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School's inspiration comes full circle



Photo by Layla Farmer

Former Carter G. Woodson student Atiya Bey is returning to the school as a teacher this year.

BY LAYLA FARMER
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Fourteen years ago, Atiya Bey, then an eighth grader, joined more than 180 local youth in the first student body at the newly-formed Carter G. Woodson School of Challenge.

Bey, who suffers from Attention Deficit Disorder and dyslexia, was the impetus for the school's formation. Fed up with public schools, which she felt could not appropriately meet her daughter's unorthodox learning needs and unable to afford a private school education, Attorney Hazel Mack-Hilliard, Bey's mother, pursued the only other option she had at the time.

"It was out of frustration with what was happening with Atiya," she said. "I just couldn't see a way out, so I left my job and came home and home schooled her."

Mack-Hilliard had been working from home and schooling Bey for nearly two years when the

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State of North Carolina passed legislation allowing for the formation of charter schools in 1996. That same year, Mack-Hilliard called a meeting at the Malloy Jordan East Winston Heritage Center for parents who were looking for a different direction for their children's education.

"We wanted to make sure we provided a place that focused on what it is our children can do, because too often, people focus on what they can't do," she said.

The response was overwhelming, Mack-Hilliard said.

"It was standing room only," she recalled. "I was shocked."

Mack-Hilliard, the senior managing attorney for the Winston-Salem office of Legal Aid of North Carolina (LANC), joined forces with a handful of the parents and Carter G. Woodson was formed.

"My mom, she's strong," Bey said of Mack-Hilliard. "She was determined for something to happen to get me through (school)."

Bey will be the first to



Photo by Layla Farmer

Hazel Mack-Hilliard (left) with her daughter, Atiya Bey.

admit she was not an easy child. Her frustrations with her learning deficiencies, combined with other factors in her personal life, created in her a sense of anger and frustration that she says often manifested in negative ways.

"It was bad ... It took a lot for me to just sit there and back then, teachers were on the traditional teaching. It was just sit there and do your work and I couldn't do

that; I couldn't learn that way," the 27 year-old stated. "It aggravated me very much."

That first year at Carter G. Woodson, Bey thrived.

"The teachers, they took their time and got to know each and every one of us, because it was very, very small. We could talk about anything," she related. "It was very homey, very loving. It was fun."

Because the charter

school only served grades 1-8 at the time that it opened, Bey was forced to attend high school elsewhere, until her senior year, when she returned to become one of two members of the Carter G. Woodson Class of 2002.

"In my whole life, everything fell into place," she declared. I wasn't supposed to go to college. I wasn't even supposed to graduate from high school. I don't know if I ever would have

graduated from high school if my mom hadn't opened Carter G. Woodson."

Next week, Bey, an alumna of North Carolina Central University, is returning to her alma mater in an official capacity: as a kindergarten teacher, working alongside some of the very women who nurtured and disciplined her nearly a decade ago. Bey says the feeling of coming full circle in her educational journey is hard to describe. Her mother calls it a blessing.

"I think (her experiences are) going to be an excellent background for doing this work," Mack-Hilliard stated. "I think she understands the impact ... a teacher can lift a child up with a word, or they can take them down."

Bey believes everything happens for a reason, and says she intends to take the lessons she learned as a stu-

dent at Carter G. Woodson right back into the classroom.

Mack-Hilliard, who still serves on the Board of Directors, says the school boasts a 100 percent graduation rate and will welcome a record number of nearly 500 students to its ranks this school year. She says there is a lesson in that for everyone.

"Often, what we perceive as our individual challenges are not individual challenges, the only way to solve them is to get with somebody else and do something about it," she commented. "I believe that we can create the world we want to live in. That's our challenge."

For more information about Carter G. Woodson, visit www.cgwsoc.org or call 723-6838.

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