



Students put their success, and city's, in their own hands

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The children of Detroit have paid the price for years of grown-ups corrupting their school system, damaging their city and leading people nationwide to view them with disdain or fear.

Since the adults can't get it right, the ninth-grade class at University Preparatory Academy plans to fix the city itself.

That was the students' pledge Monday -- and they have invited every other high school freshman in the city to join in.

The 128 UPA ninth-graders pledged to graduate, to go to college and then to return to Detroit to help rebuild the city. Calling themselves Detroit's Greatest Hope, their message was simple: We are the future.

UPA Superintendent Doug Ross asked me to speak to the students, to inspire them as they pledged their lives to Detroit. Instead, they inspired me.

"We are regular Detroit schoolkids. We took no special tests to get into University Prep," Carrie Williams, 15, said to students, teachers and Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. "We are very concerned about Detroit's future because it's part of our future, too. ... it's clear to us that Detroit's Greatest Hope -- maybe its only hope -- is the education of this next generation of young people. A city where half the kids drop out and fewer than 10% earn college degrees has no future."

Asia Bonney, also 15, cited a Gandhi quote on a classroom door as inspiration: "We must become the change we want to see in the world."

And with that, these children joined the legions of young people throughout history who have changed the world. Harriet Tubman was 16 when she ran the Underground Railroad. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was just 25 when he helped lead the Montgomery bus boycott. And Mohandas Gandhi himself was 25 when he founded the Natal Indian Congress to help Indians in South Africa fight for their rights.

"Every single one of us pledges to graduate from high school. The UPA class of 2010 will

have no dropouts," said MaLia Gaddy, 15. "Every single one of us will go on to college or other postsecondary studies so that we have the skills needed to build our city to greatness."

The pledge is no small feat for these students. Most of them have witnessed or experienced violence. MaLia's mother, Rachel Gaddy, a homemaker and mother of six, said her family is trying to move out of their Highland Park neighborhood, where "crackheads walk up and down the street all the time."

"From my house, you can see the prostitutes on the corner," she said.

Fourteen-year-old Isa Person was a 6-year-old first-grader when his best friend was shot to death as they walked home from school.

Isa, who plans to open a sportswear company and a performing arts school, said he wants to be the first male in his family to graduate from high school. One of eight children, his mission is to do his family, his neighborhood and his city proud.

"The females graduate," he said, "so I want to change that."

And 15-year-old David Miller, who wants to be a mortician, recalls proudly leaving "the block," where he used to start fights, and instead focusing on his studies and football.

The students' new mission grew out of journaling sessions done with their teachers.

"We sit in class and talk about what we see, what we need to change," said Kaellen Wallis, a first-year teacher. "We talk about how violence has affected us. Unfortunately, it has affected pretty much everyone in our class."

Esohe Osai said three of her students come from homes where a parent was killed, so the fact that they attend school at all is a success.

Through their journals, discussions and required parent meetings, the UPA ninth-graders appear to be empowered; and they have decided to do more than watch change. They have decided to effect it.

Mayor Kwame Killpatrick applauded the students as they launched their project Monday and reminded them "there is no revolutionary change that has ever happened in world history without young people being at the genesis or nucleus of it.

"I made a pledge at 13 that I would be part of this city's history, that I would come back to this city no matter where I went to college," said Kilpatrick, who graduated from Florida A&M. "And we need some help, because too many people are dropping out, and we need some more people accepting the responsibility of making this city great. And I think that the right folks are in this 128-member class."

The mayor pledged to sponsor the students' first meeting with their counterparts from across

the city.

"I'll even sponsor some food," he said, "not a whole lot of food, but I'll sponsor it."

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