

RENO HAPPENINGS

Parents praise black principal for removing racial barriers



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By Steve Papinchak
Gazette-Journal

RENO — A tall black man strode onto the playground of his northeast Sparks school and attracted a swarm of children with a happy glow on their white faces.

Drawing all the attention was Lloyd Diedrichsen Elementary School's Jesse Hall, Washoe County's only black principal.

Hall heads a friendly, smooth-running campus in a mostly Anglo neighborhood where the principal's race

doesn't seem to matter.

Some parents say Hall's example makes it difficult for racial prejudice to take root at Diedrichsen and its surrounding neighborhood.

But Hall downplays that role.

"It's an awesome task to try to represent a whole race and I don't know anyone who can do it, including myself," he said.

"If I had my druthers, it would not be that way. I want to be judged on what I am, not what I represent. But I know that's utopia because people don't look at things that way."

Gloria Bennett, one of the Diedrichsen School area's few black residents said Hall is having a big impact on race relations.

"I think having a black man who is in his 40s, who is a friend of children, helps the children here — and some parents, too — find out that black people are just like them," she said.

"When black persons are

teachers, principals or city council members, it helps people to see that we're all the same although black people don't hold those positions very often in the Reno-Sparks area," said Bennett, mother of a first grader.

Resident Laurette Looney said, "It helps break down all types of stereotypes when white kids see that the No. 1 person, the leader of their school, can be black."

"When we see a black person holding a position like principal, it registers on a conscious or subconscious level and prejudice just erodes away," said Looney, mother of a Diedrichsen School kindergartner.

Hall, 47, won the hearts of parents, students and teachers soon after the opening of Diedrichsen five years ago.

He came from Duncan Elementary School and its 62 percent minority enrollment to a school that today has only about 10 blacks and an

8.6 percent non-white student body. Diedrichsen has 59 minority students out of an enrollment of 684.

His 1981 arrival at the northeast Sparks school caught some adults by surprise, Hall recalled.

"Originally, there were a few double takes and surprise was showing on some faces . . . People just weren't aware that there was such a person as I walking this universe," Hall said.

"I just heard a few people wonder what he'd be like," said Howard Guynan, president of the Diedrichsen Parent Teachers Association. "But once he got here and people got to know him, it all went away."

"He's so open and enthusiastic," Looney said. "He's receptive to parents' ideas and the kids love him. He's an all-around good guy," she said.

"Oh, he's a real sweetheart," said Jean Kerr, a third grade teacher. Hall lets teachers share in decisions and "I always feel I know where I stand with him," she said.

"He's wonderful," said kindergartner Denise Molinsky. "I'd follow him anywhere — and I did. I taught for him at Duncan Elementary before I came here with him," she said.

Kindergartners are quick to crowd around Hall, who often jumps rope with them and sits alongside tots on playground equipment, she said.

"He's nice. He lets me get on his shoulders and he takes me around the playground," said 6-year-old Meghan Maxwell, a first grader.

Hall, a gospel music composer, says the Southern Baptist Church is a main force in his life.

His positive attitude "comes from the inside," he said. "I feel good about myself as a person."

"I have a personal philosophy that the only person who can destroy my day is me. I won't allow other people to cause me to have a bad day," he said.

"Besides, I'm an up person. I'm a positive person, and I think kids should be that way."

Hall is in the Truckee Meadows today because 24 years ago he spotted a Washoe County School District job advertisement on a bulletin board at the State Teachers College in Fayetteville, N.C., then an all-black school.

"I was so naive at the time that I didn't even realize I was going to a non-black area. I just assumed that because the application was on our bulletin board that there would be a sizable black community here."

But the 24-year-old Hall soon learned he was the county's only black teacher. And Hall saw no black faces when he looked out at his first Traner Middle School class in 1962. There was only a fraction of the 824 blacks who today make up 2.6 percent of Washoe County's 32,092 students.

After I got here, I realized I was a trailblazer of sorts. I had my second thoughts but I stuck it out and I'm glad I did. It's been a great

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Steve Yeater/Gazette Journal

VISIT: Students cluster around Jesse Hall, principal at Lloyd Diedrichsen Elementary School, as he pays a visit to their playground.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Mrs. Evelyn Mount, director of the Community Outreach Center, would like donations of any kind, she would like food, clothes, or anything that would be appropriate for a Christmas basket for a needy family this year. She has over 186 names on her list at this time. The baskets will be taken to the families on Dec. 22. If you would like further information you can contact Mrs. Evelyn Mount, 2530 Cannon St., Reno, Nev. 89512, 356-0238.

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