

Marva Collins: Students model student excellence

By Vicki T. Lee

Special to Sentinel-Voice

Marva Collins is depressed about what's happening with children in the nation's public schools.

"Not much is expected of our children," Collins said. "All I hear is, 'What's wrong with the parents?' Parents don't know where excellence is. If parents knew what was going on in the schools, there would be a revolution."

Excellence is the goal Collins set for herself years ago when, fed up with the public school system, she yanked her own children out of their "prestigious" schools and opened the Westside Preparatory School in Chicago. She developed her own "Read-by-Three" reading

program, set moral and disciplinary standards and began a program of actually teaching students.

"Excellence knows no bounds [and] if you concentrate on excuses, that's where your work ethics lie!"

Collins lives excellence, breathes it and thrives on the opportunity for her students to benefit from it, but she doesn't hide her motives. She wants something back.

"Every child in that school knows that they represent me."

To students, she says: "If I can't stamp you like a piece of USDA meat, don't tell anybody you went to my school."

"Having a good education means being able to univer-

sally communicate everywhere," Collins said. "Our students attend Harvard, Yale, Amherst, Dartmouth and are selected to study at Oxford every year," adding that that would be impossible with just local skills.

"We have to be global citizens," Collins said. To accomplish this, Collins devotes most of her time to teaching herself. "I feel I'm going to die illiterate," Collins said.

"I read voraciously, 30 to 40 books each month, self-help books, books about great philosophers, books about peace confrontation. I'm a leader and a thinker. If you're not born wealthy, you certainly better be very bright. My mission every morning is

to be the best person I can be."

She expects the same from her students, and no excuses.

"Empty wagons always make a lot of noise," Collins said, adding that if teachers put something in children, they are less likely to act out. But if they do, it's her policy to "discipline our children with nobility."

"When children misbehave, they have to write 100 times why they are doing what they did, in perfect handwriting or speak it, 'I have just hit a child. I am not going to be indolent.'"

Students in Collins' schools learn the importance of accountability for their choices and consequences for their actions, along with a

stringent curriculum in the classics, Shakespeare, Marcus Aurelius, philosophical ideas, etc.

"We are what we learn," Collins said, and she doesn't allow dollar signs or student issues to determine or undermine excellence in her classrooms.

"I don't teach poor children, I teach scholars."

What teachers need to do, Collins suggested, is "get rid of the shop talk, get rid of all the workbooks, cover the chalkboards and start teaching children. It's all about language, brains and language."

"I never hit or curse at kids. I don't argue with children. When you get angry at a kid in the classroom, you've

lost the entire class. You have already shown them your worst side. When I get a difficult child, I say, what's wrong with me that I can't help this child?"

That's difficult to find, she said. It's always about not enough materials, what's wrong with the child? "I haven't heard yet from the teachers, 'what's wrong with me?'"

"When we use excuses, we don't get to be all we were born to be," Collins said. "I don't do this for the children. I do this to practice my own excellence. They benefit because they have allowed me to practice my excellence on them."

Vicki T. Lee writes for Afro Newspapers.

Nobel Prize

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award had been the "biggest surprise in my entire life".

Deforestation has been a major problem in Kenya, exposing millions of people to drought and poverty.

Maathai's ecological campaign began in 1977 when she sowed nine tree seeds in her yard and founded an organization which has since planted more than 30 million trees throughout Africa. The organization and its nurseries now employ tens of thousands of people in Kenya and elsewhere.

Yet forests still cover less than two percent of Kenya's land, far below the United Nations' recommended minimum of 10 percent.

"Many wars in the world are actually fought over natural resources," Maathai told Norwegian radio. "We plant the seeds of peace, now and in the future."

Maathai is a biologist by training. She was the first woman in eastern Africa to receive a doctorate and become a professor. The latest Nobel laureate is also a human rights activist in Kenya, and her opposition to the one-party rule of former president Daniel arap Moi led to her being jailed, harassed and vilified.

"She has served as inspiration for many in the fight for democratic rights and has especially encouraged women to better their situation," the Nobel Committee said.

Maathai was elected to the Kenyan parliament on the Green Party ticket in December 2002 in the first free elections held in the country in decades.

The choice of Maathai, which came a day after Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek won the Literature Prize, put women center stage in the 2004 Nobel prize season.

But experts cautioned that there was little chance that the male-dominated Nobel pantheon would become a temple of egalitarianism — women have received fewer than one in 20 of all Nobel prizes awarded since 1901.

Choosing ecology was also seen as a decision by the five-person Norwegian committee to ease up on George W. Bush.

The last three peace laureates — UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, former US president Jimmy Carter and Iranian human rights lawyer Shirin Ebadi — have all been critical of the US president, who hopes to win another term in office in elections on November 2.

"These past few years, the Nobel prize has provoked criticism against the US administration. It seems reasonable to take a break from this criticism," said Stein Toenneson, head of the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo.

Maathai will receive the Nobel Peace Prize, which consists of a gold medal, a diploma and check worth 1.3 million dollars (1.1 million euros), at a ceremony in the Norwegian capital on December 10, the anniversary of the death of the prize's creator, Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel, in 1896. The 2004 Nobel prize season closes on Monday with the Economics prize.

Room

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being challenged in court — have contributed to more and more hospitals operating in the red.

According to a report released by the California Medical Association (CMA), which advocates on behalf of physicians and their patients, nearly 80 percent of ERs lost money in 2002, the most recent year in which data was available. Statewide the losses have reached more than \$600 million.

Authors of the report estimate that the total loss statewide this year will reach well over \$900 million for both hospitals and physicians.

UCLA Medical Center in Westwood lost more than \$9 million in 2002 while County-USC Medical Center lost roughly \$5.6 million during that time. On the average, hospitals lose \$80 per visit to the ER, the CMA report showed.

"If you take some of the most highly skilled and trained people in society ... tell them they have to be open 24/7 and that they have to take care of anyone who walks into the door regardless of their inability to pay, this is not a viable model," Peter Warren, vice president of communications for CMA, said. "It used to work when HMOs and Medi-Cal paid more, but now everyone is trying to undercut the price structure."

William Brennan, the state's manager of Medi-Cal's rate development branch, said he has heard the criticism from hospitals and physicians regarding the decrease in reimbursement rates, but he has been ordered by the governor and legislators to cut further because of

the state's budget woes.

When the state had a budget surplus a few years ago, Brennan said he increased rates by 40 percent, but those days are long gone. Currently, the state is ranked 45th in the nation when it comes to reimbursement rates.

Private hospitals are not immune to rate cuts or rising operating costs, either. They, too, are having trouble operating emergency rooms, especially after new laws went into effect requiring them to hire more nurses to meet more stringent staffing ratios and seismic-retrofitting, which can lead to very expensive construction projects.

"It was a business decision to close those ERs and one of the reasons we made it certainly has to do with the difficult environment in California and particularly Los Angeles County with so many uninsured," said David Langness, a spokesman for Tenet Healthcare. Tenet is in the process of selling 18 hospitals in California because of increasing operating costs.

However, Langness said ERs are not necessarily cancers killing hospitals over time. Emergency rooms bring in patients, which means money if they are insured. Some hospitals get 30 to 40 percent of their admissions through the emergency room, Langness said.

"Statistics showing hospitals losing money because of ERs are bogus," Langness said. "People look at those and laugh because [the statistics] don't count patients who go into acute care beds."

Warren of the CMA said some hospitals, mainly those in affluent areas where people have good insurance, do make money because of ERs. How-

ever, "if you have a patient who comes into the ER and can't pay or doesn't pay, then it doesn't make any sense that they will when they get upstairs," he added.

There are no remedies in sight, experts say, but there are bandages that can stop the bleeding, including two propositions on the November ballot that are highly contested.

One is Proposition 67, which would increase the 911 surcharge on telephone bills and raise an estimated \$500 million to keep ERs afloat. The money would go to hospitals, paramedics and physicians.

Opponents of the proposition, which includes telecommunication companies and groups representing California sheriffs and seniors, agree the financial burden on ERs and physicians must be relieved, but say it unfairly taxes consumers.

The proposition would increase the 911 surcharge to levy a 50-cent charge on most residential phone lines. Businesses and cellular phone customers would be charged

3 percent.

The other proposition is Proposition 72, which, if approved, would require companies with 50 or more employees to provide health insurance or pay into a state fund that would support a statewide health insurance plan.

Many businesses are against the proposition because they say it will increase their operating costs and force some out of the state.

Dr. Wesley A. Curry, president of the California Emergency Physicians Medical Group, said both propositions are a no brainer, regardless if you are opposed, because whether you are rich or poor, Black or White, insured or uninsured, we all need ERs.

"What people need to be asking themselves is, if they become seriously injured or ill... will there be a system there to respond, and the answer now is no," Curry said. "If you are on one side or the other, you have to cross that line because as an individual, we are all impacted."

Kevin Herrera writes for Wave Newspapers.

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