of schools and responsibility for education of incarcerated boys who were struggling academically and behaviorally.

According to Clarence, their mission is to provide what they term as under served, or some have called at-risk adolescent males, with the academic and life skills they need to eventually become productive members of the community. "I realize that 'productive member,' is kind of a general statement, but they are encouraged to take advantage of subsequent academics and vocational career skills which would prepare them for an increasingly more sophisticated employment situation," he said.

Established in 2015, Clarence explained the curriculum taught at the facility includes Reading 180, Math 180, math application and mentoring programs as well as a residential summer program which focuses on life skills and problem solving.

"It used to be when my dad was growing up, he finished like the ninth grade, but he could support his family because he had a strong back and willingness to work," Clarence said. "It may sound cliché ... but without the academic, problem-solving life skills that they must have to take advantage of these opportunities they are at greater risk of getting caught up in that pipeline-to-prison, and that's very real."

According to Clarence, two populations of youngsters have been identified within the youth



Above left, Sheth Zeleke, 12, concentrates on problem solving online during a Math 180 course as Yvette Johnson, a volunteer, observes during a Math 180 class at the Gateway Boarding Academy in Suitland. Above right, Jeffrey Paylor, right, a volunteer Gateway Boarding Academy Math 180 and Reading 180 instructor, assists Yared Zeleke, 13, during class.

they serve. "One group are adolescents, aged 12 through 17 years old, [who] are struggling academically, but really they haven't shown their struggles through behavioral challenges as well," he said. "The other population not only have the academic deficiencies, but they've compounded their problems because the behavioral, acting out kind of thing. It doesn't matter the cause of the acting out, it's by and large a way to feel some sense of self-esteem, because if you keep failing from grades third, fourth, fifth in school, after a while, you get to feel 'I'm less than.'"

"So how do you compensate for that? For our boys in many instances they compensate for it by 'macho man' kind of behavior, by confronting authority. What happens is they get caught up in a vicious cycle. They get penalized by being suspended. ... They're already deficient in some of the fundamental aspects of academic skills, but this exacerbates their problem, because the suspension leads to more nonproductive behavior which leads to more suspensions and ultimately dropping out or being expelled from school. ... That's when that pipeline to prison rears its ugly head."

Carter said one way they attack the problem is the after-school program, which teaches academic and life skills.

"We get youngsters who are in middle school or high school now," he stated. "We test them to see what their reading and math functioning

levels are, so we get a fix on their deficiency. The program is geared toward their nature of deficiency."

During the introduction into the program, Carter said the youngsters are given a test provided by a major publisher named Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. It's evidence based instructional technology and educational materials. Additionally, they undergo computerized assessment of math and reading strengths and weaknesses and quantified evaluation of academic progress: Lexile (reading) and Quantile (math) scores. They receive student-centered instruction consistent with the personal and culturally influenced learning styles of enrollees.

"There is a cadre of professionals with demonstrated skill in reading, mathematics and English, and with experience in teaching the student population we serve," Carter said. "Our teachers are not only skilled in their subject areas, but in the application of instruction, as well as skilled in working with the type of boys that we serve, their mentality, the style of learning and who are culturally influenced."

Currently, the academy is licensed to serve 25 students.

"We are serving 12 boys, which provides more individualized instruction for them," Carter said. "We love these kids. They're the future of our communities," he said.

Volunteers along the way have been crucial to their success.

"Thank God for these

volunteers who serve on the board. Their backgrounds are impeccable," Carter said. "We have attorneys, doctors, law enforcement, finance, information technology and public affairs. These are people in our community that have a heart for what we're doing."

For Michael Frazier, one of only two paid employees at the GSC Academy, money is not a motivating factor for teaching. "This is another opportunity for me to give back to the community," Frazier said. "It's about a commitment to these young men, but specifically because it's a program for boys. To be a role model, to show them that they can truly aspire to be not just a teacher, but whatever they want to be."

Originally from New Orleans, he stated, "I grew up in a home where my grandmother was my soul provider most of my life until my grandfather came into the picture later. So being in a one-parent household for many years I understand the need to have some positive role models in place," Frazier added.

Alan Smith, a 12-year-old student, is glad to reap the benefits from taking Math 180 and Math Application courses at the GSC Academy.

"I like my teachers; friends and I love math because it's fun. I struggle a little bit in it, but it's still a good subject," he said. Smith, who aspires to be fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force one day, said it's been his dream job since he was 3 years old.

"You need to learn to



STAFF PHOTOS BY BOBBY JONES



Clarence R. Carter and his wife, Donna Jean Carter, founders of Gateway Second Chance Foundation and Gateway Boarding Academy, interact with the Math 180 Application class instructor and students to solve a math problem.

do math to be a fighter pilot. So, I'm trying to get my math down so I can accomplish that dream," said Smith, who has tentative plans to attend an Air Force JROTC program on Joint Base Andrews soon. "I still have some things that I need to learn in math while I'm here, but I believe that my teacher is doing a great with me, teaching me what I need to learn so I can accomplish my dream later in life."

"I'm from the Bedford-Stuyvesant section in Brooklyn and I've grown up with a lot of these boys like this, who did get caught up in that pipeline-to-prison. So that's why we have a heart for these boys," Carter said.

Carter said while the foundation's major goal is to build a brick and mortar academy where the boys with behavioral issues would benefit more from the wrap-around residential services, the interim plan is to lease an expanded facility to accommodate its growth by 2021.

"We are currently trying to establish a memorandum of understanding

with the Prince George's Public School Board of Education, who has been a referral source for us," Carter said. "But it's the parents ultimately who must buy into what we can provide for their children. We charge nothing. Only a \$25 registration fee and that's it. We raise the money through donations, organization sponsorship and fundraisers, which defrays the cost. However, the principal sustaining source of their revenue is our parents. This program helps these boys not only in terms of academics, but in terms of value, life skills and problem solving."

Carter said, "God has us here for a purpose. This is a good work. Being a hearer of the word is not enough, it's being a doer of the word is what it's about."

Evening classes are held Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 4 to 7 p.m. at 5210 Auth Road in Suitland. For more information about Gateway Second Chance, call 301-332-1969 or visit: www.gatewaysecondchance.com or www.gatewayboardingacademy.org.