



Teach Your Children Well

In the early 1970s, Oakdale Covenant Church faced a crisis. The South Side Chicago church had been through a spiritual turnaround, transitioning from a shrinking, mostly white congregation to a thriving African American church. But the church's

children were in danger of being left behind. Chicago schools were failing them: the annual dropout rate in African American neighborhoods was as high as 25 percent and was continuing to rise. (By the early 1980s, fewer than half of Chicago's African American students were completing high school.)

The city's schools struggled to teach even the most basic skills: only a quarter of students in the entire school system could read at the national average, and most fell at least two grades behind. At one school in an African American neighborhood, the eleventh-grade students were reading at a fifth-grade level.

If Oakdale's students failed at school,

the congregation's leaders feared they would fail at life.

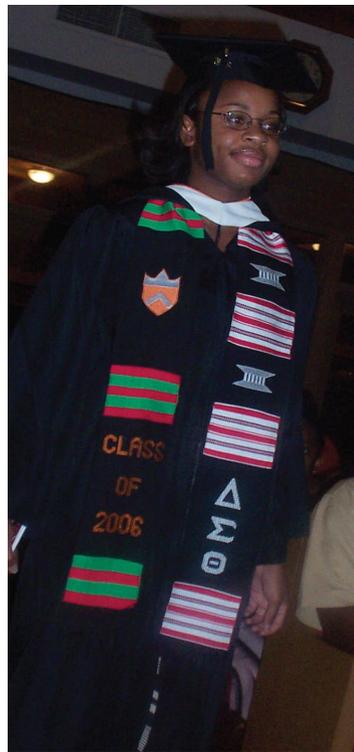
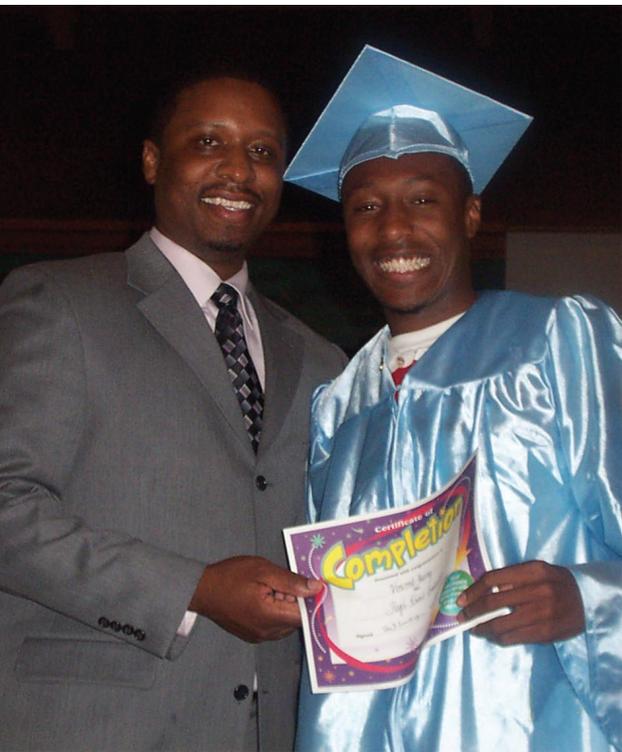
"We knew it would take education to carry us over," says Willie Jemison, pastor emeritus of Oakdale, who arrived at the church in the 1970s. But at that time, finishing high school was a challenge, and "nobody was going to college," Jemison says.

So, inspired by their pastor, a group of lay people decided to take charge of the children's future. They formed a scholarship committee aimed at promoting education. But despite the volunteers' best efforts, the group struggled. Then Jemison asked Delories

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At Oakdale Covenant Church, no child is left behind.

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Every year, Oakdale Covenant Church holds a baccalaureate service, celebrating its graduates, from preschool to PhDs.

Williams, a committee member, to take over as president. Until that time, Williams and her friends Dorothy Shipp and Sethras Jones had served mostly in the background. But when Williams was put in charge, things took off.

“When we first got on the scholarship committee,” Jones says, “they never asked us to do anything but to clean up the kitchen and wash the dishes when we had something for the scholarship committee. But we persevered, and once Delories became president, we started presenting more programs. We started off with the tutoring and it sort of branched off from there.”

Williams turned out to be an inspired choice as leader for the scholarship committee, now known as the Academic Excellence Ministry. A former soldier in the U.S. Army, she had the discipline and commitment to get the job done. And as a single mother who earned a college degree while raising four children and working full-time, she believed wholeheartedly in the transforming power of education.

“As long as we could remember, Mom was taking a class,” says Catherine Gilliard, Williams’s daughter

and pastor of Commission Disciples Covenant Church in Stone Mountain, Georgia. “She also made sure all four of her kids went to college—she really believed that education was the key to unlocking the future.”

Over three decades, Williams and her friends marshaled an army of volunteers to tutor children, to run college-exam prep courses, and to walk parents and students through the college-application and financial-aid processes. With prayer, hard work, and an occasional bit of arm-twisting, they got almost every child from the church into college.

By the time Williams died from ovarian cancer at seventy-four this past summer, the ministry had helped hundreds of young people get into college. At her memorial service, or “home-going,” many of them stood up and testified about how Williams had transformed their lives.

“People came up and told us that she was the reason they became a lawyer or a doctor or an accountant,” Gilliard says. “Everyone you met—they wanted to tell you a story about what my mother had done for them.”

“It speaks to the power of one person who decided to stay passionate at the gift she had been given and helped one person at a time,” Gilliard says. “At the end of her life—there’s a whole room full of people who give testimony to what she did.”

Today, many of the students Williams worked with are professionals: doctors and lawyers, accountants and business people. And their children have grown up and gone off to college on their own.

“In some churches, you can count on one hand how many students went to college,” says Pastor D. Darrell Griffin, who succeeded Pastor Jemison in 2001. “I can count on this hand how many didn’t go—it’s with rare exception that a student will not go on to college. It’s just not tolerated around here.”

Standing on many shoulders

The foundation of the Academic Excellence Ministry is a belief that every child can go to college and succeed, if given the proper support.

“We discovered a long time ago that it took three things to be successful—

a trained head, a dedicated heart, and hard work,” says Jemison. “We instill that in our young folks.”

Those lessons are reinforced at every level—from the pulpit, in Sunday school, at youth group, at the church-run Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops, in tutoring sessions, and in yearly seminars run for high-school seniors. The ministry created an environment of high expectation and loving care that allowed students to thrive.

The ministry drew wide support from the congregation. Most volunteers were ordinary lay people. Several were Williams’s co-workers at the post office. A number had gone to college later in life or had missed out on the chance to continue their education and wanted a better life for their children.

Everyone pitched in. For example, Jones says, in the early days it was common for tutoring needs to be announced from the pulpit. When Williams or another volunteer found out that a student was struggling in a subject, she’d let the pastor know.

“If a student had a problem with a subject, like trigonometry, she would let the pastor know, and he would announce: ‘Is there anyone here who is good in trigonometry? We have a young person who needs help.’ Or sometimes she would make calls herself to get a tutor for them,” Jones says.

At times, students were enlisted as tutors as well. Daniel King—who recently graduated from Clark Atlanta University with a master’s degree in accounting—was one of them. He says that Academic Excellence Ministry taught him how to be a leader at an early age. “I’ve loved math since I was a little kid,” he says. “So I had the opportunity to teach younger kids.”

The committee also gave students

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incentives to succeed. Each year the church held a baccalaureate service, honoring graduates of every age—from elementary school to graduate students. And every honor roll student went out to a steak dinner once a year—with their pastor paying the bill.

“I made sure I was on that honor roll every year because I love that steak dinner,” says King, who works for the accounting firm Ernst and Young. “It was wonderful from preschool to this year—4.0 in my masters—at the honor-roll dinner eating a porterhouse.”

At this year’s honor-roll dinner, Joy Dillard, an eighteen-year veteran of Academic Excellence Ministry, teased King about being a permanent fixture at

the celebration. Recalling that dinner, she smiles. “I asked Daniel, ‘When are you going to stop going to school? You just keep going to school because you like that steak dinner on pastor.’”

Almost everything that the Academic Excellence Ministry did was aimed at developing what economists like Robert Fogel of the University of Chicago call “human capital” or “spiritual assets.” Those assets can include

skills like knowing how to navigate the college-application process and fill out financial-aid forms or how to excel at tests like the ACT and SAT, along with personality traits, like the ability to persevere in the face of adversity.

To help their students succeed, volunteers like Williams and Jones became experts in the college application process. They taught a year-long seminar for seniors, guiding them every step along the way. This often meant sitting down with a parent and student to fill out financial-aid forms and applications, and going over student essays with a fine-tooth comb—making the student write and rewrite their essays until they were flawless. Current col-



Delories Williams (second from the left) with Oakdale students on one of the dozens of college tours she organized.



Among the longtime Academic Excellence Ministry volunteers are (from left) Sethras Jones, Valerie Gaines, James Sutton, Mary King, Joy Dillard, and Rosa Lavendar.

lege students would come in and speak to the students, telling them what to expect during their first year at school.

Jovanne Hughes, who graduated from Dillard University in New Orleans in 2007, was a 4.0 student in high school, but she felt intimidated while applying to colleges. Once she applied, Williams took over, calling schools repeatedly to make sure Hughes was accepted and then pressing colleges to give her the best financial aid possible.

“I must have applied to at least twelve to thirteen schools, and got accepted to all of them,” Hughes says. “She called all of them and asked, ‘Well, what are you going to give her in financial aid—she has a 4.0 GPA—what are you going to give her?’ If the answer wasn’t satisfactory, Williams pushed back. In the end, Hughes received a number of scholarship offers.

Along with developing practical skills, Academic Excellence Ministry taught their students to believe that they belonged in college. This was especially true for students with so-so grades and untapped potential—kids who hadn’t figured out how to thrive in school and didn’t think they were college material.

“The smart kids with good grades had opportunities,” Catherine Gilliard says. “Mom’s focus was on the kids whose grades were 1.9 or 2.0—and who

“The real strength of our ministry is this: if you can get us one parent or guardian involved, we can save that child.”

thought that this was all they would ever be capable of. She worked with them on their low self-esteem, and she made sure they got life skills along with academic skills.”

“She was one of those people who give you hope,” Gilliard adds.

For more than thirty years, Williams and other volunteers organized visits to historically black colleges during spring break. Each year, they would take as many as forty students on college tours, which featured four or five separate schools. Every trip was different. Sometimes they would visit schools in Maryland; other times they would travel to colleges in North Carolina and Georgia. The trips allowed students to imagine what was possible for them. All of a sudden they were at schools where being an African American college student was the norm, not the exception.

“The black college tour wasn’t meant to push black colleges,” Jones says. “It was for exposure—so that they could see the possibilities.”

The tours also prepared students for the rigors of college life. Each student had to put together a portfolio of their

work, along with letters of recommendation and a record of their grades. During each campus visit, students were assigned questions to ask—and afterward, the group would discuss their experience.

The portfolios were so professional that at least one college tried to lure Williams away from Oakdale. After a visit to Delaware State University, one of the school’s deans was so impressed that he tried to hire her without even asking about her résumé.

“Sister Williams had done such a wonderful job that the dean of the college offered her a job on the spot,” recalls Pastor Jemison. The dean was so set on hiring Williams that he told her she could “name her price.”

“No,” she told the dean. “I am going back to help my children.”

The college tour was also a chance to demonstrate tough love. Before each tour, Williams warned students that if they stepped out of line, they would be sent home. And each group was accompanied by a number of adult volunteers, so that no students would be unsupervised on campus.

During one of the early tours, several young men decided to test their leaders. After settling down for the night, a group of about seven boys snuck out of their rooms after curfew. The boys put pillows under the covers to make it appear they were still in bed.



Delories Williams (center), receiving an award from Pastor Willie Jemison (right) at Oakdale. Although she received many such awards, she was rarely photographed, preferring to work behind the scenes.



Students from Oakdale enjoy a break while on a college tour.

During the nightly bed check, the boys were discovered missing—and several volunteers went out and rounded them up. The next morning, the tour bus stopped at a bus station and Williams and the boys got out. She handed each boy a bus ticket and sent them back home.

Years later, Pastor Jemison ran into several of the boys—now grown men—at a church conference and felt obligated to apologize for sending them home. To his surprise, one of the men thanked the pastor. “We are who we are today because of your strong discipline and love,” he said.

The Academic Excellence Ministry volunteers also used the college tour to nurture long-term relationships with college admissions officers and financial-aid staff at dozens of colleges. Sometimes their recommendation alone could get a student into college—even if that child had a poor academic record. If Williams or one of the volunteers believed someone had potential, they would not rest until they found a college for that student.

“If a child has fallen through the cracks in terms of getting into school, the Academic Excellence Ministry will use its network to get that child into school,” Pastor Griffin says. “It’s with rare, rare exception that a child who wants to go to school, regardless of their GPA, will not get in somewhere. And it has been the rare exception that they didn’t get funded. The real strength of our ministry is this: if you can get us one parent or guardian involved, we can save that child.”

Along with their strong sense of discipline, volunteers go out of their way to make sure their students know they are loved and cared for. Many of the volunteers have spent decades working with Oakdale’s young people and their eyes shine with pride when they talk about the students. It’s as if each child in the church has several extra sets of grandparents watching over them.

Takiyah King, who attends Vorhees College in Denmark, South Carolina, said she realized how much Williams



Yolanda Toppins, a working mother of three, received her diploma from Chicago State University this past spring. She was inspired by Delorries Williams to go back to school despite the challenges of working and raising a family at the same time.

and the other volunteers cared for her because of the time they spent making sure she found the right college. After the applications were finished, Williams called the college repeatedly to make sure she got in.

“She taught me dedication,” King says. “She kept on calling the school and then calling me with an update and then calling the school—that was dedication. If she didn’t care she wouldn’t have called and I would not have gotten into the school or gotten a scholarship.”

Every spring, just before spring break, the congregation sends out packages to each student filled with treats baked by church members. “We put together a box with homemade cakes—no store bought cakes, we want homemade ones—along with other items to stretch out a good two or three weeks,” says Rosa Lavendar, a twenty-year committee veteran. “I have heard a lot of the students say that when they got their box, almost the whole dorm was in the room to get some cake.”

Over the past year, the Academic Excellence Ministry has been through a time of transition. Some of the recent college grads have begun to take a more active role, while some of the older committee members have had to cut back their involvement.

In November 2006, Jones returned home from a trip to Europe and stopped in to see Williams, her longtime friend.

They had known each other so long that they were as close as sisters. Williams mentioned that she had felt sick for weeks, which surprised Jones. “She had never been sick,” Jones says.

Jones called her friend’s doctor and arranged to take her that night. Not long afterward, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Williams had several chemo treatments but the illness was too far progressed, and she had to be hospitalized several times.

“Even when she couldn’t do a lot of moving around, even all the way up to the end, her mind was sharp—it never failed her,” Jones says. Even from her hospital bed, Williams kept busy, making calls to colleges and checking up on her students, making the most of every moment. When she was too ill to speak, Williams passed notes to Jones with the names of students to follow up on.

Not long before she died, Williams experienced another one of the miracles the Academic Excellence Ministry had become famous for, as Joy Dillard recalls.

“I do know firsthand that she could work miracles,” Dillard says. “My son in his junior year started bringing one of his friends from high school to Oakdale. And his friend eventually joined. I loved him to death but I knew that no college was going to accept him.”

But Williams knew better. She helped the young man with his college applications, and pushed him to rewrite his application essay over and over until it was nearly perfect. He eventually enrolled in Alabama A&M University and is on schedule to graduate on time.

“He called this summer and asked for some information because he was thinking about applying to law school,” Dillard says. “This was a boy who we thought was not going to be able to get into any college. She got him into that college. He stayed—money was always an issue, but he made it through—and now he’s talking about going to law school. That was Mrs. Williams in action. It’s one more life that has been saved.” □