

Notable Neighbors

HAR TSDALE'S BETTYE H. PERKINS TEACHES LESSONS FOR LIFE

By **Latoya West**

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When Bettye H. Perkins was a young girl growing up in the segregated South, she gleaned confidence from her African-American teachers.

"They cared not only about my academics, they cared about my general well being," recalls Perkins, founder of the Elmsford-based organization "Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers."

"They did everything from wipe my nose to making sure that I had food. They made sure I got exposure and went on trips. For them, being poor didn't mean I didn't have to buckle down. Going to college was the expectation in my poor community."

As her teachers expected, Perkins did go on to college. And after graduating from North Carolina A&T State University, she became a middle school English teacher in South Carolina and New Jersey, moved to New York to become a management training executive at IBM in Armonk, later enrolled at Pace University with the goal of becoming a district superintendent, and eventually received a doctorate in educational leadership and urban policy from Fordham University.

During an internship with the Ossining School District, the Harstdale resident was asked to come up with a minority teacher recruitment strategy for the town, which was becoming increasingly diverse but had few teachers of color.

Perkins was surprised and disturbed by her research, which revealed that there was a critical shortage of minority teachers in schools nationwide.

She decided to do something about it.

"It became my passion and my calling — and I say it's my ministry — to do what my teachers had done for me," she says. "I wanted to help schools find high quality, competent, caring, certified, effective teachers to match this growing diverse population."

The idea was introduce minority students to teaching during the teen years.

See NEIGHBOR, Page 5B



Bettye H. Perkins says her teachers inspired her. Today, she heads Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers.

MELISSA ELIAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Article Continued Below

[See NEIGHBOR on Page B05](#)

NEIGHBOR: Perkins teaches lessons that last a lifetime

Continued from Page 1B

More than 20 years later, the project that started out with seven students lives on with Perkins' nonprofit organization.

Established as a nonprofit in 1999, Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers recruits students for a program led by teaching mentors that runs from grade 9 through college.

"The idea is for them to experience a career, hands on," Perkins says. "We're saying 'try it, see it if you like it. If you stay in it at the end of those four years, you have a B+ average and good attendance, you tutor other children, visit other colleges, and take the curriculum that includes observing other teachers, then we will help you to go to college. And if you go to one of our 24 (partnering) colleges, you get half off of your tuition."

The program serves more than 350 high school students and more than 250 college students from nearly 50 high schools in Connecticut, New York, Virginia and Massachusetts. Forty-seven percent are African-American, 53 percent are Hispanic/Latino or from other ethnic groups. Seventy-five percent are the first generation to attend college.

Colleges partnering with Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers include Fordham University, Iona College, and Manhattanville College locally, as well as George Mason University in Virginia. More than 100 program graduates now serve as teachers and role models in their communities.

"It brings joy to my soul because you are giving these young people an opportunity to grow up as noble citizens with a charge to give back and teach the next generation," Perkins says. "And the circle will continue."

Perkins and her husband, John (high school sweethearts, they've known each other since elementary school), have no children, but Perkins still says "I think I am the luckiest parent in the world because I have over 600 children (thanks to the program). I see every one of them as my own."

And many of her children still stay in touch.

"I have students who send me pictures of them getting married or say this is your TSTT grandchild," she says with a laugh. Boasting about one standout program alum she says, "I will probably see him become a principal and then a superintendent one day! It brings me so much joy."



"I think I am the luckiest parent in the world because I have over 600 children (thanks to the program)," says Bettye H. Perkins. MELISSA ELIAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

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