Residents Find Common Interest in Children

Nonprofit Group Helps Black, Hispanic Parents Reach Out to Each Other, Educators in NW

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Chiquita White and Ana Urrutia are two women who, if not for their children—students at Brightwood Elementary School in Northwest Washington—would likely never have met. And even if they had, the chance that they would have developed a friendship was slim.

But here they were, one gray, overcast morning last week, walking side by side, leading a group on a tour of the Brightwood neighborhood, which straddles the upper reaches of 14th Street and Georgia Avenue NW.

White is a 52-year-old African American who grew up in a rural pocket of western Virginia called Covington, her youth circumscribed by Jim Crow laws. Urrutia is a 31-year-old immigrant from Usulutan, El Salvador, a city brutalized by a 12-year civil war and, in recent years, ravaged by powerful earthquakes. They may have both come from somewhere else, but Brightwood is their home now. Separated by race, ethnicity, culture and nationality, they are working hard to overcome those barriers in the interest of their children's education.

“We can make changes in this school, and we can make them together regardless of race... United, we have a strong voice,” Urrutia said. “We should support one another.”

Said White of Urrutia: “It feels like you have a sister away from home.”
The two of them were at the head of Brightwood's first parent-led community walk for teachers and staff.

"A lot of things have changed here over the years," White told the 60 teachers, administrators, staff and parents just before they stepped out on Nicholson Street NW. "And when we take our walk today, we're going to see even more changes." Not the least of which are parents such as White and Urrutia.

They have come together through the Tellin' Stories Project, a program designed to build stronger connections among parents and between school officials and parents. Tellin' Stories, operating in six District public schools, is a project of Teaching for Change, a Washington-based nonprofit organization that promotes social and economic justice in public education.

The project began its work at Brightwood Elementary in late August. While about a dozen Latino mothers made the first couple of meetings, the black parents, who traditionally ran the PTA, did not. But a concerted effort to reach out to White, the PTA president, and other black parents paid off quickly.

"One big part of Tellin' Stories is relationship-building," said Marisabel Villagomez, the project director who has been working with the Brightwood parents. "And they were ready."

Principal Wanda Fox agreed. When she arrived at Brightwood five years ago as assistant principal, Fox said, the school was on the cusp of yet another sea change. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the school population was largely Jewish. In the mid-1970s, it became all African American. In the mid-1980s, Hispanics began moving into the neighborhood, and by 1998

Latinos were about to outpace blacks as the majority. But black parents ran the PTA, and Latino parents rarely participated in school activities.

"I saw all these Latino parents walking their children to school every morning and they came up to the door and they never came in. It was like there was some unwritten law or a taboo, like we're not allowed to go over the line," Fox said.

More than anything else, it was the fear of not being able to communicate well in English, said Berta Hernandez, a parent now active with the Tellin' Stories group.

"They thought there was no one who could translate for them, that they were closing the door to them," said Hernandez, who, along with another Latina parent, made the tacos, roast chicken, rice, beans, fried plantains and salad that were served to teachers and staff at the end of the community walk.

In Fox's four years as principal, she has presided over plenty of change at Brightwood. Today, the school's 463 students are 75 percent Latino, 18 percent African American and 7 percent Ethiopian. Fox has instituted formal bilingual instruction in Head Start through second grade and informal bilingual language arts classes in fifth grade. She hired a bilingual assistant principal, two bilingual counselors, 10 English-as-a-second-language teachers and bilingual educational aides. The PTA and other schoolwide meetings now have translators—a move that Fox said black parents initially opposed—and about half of the PTA's executive council is now Latino. A bilingual newsletter for parents was just started.

The Tellin' Stories group made a quilt, in which parents portrayed their significant life events on felt-decorated squares, and their community walk and lunch for the teachers and staff was a success. What Fox and parents such as White, Urrutia, Hernandez and Marisol Huaman, another Latina who has emerged as a new parent leader, hope is that the relationship between black and Hispanic parents can be cemented so that they can work together to improve Brightwood Elementary.

"It's important that we're equals in this business of education," Fox said.