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Oakland Community School Graduation

"I WANT TO HELP MY PEOPLE BE FREE"



BPINS photo

The proud and beautiful 1976 Oakland Community School graduates: (left to right) **THERESA WILLIAMS, VALERIE WILSON, BARBARA BAKER, JEANINE WILLIAMS, CLEVELAND WILLIAMS, STEFAN GIBSON, EUGENE BURKS, and ALPHONSO LITTLE.**

(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" in

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"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 businessman 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



The Oakland Community School graduates begin their processional march upon entering the OCS auditorium (left) and the youngsters from Groups 1 and 2 (right) sing along with the rest of the progressive school's student body.

The proud 1976 graduates of the Oakland student body sing together for

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 I of Ericka's thought-provoking address to the Conference.

PART I

"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 who we were, whom we 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 125 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 to 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



BIPINS photos

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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



Community School (left), and (right) the entire OCS first time in the 1975-76 school year.

in what they saw us doing and they wanted to include their children in this kind of supplementary education. We gained more children, more community support, and more instructors volunteered to work with us.

"In 1973, we decided to form a nonprofit, tax-exempt, community-based corporation, which we called Educational Opportunities Corporation (EOC). When I say we, I mean the people who were working with the school. I'm not talking about the Black Panther Party alone. In September of that year, we moved into a building which was formerly a Missionary Baptist Church in East Oakland, which is the 'target' Black community in Oakland. Black and Chicano people predominate there.



The presentation of Oakland Community School Director Ms. ERICKA HUGGINS (inset) at the recent Chicago Alternative Schools Conference was one of the event's high lights.



(Left photo) The eight 1976 OCS graduates on stage before the audience. (Right photo) Ms. JEANETTE KEYES (right) receiving the Huey P. Newton "Outstanding Parent" Award from EOC Executive Director, Ms. ELAINE BROWN.

and were about to begin a yet unknown experience; tears shed by a group of children who have the unique distinction of loving their school (how many Black and poor children in America actually love the schools they attend?) and were sad that they had to leave its warm and loving atmosphere; tears of togetherness and love.

OCS students Albert Armour III and Alisha Keyes then presented the graduates with lovely silver rings inscribed with the logos of the School that includes the motto, "The World Is the Child's Classroom."

Elaine Brown followed, making a special presentation. Thanking the community for the strong support it has given the OCS since its founding in 1971 by Black Panther Party leader and founder Huey P. Newton. Elaine announced that beginning with this graduation, each year a Huey P. Newton Award would be given to the most outstanding parent of the School. A surprised and happy Mrs. Jeanette

"We moved in with 50 children and within the span of a month we had 90 children. We have an enrollment now of 125 with a waiting list of 200.

"The children are primarily Black, but we also have Chicano students, Asian students, Native American students and White students. We provide three meals a day, free medical care, parent-student counseling, a full curriculum and a lot of love and individual attention — and the last two things, love and individual attention, are almost the most important.

"Our curriculum includes Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Science, Music, Drama, Dance, Art, Spanish, Physical Education (which includes yoga and martial arts, as well as all of the other sports) and Environmental Studies.

"All of the subject matter that we involve the children with is given to them in a unique way. First of all, our classes are very small; there are no more than 10 children to any one instructor. Though there may be 20 children in one group, there are two instructors for that group as well as volunteers, aides both from universities and community colleges, parents, relatives and people who have just come to us through the publicity about the School.

"We are very much concerned that children learn how to think and not what to think. I really don't feel that people understand what I mean when I say that, so I have a little example.

"In giving a Mathematics lesson our instructors may say to a child, $2 + 2 = 4$, rather than $2 + 2 = ?$ or $2 + ? = 4$. We tell the children $2 + 2 = 4$, instead of the mystery of $2 + ? = 4$. Then we say, 'How do you come about getting four?' This causes a child to

Keyes was honored as the 1976 Huey P. Newton Award winner. Jeanette received a necklace with the School logos and a plaque.

Next, Ms. Ericka Huggins, director of the OCS, presented the proud youth with their certificates of graduation after which they recessed from the auditorium.

After the program was over, everyone enjoyed delicious refreshments in the cafeteria of the Learning Center where they crowded around the graduates to congratulate them and to get their autographs. Later, the graduates and other children of the School enjoyed a fun-filled party.

As one brother commented after the graduation program, "Man, I wish I could have had a graduation like that when I finished elementary school." Glad that the children of the Oakland Community School could, indeed, fulfill such a dream, his thoughts were obviously shared by all who attended—confident that their future was in fine hands. □

think, instead of looking over at another person's piece of paper, asking the person next to them or getting the answer by just complaining that they just don't know how to do it.

"We want the children to learn how to think because we were never given that chance. We were always told what to think, how seriously we should think about it, how long we should think about it, and where it was in terms of priorities in our thinking. All of that. We were duped, all of us — except perhaps the young children who are sitting in the front row because I'm sure their parents won't allow that to happen to them. We were all fooled. We still are fooled, so we want our children to learn how to think.

"We're very, very particular at the Oakland Community School about knowing each child and finding out the problems in the home (if there are some and there usually are because our children are from poor families). Our typical parent is a single working mother. Our next typical parent would be a welfare recipient.

"It's impossible for a child to think about Language Arts if he or she has no food at home. It's impossible for a child to think about Mathematics if she doesn't know whether she'll be able to get to school in the morning, because she doesn't have a pair of shoes. If a child is seeing constant argument or struggle at home, it's impossible to think about what makes flowers grow and why there are stars and the sun and the moon.

"So we try to wipe all the obstacles out of the way and then we involve the children in learning. **TO BE CONTINUED**