

Lincoln High School

(A)

“Well Ma was right, nothing draws a crowd like fried chicken” Jimmy Jackson, principal of Lincoln High School, thought as he looked out at the small lively gathering that was feasting on his homemade chicken. He continued to circulate. To the students present it was a familiar sight, one repeated daily at Lincoln High. Jimmy calling out in his booming voice, closing in, clapping them on the shoulder or shaking hands, for a moment, making them the center of attention, making sure they knew he noticed. For families it was a happy discovery- a principal who seemed genuinely glad to see them at the school.

As Jimmy moved away from one family, Sue Hampton, Lincoln’s Special Assistant to the Principal and Jimmy’s right hand, came up and gave his arm a squeeze. “Great event, Jimmy. What a great idea. You were right, it did bring some new faces into the building.” Jimmy returned her smile but sighed, “but I could have gotten off making half as much, the crowd isn’t as big as I hoped.” Sue cut in, “Jimmy this is a great turnout, much better than I expected. Besides this tired old place probably hasn’t smelled this good in years.”

Jimmy couldn’t help smiling back. He knew that Sue, ever the hard-eyed “realist” had worried that no parents would come to the event. She was not sure it was worth planning this potluck following the regular school council meeting. Jimmy noted that parents were not attending meetings of the newly formed school council. The late Fall potluck would encourage families to sample the meeting and, hopefully, stay involved. He touted the meeting and the potluck- promising his special recipe fried chicken, sending home announcements and posting notices around the school and by the front doors. Sue was right, given the school’s track record this was a good turnout, representing ten, maybe even fifteen households. But this was a school with 1000 students. Based on demographics they were one thousand of the neediest kids in the district, facing all the challenges of inner city life. It was going to take a lot more than ten or fifteen families to make a difference at Lincoln High.

Jimmy Jackson

Jimmy Jackson had taken over as principal of Lincoln High in August of 1996. It had not been an easy decision for him. He was happy in his position as an Assistant Principal in one of the city’s exam schools. He had a good relationship with his principal, he enjoyed the bright, motivated students he worked with and he felt he provided a role model for minority students. The school the Superintendent had offered him was one of most difficult in the city. Lincoln had a sorry reputation among teachers and administrators

alike. The most seasoned principal would be challenged by the magnitude of the school's problems and Jimmy would face all this in his first principal's position.

But the Superintendent had guessed right. Jimmy Jackson was not a man to back away from a challenge. He was a classic success story. A product of the city's elementary and secondary schools, he had returned first to teach, then moved to administration. Jimmy remained passionately committed to the city and its schools. Unlike many, he had not moved to the suburbs. He lived within minutes of his old neighborhood- not far from Lincoln High. He had watched as the area's economic fortunes steadily declined, while the obstacles to success for the area's kids steadily increased. The position would be a challenge, but it would give him a chance to turn around a school and with it he hoped, the lives of some of those kids.

Jimmy was not naïve. He knew his limitations. He was a "people person", with a talent for connecting with others. He truly enjoyed working with students and getting to know their families and in previous positions had developed a rapport with many members of his school's community. But a school as needy as Lincoln would require that and more. As a condition to accepting the position he wanted to bring in a special assistant, someone he knew and trusted, someone who could tend to the administrative details and see to follow through. He asked that Sue Hampton, who he had worked with in a prior position at one of the city's elementary schools, be brought over as a Special Assistant. The Superintendent approved and the deal was done.

Jimmy and Sue were a study in contrasts. Jimmy was an expansive, charismatic, black man with a booming voice, and a real presence. A large man with the fortunate combination of size and quickness of a former football player, he seemed to fill any room he entered. Sue was fair, slim, and soft-spoken. Organized, persistent and attentive to details, her motto was "there is no substitute for follow-through." Despite their differences they had forged a solid working relationship and had come to rely on the strengths each contributed to the school.

Jimmy was also fortunate to have other strengths to tap. When he arrived at Lincoln High Jimmy found a hard working and energetic administrator, Kathy Moore, in an Assistant-principal position. He knew he was lucky. He had seen first hand how administrative positions sometimes filled up with those who were burnt-out from teaching and had no more enthusiasm for an administrative role. Jimmy needed all the strength and skill he could find on his leadership team, Lincoln High was a school on the brink.

Lincoln High

Lincoln High was arguably the most troubled high school in its district. The school was part of a large East Coast urban school system that had been fighting steady decline. Families with resources had been opting out of the system- moving to the suburbs or private or parochial schools. The district seemed always in flux, with four Superintendents in ten years. New leadership inevitably brought new school reform ideas

that would start to take hold only to have a new administration enter with a different agenda. At the school level, this translated to an ever shifting set of demands and an ever-changing pool of resources.

Schools without strong leadership fared most poorly and Lincoln High had not been blessed with strong leadership. The school had a reputation as a “last resort” for problem students or teachers. It was one of the two high schools in the city where youthful offenders on parole were assigned and had an unusually high percentage of special needs students. It had traditionally been a last choice for teachers transferring within the district, so teachers who were passed over by other schools found their way to Lincoln.

Adding to Lincoln’s challenges was a negative public perception of its surrounding neighborhood. The school was located in Lincoln Heights, a once a stable working class area whose economic base had withered over the past 30 years so now it was one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city. The neighborhood faced the problems associated with urban poverty: unstable families, drugs, crime, and unemployment or under-employment. Despite these challenges the area could claim a rich range of resources in its committed residents, agencies and institutions. Community organizations like the “Y”, the Boys and Girls Club, and numerous churches flourished and were cherished by the community. But it was the challenges that made the nightly news and, in a district with a school choice program, this perception of urban blight had an impact on the school, discouraging parents and students from even considering Lincoln.

The results of all this were obvious at Lincoln High. The school had standardized test scores that were at or near the bottom of the district. The dropout rate was almost 18% in 1995. Attendance was dismal, on any given day more than 20% of students were absent. Even the building and grounds were a monument to past indifference and neglect. It had been decades since the school had seen major renovations. The library was tiny and substandard. Computers and technology were non-existent. Unsurprisingly the school had been put on accreditation probation after a 1995 review. The list of deficiencies was daunting. But the probation did focus attention on Lincoln’s needs, most notably the need for leadership.

In August of 1996 Jimmy Jackson became principal of Lincoln High.

Developing Partnerships

Even before he entered the school, Jimmy knew this was something he could not do alone. At the top of his agenda was getting help, securing resources for Lincoln High. Money from the district would be slow in coming, if it came at all, so Jimmy decided to focus on community resources. A major communications corporation was a long-standing “industry partner” with the school and they were willing to provide help creating the comprehensive school plan required by the new Superintendent. Sue worked with staff to put together grant proposals and to pursue foundation money as well as resources available in the system through “internal grants.”

Ironically, Lincoln's increasingly desperate plight had finally given the school a high profile within the district. Coupled with a realistic hope of change stemming from the new leadership, Lincoln attracted the attention of local institutions. The school began to develop partnership with two local universities who were willing to provide help with staff development and team-building. Still Jimmy Jackson saw some major needs were unaddressed. The resources from major companies and institutions were valuable but did not directly touch students.

Jimmy was also approached by "Community Action Now" (CAN) a small non-profit established a couple of years earlier by Seth Paris, a graduate of a local MBA program who had decided to turn his energy and skills toward building urban neighborhoods. CAN had successfully run some high visibility "community improvement" events designed to encourage a sense of collaborative action and generate excitement. The events had received great press. As it happened the prior events had not involved the local schools. Now Paris was interested in working with a school and Lincoln, with its decaying building and grounds, seemed a perfect candidate. Jimmy was intrigued by the idea. It offered the hope of some much needed school improvements and a chance to get the community involved. He agreed to work with Paris to start a community initiative.

Creating an Event

In November of 1996, CAN started working with Lincoln High. Jackson and Paris sought out teachers, students and administrators who were willing to commit some time to planning an event. Paris thought the efforts should start at the grass roots, in this case within the building to develop a committed group and then do outreach to the larger community. This latter element was an area where CAN felt it could contribute significantly. This was their expertise- they had contacts with sources of sponsorship, with community development organizations and sources of free publicity and they knew how to do the organizational grunt work to get an event rolling.

The first meeting in November drew a handful of teachers and students. Seth Paris was introduced and he explained the process. First the group would consider how to raise interest in the planning group, with the hope of increasing their numbers by the next meeting. Then the group could start the work of discussing what needed to be done at the school and what kind of event would work for this community. The objective was to put together a proposal to the International Community Service Day Foundation (ICDF).

The process unfolded slowly. A core group of students, teachers and administrators began to meet regularly. Jimmy made it a priority to get to the meetings though they inevitably lengthened his already long days. But after many meetings and 2 1/2 months the group had a proposal together and the result seemed to justify all the work. ICDF was enthusiastic about the proposal and offered a joint "training" session in January 1997 for 8 ICDF staff members and two administrators and five teachers from Lincoln with the goal of creating an outline for the larger community planning process.

Working with the Larger Community

The January training was another first step. The task now was to engage the community at large. Over the next five months the group accomplished a lot. The core team grew. Joining the group from the school were five more teachers, three students, two parents and a Lincoln High alumnus. The core group solicited involvement from the Lincoln Heights community and two school neighbors and three individuals from local community organizations joined them. The ICDF recruited ten volunteers from the greater metropolitan area. The group raised more than \$30,000 in cash and materials by hosting a car wash, holding a raffle, selling t-shirts and soliciting contributions.

Both Jimmy and Sue stayed involved with the process as it unfolded. Sue's planning instincts had kicked in and, as she told Jimmy, "I could not resist once we started putting together a wish list. I would paint that cafeteria single-handed to get it done." Jimmy found that the core team had the planning in hand and he let them operate independently, checking in with Seth or the teachers involved.

The ICDF and CAN provided valuable expertise in getting the word out. There were notices and public service announcements throughout the city. In late May of 1997 the hard work had its payoff. The two-day weekend event accomplished much. There were over 900 volunteers from all over the region and the state. The largest single contingent was from the local community. Two hundred students, fifty staff and teachers and twenty parents from the school were involved. Another large contingent of two hundred children and adults joined from the surrounding neighborhood.

The volunteers built 30 computer tables, painted 70 doors, painted, installed sound baffling and re-decorated the cafeteria and cleaned and re-landscaped the grounds, planting 80 trees shrubs and flowering plants. The school building still had a long way to go but at least the halls were now brightened with color from the doors and the cafeteria had been transformed into an appealing multi-purpose center.

The event was covered by the local news media and provided a shot of good news about the school and community. It seemed an unqualified success.

Next Steps

Jimmy asked Sue to come down to his office. Several weeks had passed since the event and the school year was days from ending. When Sue sat down Jimmy confided what was on his mind. "Am I looking a gift horse in the mouth? The event was great, but the more I keep thinking about it the more disappointed I am." Jimmy knew that Sue had become a regular booster for the event. She could not resist showing off the cafeteria and he could not resist kidding her about it, particularly after one meeting with Lincoln's higher-ed partners. The picture of Sue gathering up the group of academics and leading them down the stairs and through the corridors to check out Lincoln's cafeteria always brought a smile.

“Well, the event accomplished a lot. What were you looking for Jimmy?” Sue asked. He laid out his concerns that after all those months of work, all the meetings and discussions and all that publicity there were still only 20 or so family members and parents working at the event. It just had not engaged families in the school the way he hoped it would. Sue thought for a while and replied that she was not surprised to see largely the same familiar faces at the event. There really had not been any sign of a groundswell of parent support in the planning stage and the event was not structured to reach those who did not step forward.

Jimmy acknowledged that in retrospect the pattern seemed clear. But now he faced a larger question. Where did he go from here? He knew that issues like improving attendance and completion of homework, preparing kids for higher education or the workplace, and encouraging kids to reach for high standards were areas where parents and family could be powerful allies. But how could he get parents involved if he could not get them into the school.

He turned to Sue with the question. She could not resist the opening. “Well Jimmy how much do you like cooking fried chicken?”