

More than just a dance for Manley Career Academy students

I wish everyone could have been there. From Northbrook to Calumet City, from Lincoln Park to Naperville. I wish everyone who secretly worries when he or she is approached by a group of young African-Americans had been there. Everyone who has a whisper of doubt about the conduct of kids from gang-ridden neighborhoods. I wish they could have been at the Renaissance Oakbrook Hotel Friday. I wish they could have been at the prom.

Friday night, members of the graduating class of Manley Career Academy gathered in the penthouse ballroom to celebrate the most important night of their high school life with dinner and dancing.

The young men were mostly

in white brocade tuxedos with pocket handkerchiefs that matched the dresses of their dates, long shimmering satin numbers with low necklines and slits up the side and shoes to match.

They did the grind and a hip-hop variation on the bunny hop. They posed for those ubiquitous prom portraits, the ones where the couple stands in front of a draped background, arms intertwined, looking straight into the camera lens.

It was a classic prom as proms go and yet it was so much more.

Manley Career Academy is one of those mostly forgotten Chicago public high schools. It's located in North Lawndale, a few blocks south of the Eisenhower Expressway, just west of



Carol Marin

the Loop but for all practical purposes, a million miles from that hotel in Oak Brook.

Just to get to school, students travel through open-air, gang-controlled drug markets. Go south on Francisco Avenue to Lexington Avenue and you'll see what I mean. Every day the Vice Lords are there selling ready-rock and heroin. Their "drugstore" is just one block from the school.

The kids who attend Manley are black and poor, 94 percent coming from homes with annual incomes below the poverty line. But that's not the statistic I want you to remember. Read on. There's a much more important number coming up.

Manley has been among the worst-performing schools in Chicago for years. When students walk through the door as freshmen, almost all are ill-prepared for high school. Manley

offers the basics in order to graduate but there are none of the bells and whistles of suburban schools. There are no physics classes, no calculus, no band and no yearbook.

And yet, because of two very different women, there is hope.

Katherine Flanagan, the principal of Manley, is fifty-something and African-American. Back in the early 1960s she was a pioneer in breaking the color barrier as one of a handful of black students to integrate the all-white Thomas Kelly High School on Chicago's South Side. The irony is that today she presides over a school without a single white student.

Lila Leff is thirtysomething and Jewish, a native New Yorker from Queens.

Leff is as brash as Flanagan is reserved.

But six years ago they came together, a kind of ebony-and-ivory odd couple, to start a small revolution.

In 1997, when Leff knocked on Flanagan's door, Leff said she wanted to show the students of Manley a world outside of Lawndale.

Flanagan let her in.

A change-agent rather than a

teacher. Leff started a program called Umoja, the Swahili word for unity. With Flanagan's support, Leff began homework clubs, chess games at lunch, girls' and boys' writing clubs. Umoja partnered with the teachers at Manley and introduced students to business leaders and professional people.



Lila Leff

Kids, who in some cases had never even been downtown, were being taken by Leff on their first plane rides to college campuses around the country, places like Clark Atlanta, Alabama State and the University of Illinois.

At a time when education in America is under fire, when the federal No Child Left Behind legislation still threatens to leave too many kids behind, and while President Bush and Congress approve billions of dollars in tax cuts as states struggle to find money for education, this little program called Umoja should grab our attention.

Why?

Because Umoja works.

Fueled by Leff and a dedicated staff she has recruited, funded by a few foundations from which she relentlessly begs for money, it works.

The results after six years? In 1997, fewer than 10 percent of Manley seniors went off to college. Today? More than 60 percent do, according to Leff. Now that's a statistic. It's not that college won't be a struggle. It will. But look how fast and far they've come.

All of this helps explain why the prom was so important to the families of those 68 seniors from Manley.

Many of them are the first in their families to graduate from high school much less go on to college.

And so, as poor as so many of these families are, they pooled their cash to pay for the tuxes and the dresses and hotel in Oak Brook.

To them this prom was not just a dance. For the Manley Class of 2003, it was a victory.

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