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Reading Article G2

Article #14: A "Real School" Is Born

by Collin Perry

LORRAINE MONROE sat dumbfounded, watching the spectacle before her. She had pulled into the faculty parking lot of Harlem's Frederick Douglass Intermediate School just as the next-to-last-period bell sounded. Dozens of students streamed from exits, running and screaming wildly.

"This is nothing," an administrator told her. "I've seen textbooks sail out windows. Even

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chancellor of new york city public schools had prepared her for this.

As she headed for the office of school administrator Howard Lew, Monroe picked her way through the filthy, graffitied hallways, stepping over students sitting on the floor and past others roaming in groups—even though classes were in session.

Touring with Lew, Monroe took in the broken windows, and graffiti-coated blackboards. Ceilings in many rooms looked as though they had been systematically punched out by students. Fires had left other classrooms gutted and boarded up.

In class after class, students lounged on windowsills, laughing and gossiping while the teacher tried valiantly to teach.

The few kids who wanted to learn were either unable to because of the chaos or afraid to try.

"Seen enough?" Lew asked.

Monroe just shook her head. *This isn't a school*, she thought. *It's a holding pen. What am I going to do?*

Dream Maker.

Monroe had grown up not far from Frederick Douglass. Back then the neighborhoods were not as devastated by drugs and gangs, but life had been hard. In many ways, it was Lorraine's tough-minded mother who had maintained the family. She had sweated the details, organizing, cleaning, shopping and hustling about on Sundays getting everyone together for church. She made it into a ritual, a real tradition.

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"Yes, baby, that sure would be something."

"Look, here's another one: 'Split-level ranch priced to sell'—and, see, a fireplace!"

Then one Saturday he showed up with wood to build a fireplace in the living room of their walk-up apartment. No flue? Not a problem. In no time the family was enjoying the best electric-flame fireplace in all of West Harlem. Sometimes, you just had to start from nothing—and be bold.

Then it hit her: did she dare envision starting from scratch with Frederick Douglass?

Real School.

A few weeks later, she made her announcement: "The school is being closed, Mr. Lew, and we're starting all over."

Monroe explained that she had already talked to the school board about a new approach. With Frederick Douglass such an embarrassment, they were willing to try anything.

"We'll reopen in September and start with the seventh grade; the following year, seventh and eighth, and so on until we have a completely new combined junior and senior high school. We'll no longer be just another school: we'll be Frederick Douglass Academy for college and professional careers."

"Where will everyone go," Lew asked, "while we're getting this under way?"

"I'll be there," Monroe said.

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Monroe composed a list of "Twelve Non-negotiables"—rules that all students must follow or face real consequences, ranging from in-school suspension to expulsion. The rules included: No gum, candy, hats or radios. No physical or verbal violence. No defacing of school property. Uniforms worn daily. Students must show respect for staff and one another at all times.

The staff devised a college-preparatory curriculum. "Math, science, social science, English and a foreign language will be the basics," Monroe declared.

A few teachers left the school by mutual agreement, feeling the highly disciplined environment was not for them. That allowed Monroe to handpick new teachers—people with enthusiasm and a sense of purpose.

High Expectations.

Next, she had to sell the academy to the community. As expected, objections to uniforms—“freedom of expression will be denied”—came from community leaders. But not from parents.

Monroe pointed out that uniforms were already prevalent: those of violent gangs and designer-clothing retailers. “And if they can afford \$100 sneakers,” Monroe said, “they can afford a traditional outfit or two.”

When asked what she expected of parents, she replied, “That you support the concept of high expectations.”

On opening day in September 1991, 150 wide-eyed seventh-graders in navy-and-white

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Rules Are Rules.

From that first day Monroe was everywhere, getting to know the kids, encouraging the staff and unexpectedly popping in on teachers—a practice they don’t traditionally welcome.

“A principal who stays in her office might as well stay home” was Monroe’s position. What she ended up with was a fine academic school running smoothly. Real school. She had innovative, dedicated teachers, and kids who were doing so remarkably well that even she was surprised.

After just one year, Frederick Douglass students scored at the top of their district in city-sponsored tests for reading and math. Monroe’s critics now paid her the ultimate “compliment,” claiming that if her kids were performing above average, she must be “creaming” Harlem—taking only the best students. Monroe pointed out school policy: 75

percent of the students had to come from Central Harlem. "No cherry-picking here. Just the hard work of education."

There was no more poignant proof of this than Monroe's ongoing struggle to educate Robinson Cuevas. He was chronically in trouble for talking back to teachers and refusing to work.

One afternoon Monroe sat down to meet with him. "Robinson," she began, "we've tried our best, but things aren't working out. Maybe you'll settle down to work in another environment."

Like so many kids, Cuevas had been conditioned by bluff. Goof off, and you meet with threats and calls home, but never expulsion. Suddenly the young man was near tears.

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tes, and all, the boy replied, trembling visibly.

"Now, stand up," Monroe said, "and let's shake on it."

Feeling Proud.

One day in 1994, Lorraine Monroe headed toward a ninth-grade class. Long accustomed to his boss's "radical" ideas, Lew had feigned shock when Monroe suggested they offer Japanese at Frederick Douglass. "Look around you," she'd said. "It's Japanese cars and CD players we're buying. We have to look ahead."

Entering the classroom, she smiled at the young instructor, Chie Mochizuki-Helenski, and took a seat. "*Basuketto boora no geemu-ni ikimashita,*" Mochizuki-Helenski intoned.

"Translate, please." Hands strained toward the ceiling. "I went to a basketball game!" one of

the boys shouted. "I taught that one to my mother last night," he said, beaming.

Monroe resisted the urge to pinch herself. Yes, this was Central Harlem, one of the innermost of inner cities. Yes, this was a public school. But this child of the ghetto was not only learning a difficult foreign language; he was passing some of it on to a parent.

By spring of 1996 Lorraine Monroe had many reasons to feel proud. She had brought order and boldness to her school, and it now housed more than 700 students. Nearly all were on course for college. Walking back to her office, she passed a boy who called out, "Hello, Dr. Monroe!"

"Hey there, Robinson. All's well?"

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