

EDUCATION: LANGSTON HUGHES

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The re-making of a school

*Today is Friday, August 26, 2005
Friday is the fifth day of the school week.
It is sunny outside.
Today will be a good day.*

A teacher at Langston Hughes Elementary School wrote these words on a blackboard on the last school day before Hurricane Katrina flooded the school and ended its 50-year run as an educational institution in Gentilly. Nearly two years after the storm, the words were still there, awaiting the wrecking crew that would take down the damaged school to make way for the new one: Langston Hughes Academy.

Now a charter school, Langston Hughes opens Aug. 6, instructing about 100 fifth grade students. For the first several weeks, classes will be held at Thurgood Marshall Middle School, located at 4621 Canal St. Langston Hughes will move to modular classrooms on its original Trafalgar Street site near the Fairgrounds Race Course sometime in the fall. Eventually, the school will expand to grades kindergarten through eight.

John Alford, the school's new principal, couldn't save the mid-century building with its wood-paneled walls, beamed ceilings and student painted doorways but he saved its artistic spirit when he chose the site for the charter school he long dreamed of opening. Because Alford writes poetry in his spare time, the school's identification with an important American Black poet cinched his interest in the location. His focus is quality academics but he kept the name and plans to continue the school's artistic emphasis with dramatic presentations of Hughes' work.

Hughes, the most influential poet of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote about his dreams for racial equality before Martin Luther King, Jr. immortalized the ideal in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The poet's life and work resonate with Alford, 32, who grew up in a racially troubled neighborhood in Brooklyn, N.Y. Raised in a housing development by a mother and father who encouraged studious pursuits, he eventually earned a Master of Business Administration degree from Harvard.

"It's personal to me," Alford says of his quest to reopen the school. "Having found my way out of that environment, I think every kid should get a chance to rise up and get an education."

Originally named in 1958 for Edward Douglass White, a former Louisiana U.S. Senator and Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, the school was renamed in the mid-'80s to reflect its focus on the arts, says Dr. Sandra Wilson, a former principal. The school also changed its name to accommodate critics who felt that it shouldn't be named for a former slave owner – White's family used slave labor on its LaFourche Parish sugar cane plantation before the Civil War and, while serving on the U.S. Supreme Court, White authored a decision that upheld Jim Crow laws by allowing the continued disenfranchisement of illiterate black voters.

After getting the new name, art instructors used Hughes' work as artistic inspiration to decorate walls and promote school pride. In the cafeteria, student crafted tiles depicted Hughes' most famous poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." A front exterior wall welcomed visitors with scenes painted in the colorful, self-taught style of Black folk artists Clementine Hunter and Bill Traylor.

Student test scores continued to lag, however. Even though the school had made improvements, it was tagged as a "failing" school. The Recovery School District took control of it in 2005 as part

as a state takeover of underperforming schools. Alford's 110-page application for reopening it as a charter school operated by NOLA 180, his organization, won approval in February.

Alford admits that he faces the challenge of his life: His goal is to transform a "failing" school to one that sends kids from disadvantaged homes to selective college prep high schools. Many of the students he personally recruited started the school year a grade or two behind in basic skills. One child, a recruit from a group home, didn't know all his letters, Alford says. A three-week program held at Tulane University earlier in the summer introduced students to the school and began an ongoing review of third and fourth grade skills.

Alford didn't initially intend to become an educator. The work seemed too difficult, so he chose engineering instead. However, after three years working at General Motors, he moved on to Harvard where he took a class in charter school education. He wrote a business plan and felt uplifted by the experience. Then he saw a 60 Minutes segment on Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) schools and he knew he'd found his real path. "Once I saw that I knew I had to do this," he says.

He contacted KIPP's founder and soon began work as the program's national director of trailblazing, a position that took him all over the country opening new KIPP schools. The job eventually brought him to New Orleans.

Other than a year stint as a KIPP math instructor in Baltimore, Alford has little classroom experience. Nonetheless, his enthusiasm and business credentials draw admirers. Even though he's usually reserved, he sometimes flashes a schoolboy smile that could melt the coldest heart. That charm, coupled with missionary zeal, attracted an equally goal oriented staff. He hired the former principal of a KIPP school in Harlem to mentor teachers and a former Orleans Parish School Board accountant to serve as business manager.

Business Manager Melanie Flot retired from the school board post-Katrina after working in accounts payable and computer management for 20 years. The experience didn't quite fulfill her need for community service, she says. Alford's determination to make Langston Hughes Academy a step ladder to college appeals to her desire to see the results of her efforts.

"I worked in the school system but never in a school," she says. "These students can be whatever they want to be and our school will help give them that."

Once awarded the charter, Alford says his greatest challenge was finding teachers who share his belief that kids from struggling, single parent homes can excel. The teachers also had to be willing to push students and work the nine-hour school day required to meet exacting standards.

Alford's vision attracted teachers trained in the Teach for America program, an organization that recruits recent graduates to teach in economically disadvantaged areas. Kwame Floyd, a graduate of Penn State who completed Teach for America training over the summer, says Alford easily persuaded him to teach math. "Expectations of high results are what got me here," Floyd says.

Many of Alford's educational strategies mirror KIPP tactics, such as increasing instructional time, following up on absent students and providing teachers' cell phone numbers for last-minute questions about homework.

Hughes likely would approve of the educational efforts done in his name, even though he dropped out of Columbia University, took odd jobs and ended up in Paris. That episode, however, was only a bend in the road to success. He eventually finished college and became famous for writing such lines as these:

Though you may hear me holler / And you may see me cry / I'll be dogged, sweet baby / If you gonna see me die

