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[Midwest
Vincentian
Newsletter
Contents](#)

[Midwest
Vincentian
Archive Index](#)

[Midwest Province
Home Page](#)

FEATURE

At Vincent Gray High School: Dreams Become Reality

by Maria Rodgers O'Rourke

What happens to a dream deferred? wrote Langston Hughes. Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun, or does it explode? At Vincent Gray Alternative High School in East St. Louis, Illinois, teachers work to reclaim the lost dreams of young people and prepare them for a future filled with possibilities.

Confreere Daniel Kearns, C.M., is executive director of Vincent Gray, and is devoted to young people who have "fallen through the cracks" of public education. "The youth of

East St. Louis are some of the most abandoned people in our area...arguably in our country," said Fr. Dan. Most students of Vincent Gray have not been successful in the traditional high school situation. Vincent Gray's alternative approach includes a low student to teacher ratio and dedicated instructors who take a personal interest in each student. One student remarked, "Here I found somebody else who cares for me, next to my mother. They make you want to do something with yourself."

Shanta Norwood has that desire. A graduate of Vincent Gray, she was recently honored by the East St. Louis Women's Club. She completed her studies at Vincent Gray in November 1999, while caring for her son as a single mother. Later that month, she began studying business at Venice-Lincoln Tech, a vocational school just north of East St. Louis. She will officially graduate from Vincent Gray in January, 2000, just as her son DeMarco turns three.

Shanta's advocate for the award was counselor Mrs. Bernadine Branch-Smith, who came to know Shanta through Teen Parenting Services of the Department of Human Services. Celebrating "The Year of the Woman" in 1999, the East St. Louis Women's Club honored Shanta



Dan Kearns, C.M., with '97 Vincent Gray graduates Sharon Jones (l) and Elton Thomas.

with a special award. "This is the first time in our 26-year history that the award has been given to a young woman 'on the way' to success in the future," explained Bernadine. The club's motto is "Lifting as We Climb," and Shanta's "drive, initiative, and perseverance are fine examples of how a young person can make a difference for her future," said Bernadine. When Shanta finishes her business studies at Venice-Lincoln, she plans to open her own day-care center.

Other graduates of Vincent Gray move on to similar post-secondary studies, to military training, or to the job market. However their futures unfold, the aim at Vincent Gray is to help them see the "next step." For students, a high school diploma is a great accomplishment. Teachers at Vincent Gray encourage students to plan for what comes next after graduation. Joshua Jackson realized his plans for the future before his 1999 graduation, and helped Vincent Gray in the process.

Vincent Gray is a not-for-profit organization, dependent on donations and grants to provide a tuition-free education to students. When Fr. Dan made a grant request in 1998 to the Incarnate Word Foundation, the sisters suggested a testimonial letter from a Vincent Gray student. Joshua wrote a letter of recommendation, stating: "When I started attending this school, I was accepted by the teachers and motivated to pursue my education. [After my graduation] I plan to further my education by studying architecture in college. I have been pleased with the teachers' concern for my education. After I graduate I will never forget how Vincent Gray has turned my life around." Joshua's compelling witness to the work of Vincent Gray helped secure the grant.

Founded in 1980 by two Marianist Brothers and a School Sister of Notre Dame, Vincent Gray High School was named in honor of a Marianist brother who taught in the St. Louis area until his death at the age of 37. Fr. Dan has been on the staff for 9 years, and is in his fifth year of service as principal and executive director. In addition to the six teachers on staff, confrere David Goodman, C.M., serves in building maintenance for the school. For them, the Vincentian dimension of the school's



Joshua Jackson, '99 Vincent Gray graduate (l), with Sr. Cathy Vetter, C.C.V.I., and Dan Kearns, C.M., at the Incarnate Word Foundation Grant Award Ceremony.

mission is clear: to help those abandoned by the system, fighting the constraints of poverty, environment and attitude, to make their way to a hopeful tomorrow. "East St. Louis gets a bad rap," said Fr. Dan. "These kids are intelligent, funny, forgiving, and hopeful. There are a lot of

wounds that need healing, but give them the chance, and they'll come through."

While student's success can be credited to the smaller class size and dedicated teachers, ultimately it is up to the student to take advantage of what may well be their "last chance." This year, Vincent Gray will graduate 17 students who have done just that. By perseverance and commitment, with street-wise eyes shining with newfound hope, these graduates emerge better able to meet the demands of adult life. And, Fr. Dan hopes, with a dream "exploding" in their hearts.