



# 100 percent of school's first class college-bound

By SHARON COHEN (AP) – June 27, 2010

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CHICAGO – For each boy, the new school offered an escape and a chance at a life that seemed beyond reach.

Krishaun Branch was getting D's, smoking reefer a lot, skipping school twice a week. His mother was too busy working to know what he was doing. He liked to fight and hang out in the streets; having relatives in gangs was his armor.

When a young man in suit and tie came to tell his eighth-grade class about a new high school on Chicago's South Side, Krishaun wanted no part of it – until he heard something tempting: Students would have laptops. Suddenly, he was on board.

Marlon Marshall was nonchalant about everything, school included. He did just enough to get by. His mother pushed him to go to college. Sometimes she'd yell at him and his brothers for their bad grades.

Once she was so upset when she saw their report cards, she just sobbed.

Marlon had heard a pitch, too, about the school. He'd already been rejected by other high schools and his grades were mediocre. But students for this new academy would be accepted by lottery so maybe, he thought, he had a chance.

Marcus Bass figured there just had to be something better for him. Barely a teen, he'd been shot at, robbed a couple of times and had seen terrible things in his housing project. His parents argued constantly; life was chaotic.

He was sold by the recruiter's description of a "different" high school.

Urban Prep would be a charter high school. It would bring together some 150 boys from some of the poorest, gang-ravaged neighborhoods and try to set them

on a new track. They'd have strict rules: A longer school day – by two hours. Two classes of English daily. A uniform with jackets and ties.

And Urban Prep had a goal – one that seemed audacious, given that just 4 percent of the Class of 2010 was reading at or above grade level when they arrived at the school in 2006.

In four years, they were told, they'd be heading to college.

From the very start, Tim King had a grand plan.

"I wanted to create a school that was going to put black boys in a different place," says the founder of Urban Prep, "and in my mind, that different place needed to be college."

King faced long odds: Slightly more 40 percent of black male students in the Chicago public schools graduate high school; a little more than one in five earn a college degree in six years.

Still, on an August day in 2006 he gave members of the first class of Urban Prep a peek at the end of the rainbow. He took them on a guided tour of Northwestern University – just 25 miles away, but a foreign land to kids who had never visited a college or, in some instances, even Chicago's Loop.

"When you think about it, it's crazy because a city like Chicago is teeming with college campuses yet these students don't have those experiences," says King, a Georgetown Law School grad who decided to become an educator.

It had taken four years for King to win permission to open the Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men. About 75 percent of the funding comes from the Chicago public schools, the rest is private.

King's plan was both idealistic and grounded in the harsh realities of inner-city life: He'd take boys from tough situations, many way behind in school, and if they followed the rules and his road map, they'd get into college.

That was not the route he'd taken. Growing up the son of a construction company owner and an educator, King says the only question around the dinner table was: "Are you going to business school, law school, or medical school?"

It was a different story for Urban Prep's Class of 2010.

About 85 percent came from low-income families, the overwhelming majority single-mother households. Many kids lagged far behind in academics, but that wasn't their only obstacle.

There was poverty.

King says that meant confronting some basic questions: Do the boys have enough to eat? Can they realistically have a clean shirt every day? Do they have a place to study at night?



There was violence. Some Urban Prep students had to worry about navigating a clear path around gangs and had to plot different bus routes to avoid getting jumped. Others stashed their uniforms in lockers, knowing that a red-and-gold lion crest on a black blazer can be a bull's eye.

Englewood is the South Side neighborhood that captured national attention last year when a 16-year-old public school honors student was stomped and beaten to death with wooden planks in a horrifying brawl captured on video.

Then there were those thorny issues not in any teaching syllabus.

King remembers a freshman's words: "I hate this school. ... I never had this many men tell me what to do."

"This was a guy," King says, "who had no relationship with his father. He had never had a man in his life who said, 'Pull up your pants, tuck your shirt in, do you homework' ... the things for me growing up I certainly took for granted."

Urban Prep's dress code – no earrings, sneakers, baggy pants, long hair or bling – is essential to a school philosophy that blends discipline with a reach-for-the-stars message.

College pennants line the hallways. Posters and quotations from black leaders – Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, George Washington Carver – fill the walls. Photos of students with the famous – President Barack Obama and director Spike Lee – are tacked to bulletin boards.

But nothing is more important than the creed, uttered every morning at 8:30 at a gathering called "community." First come the routine announcements, then the celebrations of success accompanied by snatches of the hip-hop song "Swagger Like Us" ("school of hard knocks, I'm a grad ...") belching from giant speakers. Finally, the oath that is the school's guiding principle:

"We believe... We are college bound. ...

"We are exceptional – not because we say it, but because we work hard at it ....

"We believe in ourselves. ... We believe."

Krishawn didn't believe.

When he discovered what he'd signed up for, he wanted out even before school began.

No girls? School until 4:30 p.m.? A jacket and tie? You've got to be kidding. But his mother urged him to hang in. So did an aunt who threatened to stop buying him clothes and giving him spending money.

So he stayed, and raised hell.

He fought, he cursed the teachers, he got suspended. He wanted to get kicked out.

"I went to the principal and said, 'Do what you got to do. I don't want to be here. Just send me home,'" he recalls. "I didn't like the discipline. I didn't like the surroundings. I didn't like the uniform. I didn't like anything."

Krishawn started sophomore year on probation (he had janitorial duties after school). He was failing some classes and straddling two worlds: As an Urban Prep student, he'd hop a bus and elevated train for an hour commute. As the kid clinging to street life, he'd furtively tuck a white T-shirt into his book bag – part of the uniform of the gangbangers – so he could hang out with them.

After fighting with another student sophomore year, Krishawn left Urban Prep.

He was surprised when one of the deans seemed to be teary-eyed at a final meeting. "It shocked me someone did care," he says. He transferred to a Chicago public school, but couldn't stop his downhill slide, receiving two F's and 3 D's.

Then came a brutal wake-up call.

A close friend was beaten to death with a bat. "He was a guy who knew how to fight," he says with admiration. "These days, people don't like to lose."

Krishawn started seeing Urban Prep in a new light. He pleaded to return.

"I knew I was going down the wrong path," he says. "I had to graduate or my

life was going to be nothing. ... I'd seen the streets were not going to get me anywhere."

He lobbied Evan Lewis, the recruiter who'd visited his elementary school and had become a mentor.

"He didn't take no or maybe for an answer," Lewis says.

Krishawn was readmitted. He knew there were doubters; he wanted to prove them wrong. He buckled down, and his junior year was honored five times with a "student of the week" designation. With it, comes a reward: a gold tie.

"My personality changed," Krishawn says. "My posture changed. My speech changed. A lot about me has changed."

But he still has a trace of swagger, a glint in his eye and an easy charm that helped him become president of the Student Government Association.

"He has made if not a 180-degree turn, maybe a 160-degree turn ...," says Lewis, vice president of institutional advancement. "He's a very smart kid, a very savvy kid. He sees the big picture. That's the reason he survived on the streets. That's the reason he'll be successful."

There are second chances at Urban Prep.

Every student has at least one mentor – maybe a coach or a teacher among a predominantly young faculty. About 60 percent of teachers at the Englewood campus (Urban Prep has another school and plans to open a third this fall) are black men. They serve as confidantes and role models to students, many of whom have no fathers in their lives.

"Sometimes they need someone to advocate for them," says Joffrey Bywater, a 29-year-old history teacher. "Sometimes they just need someone to listen to them."

All staff members have school-assigned cell phones so students (and parents) can phone day or night. And they do.

Just ask Corey Stewart, a 24-year-old history teacher.

Students will call and say, "I'm stranded and I don't have a way from downtown to get home," Stewart says. "Can you come pick me up?" Absolutely, I'm on my way. Or 'Mr. Stewart, I'm afraid that I might get jumped on after school today. Is it possible you can take me home?' Of course."

Stewart says he doesn't worry about blurring lines or becoming too friendly with his students and won't hesitate to fail someone who's not measuring up.

His emphasis, though, is on inspiration. So a discussion about Aristotle and Plato, for instance, might lead to comparisons to rap legends Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G. "You can bring up the most archaic ideas in class and you can connect it to real life, and they will love it," he says.

Stewart leads a "pride" (more lion imagery) – another name for home room that meets three times a day.

It's one of the unorthodox steps taken for a student population that requires extra attention. That's the reason for the longer school hours, the double dose of English and mandatory 20 minutes of reading daily, the assessments every six weeks, Saturday classes and summer school for those who need it.

Of the 150 teens who started in 2006, 95 lasted four years. (Another dozen were transfers.) They've become a tight-knit group.

So when Cameron Barnes' mother died last year of liver disease, he returned to school the next day, finding solace there. "It was like being with family," he says. "It's like a brotherhood."

And when it came time for his mother's funeral, the members of his "pride" stood with him.

Marlon Marshall was in a bind.

His mother announced she was moving to Michigan. She was sick of the guns and killings in her neighborhood; her brother was shot and seriously wounded while sitting on their front porch.

Marlon wanted to attend Urban Prep his senior year. College, once a fantasy, was now achingly close. But he had no home.

Urban Prep staff huddled, and with his mother's permission, he was taken in by assistant principal Richard Glass, a Don Cheadle lookalike with an unflappable manner and a buttery voice made for radio.

After nine months under the same roof, Marlon calls Glass "godfather" or "Pops."

Glass calls Marlon "a great young man" who falls in love easily – a declaration that prompts the 18-year-old to rub his hand over his face in embarrassment.

Marlon's father, just 16 when his son was born, left when he was 3 months old. Marlon moved around a lot, living for some time with his stepfather. Always, there was danger. One place was so bad it was risky just to walk home from the bus stop at the corner.

"Living here has given me so much freedom just to be a kid," he says, sitting in Glass' spotless kitchen. "I really haven't had a childhood. I couldn't go outside. ... I knew once the sun went down that's when the problems started."

Just having a curfew (11 p.m.) was thrilling. "I can't even explain the feeling I had when we were going over the rules," Marlon says. "I need structure. I sometimes get sidetracked or a little bit lazy."

And when Marlon's grades began slipping, Glass pushed him to turn things around – and he earned a 3.0 average his senior year, his best ever.

This isn't the first time Glass – who's pursuing a doctorate in education – has gone the extra mile.

As an elementary school teacher, he'd escort groups of kids – some of whom had rarely been out of their neighborhoods – to a skating rink, an amusement park or out to dinner. "I try to treat all of my students as if they're my sons," says Glass, who, at 39, is a grandfather himself.

Marlon already has put Glass on notice – he doesn't want their friendship to end after his senior year.

"He's going to need me for some time," Glass says, "and I'm good with that."

The acceptance letters began arriving this spring.

Trinity College. The University of Il-





linois. Howard University. The University of Virginia. Morehouse College. Georgetown. Tuskegee University. And on and on.

Each time a student was accepted to a four-year college or university, he received a red-and-gold tie (King is a Harry Potter fan; these are Gryffindor colors) to the strains of Jay-Z's "On to the Next One."

When all 107 seniors had received letters, there was a celebration.

Marcus Bass wanted to cry – but he refrained. It had been a rocky four years, riddled with doubts, struggles in biology and an attitude adjustment.

"At first, I thought everybody was out to get me," Marcus says in a deep, barely audible voice. "I wasn't used to taking orders from anyone. I was used to just doing my own thing."

There were warnings, he says, from teachers and administrators. There were outside pressures, too.

Guys he grew up with, would say "you ain't even with us no more," Marcus says. "We kind of distance ourselves from each other now. I see them doing their own thing, or hanging in the streets, just smoking and drinking all day. I try to tell them there's something better than that. They just ... blow me off."

He's convinced Urban Prep has kept him out of trouble. "It's hard to say how they've saved my life," he says, "but they have."

In May, the Class of 2010 united for a "signing day" modeled after events held for high school athletes when they choose a college. At a steakhouse, the seniors stood one by one and announced their school, then donned a cap bearing its name.

There also were T-shirts on a table adorned with a jaunty crown and the words: "100 Percent."

But the Urban Prep story is still unfolding and King knows it.

There will be struggles ahead for the college-bound students. Some will be academic – it's unclear how many graduates now read at grade level. Others will be financial, even though the Class of 2010 will benefit from more than \$4 million in grants and scholarships.

And still others will come from simply being away from home and needing support, encouragement and practical advice.

Urban Prep is working on a plan so every college freshman will have someone in Chicago to tap for guidance when problems arise. "We don't think once you're gone, we're done with you, see you later, have a good time," King says.

And while there's "a huge feeling of accomplishment," King insists "it's just a milestone. It's not an endgame. This is not the fulfillment of our mission. (That) comes when we are able to see our students succeed in college and that may not be apparent for four or five years."

On a muggy June night, King surveys the graduates, clad in black gowns with the Urban Prep crest. He tells them how proud everyone is of them.

In four years or so, he says, he'll be expecting invitations – to their college commencements.

But this is graduation night, time to reflect on how far they've come, and where they're going.

Krishawn Branch, the kid who stopped himself from going over the edge, is heading to Fisk University in Tennessee.

He's a jumble of emotions, rattling them off in quick succession: "Happiness. Sadness. Proud. Proud of myself. Thankful. Successful."

Marcus Bass, the kid who wondered if he'd make it, grins widely with relief as he ponders a future at Jackson State University in Mississippi.

"It feels like I don't have anything to prove to anyone but now I have to prove something to myself – and that's making it through college," he says.

And Marlon Marshall, the kid who found a new anchor in life, will attend Earlham College in Indiana. "Everybody said we wasn't going to make it," he says, "but we're here and about to do bigger and better things."

Marlon's family has gathered in a cheering section. His father – he doesn't remember when they last saw each other – is in from Mississippi, his mother, Vernita Lockett, from Michigan.

"I'm very attached to Marlon," she says. "I had him when I was 15. ... They told me my boy was going to be a statistic.

They told me he was going to be another gangbanger. Well, we're here to prove them wrong."

As each graduate's name is called to receive his diploma, squeals of joy fill the auditorium.

When Cameron Barnes lopes across the stage, his long legs crossing the distance in a few strides, he touches his fingertips to his lips, looks toward the heavens, then blows a kiss – a tribute to his mother, no longer with him.

And when Marlon is called up to receive a special medal, his mother stands and shouts: "We LOVVVVVVVE you!"

Later, Marlon and his dad share a tearful embrace. "You're a much better man than I ever was," Marlon Sr. says, burrowing his face in his son's chest as the two rock from side to side.

"Daddy, don't do that. ... You did what you could, man," Marlon whispers, his eyes red-rimmed, his face tearstained. "Don't blame yourself 'cause I never stopped loving you ... I never gave up on you, man. I always knew that you was trying. If anybody going to believe in you, man, it's me."

There would be another embrace before the night was out, when Marlon Sr. thanked Richard Glass – the man who guided his son to the finish line.

Tim King asks the graduates to take the stage and recite their creed one final time.

They repeat the lines, rapidly and forcefully. The last words are joyous, and emphatic.

"WE BELIEVE."

A few raise their arms in triumph.

Then they toss their mortarboards in the air, red-and-gold tassels flying as the crowd cheers.



**For more information on Urban Prep, contact:**

Urban Prep Academies  
420 N. Wabash • Suite 300  
Chicago, IL 60611

312.276.0259

[www.urbanprep.org](http://www.urbanprep.org)

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