Oakland Community School Graduation

"I WANT TO
HELP MY PEOPLE
BE FREE"

(Oakland, Calif.) - "We can do anything because anything is possible... We can save the world... We can bring harmony... We can make life begin again, you and me..."

These words from the song "We Can Do Anything," sung by the eight truly "Black and beautiful" 1976 graduates of the Oakland Community School (OCS) at the June 10 graduating ceremonies, appropriately captured the uplifting spirit of pride and joy that filled the OCS last Thursday evening.

An overflow crowd gathered in the auditorium of the Oakland Community Learning Center to witness the memorable program (the third graduation for the School), which alternately had the audience laughing in stitches and openly and shamelessly shedding tears of happiness and togetherness. The center of attention was quite naturally the graduates - Valerie Wilson, Eugene Burks, Theresa Williams, Jeanine Williams, Barbara Baker, Stefan Gibson, Alfonso Little and Cleveland Williams. Clearly aware that this was their last activity as OCS students, the young graduates took the opportunity to give their heart-felt expression on what the OCS had meant to them. In the process, they created a night that will live in their memories and those of the audience for years to come.

Strikingly dressed in white, the graduates proceeded into the auditorium beaming with smiles of expectation. After they had taken their seats on stage, they began the program with a recitation entitled "Our School"...
"I WANT TO HELP MY PEOPLE"

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which they described those qualities and characteristics that make the OCS the special place that it is for them and for all those fortunate to be a part of it.

In "I Remember," each of the graduates spoke of the experiences and activities that meant the most to them while they were OCS students. Throughout this segment of the program, while one graduate related the "Remembered" experience, the other graduates pantomimed the stories.

YOUTH COMMITTEE

Barbara talked about the Youth Committee, an organization composed of two representatives from Groups 3 through 8 at the School which helps to set student policies; the Youth Store where the children sell various items in order to make money for the School; the newspaper and the Movie Committee, of which Barbara was chairperson.

While Stefan recalled the trip to the Port of Oakland, the graduates pantomimed the day the AC transit bus came to the School to pick them up. Cleveland described the OCS radio station while the other graduates enacted all the different jobs it took to make the station work. Already a budding poet, Valerie talked about the themes of her poetry, explaining that they are "about my life" and "survival."

Theresa gave a touching account of her pet hamsters (and everyone had a good laugh watching Eugene portray one of the hamsters being fed, bathed and, eventually buried.) Eugene shared his love for track and field. A visit to the San Quentin 6 trial in Marin County was an experience that stood out in Alfonso's mind and the children enacted how they were body searched. Jeanine reminisced about a visit she and Valerie made to San Quentin Prison to visit Johnny Spain, a member of the Black Panther Party and one of the defendants in the Six trial.

Graduation ceremonies usually bring to the graduate's mind, "What will I do with my life?" and the OCS graduates were honest and sincere as they attempted to answer this always burning and difficult question. Barbara said that she wants to be a lawyer; Stefan, a "revolutionary" doctor; Cleveland, a veterinarian; Valerie, a writer; Theresa, an actress; Eugene, a football player; Alfonso, a business man and Jeanine, "Whatever I can do to make my people free."

Indeed, each of the eight youth expressed his or her desire to use their skills and talents to serve their community.

The entire student body of the OCS—whose

O.C.S. Director Ericka Huggins Highlights Chicago Alternative Schools Conference

Certainly one of the highlights of the recent Alternative Schools Conference held in Chicago on May 22 and 23 were the presentations made by Ms. Ericka Huggins, director of the widely acclaimed Oakland Community School. First, at a Saturday workshop on the subject of "Model Schools and the Model Schools Concept," and then in a Sunday address to the entire Conference body, Ericka explained how the essential dynamics of human concern and understanding — combined with creative teaching methods — help make the Oakland Community School the innovative place for learning that it is.

Following, THE BLACK PANTHER reprints Part 1 of Ericka's thought-provoking address to the Conference.

PART 1

"Good afternoon. I still haven't recovered from the flight from Oakland, or the streets of Chicago. This city needs people to organize, people to get things done, not only in education, but in housing, in the courts, everywhere. I wanted to say that before I went on to talk about education. I realize there is a lot of apathy in the country and I certainly don't think Chicago is any different from Oakland, California, or any other city. People need to do some things. I feel that it's important that people not just sit and talk — and have conferences, and seminars, and workshops. The most important thing is that they do whatever they want to do in their lives."

"I talked yesterday about the Oakland Community School, about alternative education, and community schools. I'd like to begin today to give you a history of the Oakland Community School, why we started it, whom it serves, and in what direction we feel we're heading.

"First, we don't call ourselves an 'alternative school.' We know that we are, but the word 'alternative' has taken on such a negative meaning with black and poor people that in analyzing the situation, the people who were serving and what we were trying to do, we decided to call ourselves a 'model school.'

"We call Oakland Community School a 'model school' — and it is. We serve 155 children. We're located in East Oakland. We serve children who have been labeled 'educationally disadvantaged,' 'economically deprived,' 'uneducable.' We're working with children who would be in public schools; who have not been in private schools or other alternatives; whose parents have no political affiliation and just want their children to have the best. I know we all want the best for our children. Children deserve the best because they are the future.

"So, in 1971, as a result of harassment that certain children were getting in Oakland — by certain children I mean sons and daughters of members of the Black Panther Party — a group of parents and instructors got together and decided to form what was then called the Intercommunal Youth Institute. This was the summer of 1971. We began in a storefront with 15 children. What we did was to give our students supplementary Language Arts and Mathematics after school.

As time went on people became interested
BE FREE

125 children range in age from two and one-half to 11—next went on stage and enthusiastically sang "Love Is the Answer and Come Along to the New Creation." The children gave their typically fantastic performance and received a standing ovation from the appreciative full house audience of family and friends. The graduates then sang the inspiring "We Can Do Anything," written by talented songwriter and community activist Ms. Elaine Brown, who is also executive director of the Educational Opportunities Corporation (EOC)—the nonprofit, tax-exempt, community-based organization that administers the Oakland Community School.

As the children sang, the tears began to flow down their cheeks and those of many in the audience. These were tears shed by youth who had finished one stage of their development.

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