

WE WIN Institute, Inc.
rites of Passage for Girls
“Brothers & Sisters of the Ankh”
Green Central Park School 2006

WE WIN Institute’s Rites of Passage for Boys and Girls; “Brothers and Sisters of the Ankh” at Green Central Park School has made many successes since its inception in January 2006.

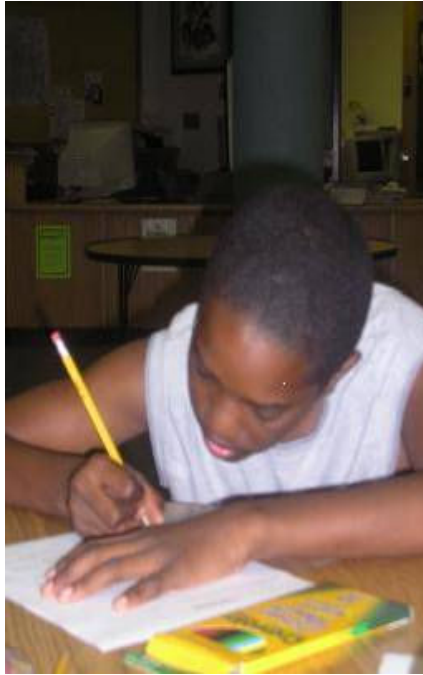
It is difficult for any program to start new in any school in the middle of a school year. Students are used to the teachers that they have been with since September. It is important for them to challenge the “new program on the block,” test the water, and discover whether the program is worthy.

The class was comprised of African American and Mexican American students. The grades ranged from sixth to eighth grade. Some students were very motivated to learn and others were in class because they were required.

The first three classes were spent to acquaint students with the mwalimu (teacher) and to help the mwalimu know the students. The Mexican American students agreed to teach the class the Spanish equivalents to every Swahili word that they learned.

The first assignment was to write about their dreams. Initially students were resistant. It required persistence to get them to articulate on paper their visions for themselves. Once they started, there was no stopping them. They wanted to be doctors, attorneys and veterinarians. They dreamed of owning their own beauty shops to being entrepreneurs; basketball players, football players and a hip hop star. They created magnificent pictures that captured the essence of their dreams.





Student turned dreams into goals. They looked at what goals they needed to reach in school in order to make their dreams a reality. They also hypothesized during the school year how many absences, tardies and suspensions they had received. I had several students who explained that they were late everyday. Our discussions centered on personal responsibility and what they missed when they were late school and how difficult it is to reach your goals if you are not in school to receive all the information you need to be successful.

The natural transition was, giving their best to everything they do. They answered the questions, why should they give their best at school, and why teachers push them to give their best. They drew a picture of themselves in their dream job.

Roland Smith, a resident of the Central community, an ex-gang member and a mentor for boys, spoke with the class. Mr. Smith explained how he grew up in Gary, Indiana and how he was a member of the Bloods. He told of the many horrors of being a gang member and explained that after he saw so many of his friends either dead or in prison, he knew that he wanted a new direction for his life. He asked students many questions about what was going on in their neighborhoods and lives.

It was interesting to learn how many of the students felt the need to glorify violence. Every student in class talked excitedly about some violent act they had seen or experienced. Mr. Smith listened intently. One student who usually does not speak in class explained that he wanted a different life for himself. He shared with the class that he was a member of a gang

and that he had witnessed his seven year old cousin get shot in the head and die from a drive-by. He felt that if he didn't make some changes in his life that he would not make it to the age of 18.

Libby Osborne, a spoken word artist shared her poetry with the Rites of Passage class. She explained the historical development of spoken word and how she got involved. She read several pieces of her work and explained that she began spoken word to give herself real voice and expression. She did a series of exercises that allowed them to develop their own poetry.



Winfred Payne, an African American man who spent 25 years in prison and is the executive director of an after-school program called, Alternatives, shared his story. He explained the mistakes he made in life and why it is so important to become educated so that they could have true alternatives in their lives. Mr. Payne showed that incarceration did not break him and that he discovered his mission in life was to assist young people to be successful so they would not make the same kinds of choices that he made in the past.

As a class, we read the article entitled, "Lost in translation." It explained how an African American man traveled from northern part to the southern part of Africa on his bicycle. When he arrived in the country of Chad, there was a store called, "Nigger." The bike rider went through his own soul searching about the language used in hip hop and the how he did not want the word "nigger," to be the legacy that African Americans gave to their

brothers and sisters on the African continent. He vowed not only to never use the word again, but not to buy music that used the language.



Students from Andersen Open came to Green Central's Rites of Passage program, to listen to Louis Mendoza, the director of the Latino Studies program at the University of Minnesota. He explained the importance of education. He shared his development as a student. He shared how he started out as a poor student because he didn't understand the importance of education. Through the assistance of caring adults in his life, he learned that education would open up doors for him. He showed how successful a person can be if they give their best.

Rites of Passage went on a field trip to the University of Minnesota with other middle school students throughout Minneapolis. They toured the campus, learned what courses they should be focusing on in order to qualify for college. They did creative movement with the Theater Department and ate lunch with college students.

Students learned about Nigeria and the Yoruba culture. They learned about Nigeria and the cultural significance of many African symbols. They learned about folktales which assisted students in understanding the historical development of this African oral expression. The lesson taught the development of folktales from Africa through slavery, from the civil rights movement to hip hop culture. They wrote their own stories based on one of the symbols they learned about.

The significance of these academic exercises has assisted students in the Rites of Passage program to begin to examine their goals and their dreams and their purpose for coming to school. They looked at the question of

immigration and taught Ms. Bediako that the term “wet back” referred to Mexicans who cross the borders illegally. Some students in the class learned that when you write a paper, that the first writing they develop is a rough draft and they have to write a final draft. Some students initially resisted rewriting a paper they had already written. When one student was told to write her paper a third time, she burst into an angry fit. After she completed her last draft, she was proud of her persistence and her final product.

African American and Mexican American youth need an opportunity to be challenged academically, to have loving, caring adults share their stories, and work with them consistently, to be successful in school and in life. . WE WIN knows that **the more young people learn about themselves, the more it contributes to them feeling better about themselves and their ability to be successful in school and in life.**

