

Marva Collins is founder and faculty member of Westside Preparatory School in Chicago. She and her unusual teaching methods have been the subjects of numerous magazine and newspaper articles and television interviews.

Her biography, Marva's Children, is being published in 1983 by Houghton-Mifflin. Mrs. Collins has received honorary doctorates from Dartmouth, Chicago State, Clark College, Boston University, Amherst, and the Universities of Hartford and Massachusetts. She has been named recipient of nearly two hundred awards including the national American Public Service Award. She is listed in Who's Who in America and Who's Who in the World.

Mrs. Collins' personally stated goals are: (1) to establish the finest black high school and college and teacher training center on the west side of Chicago by 1986 and (2) to prove that monies do not educate children, people do.

"The Human Condition" radio series is produced by the Communication Center of The University of Texas at Austin and the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health. The series is broadcast weekly by stations subscribing to the Longhorn Radio Network.

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## Foreword

Marva Collins, like many excellent teachers, left the traditional classroom. *Unlike* many excellent teachers, she did not turn away from education. Rather, she made positive use of the energy that could, instead, have been dissipated through anger and frustration. She brought to fruition a dream that must have lain dormant through the years when she wrestled with a failing educational system that was impeding development of youthful human potential.

She chose not to join the ranks of those who merely argued about appropriate educational theory in the safe and antiseptic halls of academia. She decided to act on the courage of her convictions and to test some of the tenets of common wisdom (or common sense).

Mrs. Collins abandoned empty questions like, "Why can't Johnny read?" She refused to get enmeshed in platitudes like, "Back to basics." She eschewed high-sounding theories of motivation, cognitive attribution, and the like.

She recognized the positive aspects of all of these concerns, but turned her attention to the "unconditional positive regard" of which Carl Rogers spoke when he insisted on the acceptance of persons as they are and where they are in therapeutic settings. Should not the classroom be seen as a therapeutic setting? Mrs. Collins saw a mental health attitude related to educational progress as she recognized that one's feelings about self correlate highly with motivation and capacity to learn.

Without fanfare and empty rhetoric, Marva Collins put sound educational principles to work. "Hard love" became her benchmark. It takes love that transcends race, color, sex, and/or class to be a good teacher. It takes love that "passes all understanding" to help some children become.

If this pioneer becomes annoyed with questions that suggest the possibility of some magic potion or voodoo rites as a means of getting children (and especially minorities and 'the "disadvantaged") to learn, it is understandable. If she ignores the hand that follows the tradition of offering money as the solution to all ills, she is to be congratulated.

Melvin P. Sikes, Ph.D. Professor of Educational Psychology The University of Texas at Austin Westside Prep has proved wrong all the public school teachers and principals who say poor black children in crowded city neighborhoods can't be expected to learn. In the beginning, Collins dismantled all the excuses for public school failures by taking in 18 children the public schools had discarded and bringing them above national test standards in reading and math. And she did it with no public money. Juan Williams, The Washington Post, © 1981

## INTRODUCTION

One expects to find preparatory schools nestled behind ivy-covered walls or on broad expanses of green lawn, usually in exclusive neighborhoods. Not Westside Prep, which had its beginning in a converted office building in Chicago's ghetto. Nearby structures with iron gates on storefronts were testimony to the "quality of life" of the area. But inside the office-to-school building, amazing things went on. Marva Collins was at work, and students learned at a pace never dreamed of by traditional educators.

The school now has two buildings purchased with proceeds of a book and movie of "The Marva Collins Story" and support from a Chicago foundation. But quarters are still cramped, and resources are still limited. And the waiting list for enrollment continues.

Many of the original pupils were pushed out of public schools. They had poor grades and worse conduct/attendance records. They had been told they could not learn. They were labeled "troublesome" or "disturbed" or "retarded."

A correlation exists between learning difficulties and behavior problems. Poor learners are usually troublemakers. But with Westside's no-nonsense approach to education, these same youth began making significant strides in their intellectual development. As

they mastered new skills and new material, their selfesteem grew. And they no longer had time for—nor interest in—mischief or violence.

The uniquely successful program has made Mrs. Collins a celebrity. She had been interviewed on "60 Minutes," "Good Morning America," and "The Phil Donahue Show." Award-winner Cicely Tyson portrays the innovative teacher in a made-for-television movie.

Mrs. Collins has been offered and has declined federal positions as Secretary of Education and as Director of Children, Youth, and Family Services. She has said no to appointments to the office of Superintendent of Los Angeles Schools and head of the Chicago school board. She turned down an offer of \$1 million to start a chain of Marva Collins' Schools. And she has received a \$50,000 "Endow a Dream" award from the W. Clement Stone Foundation.

Collins quit her job as a public school teacher after 14 years and cashed in her \$5,000 pension to buy books and desks to start her school. She tries to avoid her sixth-graders' going back to public school. She hopes to add secondary level classes through 12th grade soon. Juan Williams, The Washington Post © 1981

"I tell each child, simply, 'I will not let you fail.' The child believes and succeeds. I tell him that 'I can't' is a lie. He tells me, 'I'll try'." Marva Collins, "60 Minutes," CBS, November 11, 1979

## "A Different School"

A paragraph from a Washington Post article by Juan Williams reads, "Marva Collins, teacher extraordinary, lives here on West Adams Street in a brownstone, a few broken bottles away from a vacant lot covered with bricks and garbage, houses with doors hanging off the hinges, and ragged children running the streets begging change."

Houses in this neighborhood have been neglected much the same way that lives of people there have been neglected. If one person persists long enough and has patience enough to restore, repair, and refurbish a dwelling, it gives hope to others around. It's like a ripple that spreads until the entire block is involved. And the same principle applies to the people who call this section of the city home. When someone has the interest and makes the effort to reach them, rewards come back multiplied.

Westside Preparatory School makes such a special effort, and its teachers share that interest. It began with Mrs. Collins as the sole teacher (she brought her own two children) and with pupils who had no place else to go—who had been pushed out of public schools. The only things in abundance were hope, faith, and determination. The teacher handwrote textbooks because there were no funds to purchase them.

Funds are still insufficient for some purposes, but the school and the children have made remarkable progress. Sixth graders recently took a standardized high-school-level examination. The *poorest* scores averaged what a sixth grader would be expected to make. And the highest scores, recorded by several students, placed these sixth graders on the level of college freshmen.

"We believe in teaching the total child to learn to like himself or herself, the world, the neighborhood. Ironically the skills automatically come once people get that caring about themselves," Mrs. Collins continues:

The preparation of the teacher and the kinds of skills that a teacher brings to the classroom make up 99 percent of the task that must be accomplished. First of all, it is necessary to be human. One may have all sorts of skills, but too many of us have lost the ability to be human. And I think attitudes play a very important part. Attitude is one of the first

things I look for in teachers—not their degrees or how much experience they have. If they do not believe that they can perform, nothing else will come through anyway.

I select those teachers who are human, first, before their degrees. I am not interested in what they did some place else. Our school is antithetical to what everyone else does in America. We do what is best for the children there, and the children are first at all times. So I look for those teachers who are willing to give a little bit.

I look for a teacher who does not have to be told that the children are the most important people there. We have a saying in our school that the children are the big I's, and we are the little u's. The children have desks, but teachers do not have the luxury of desks. We move about among the children all day.

I look for a teacher who is not bogged down in excuses for not getting a job done. I look for a teacher who does not give homework as punishment, a teacher who is always in control and does not get upset and lose control. I look for a teacher who is calm and who does not scream and yell, because when we scream and yell, the children know that we are out of control.

The team of founder and teachers is firm with students, but they can and do tolerate a wide variance of behaviors a child goes through before coming to feel totally accepted and wanted. As children reach to like themselves and then others, they will go through belligerent stages, phases where they challenge authority.

I always told people, "This is my way." They have to find their own ways. But mine has worked for me. The more a child says to me, "I hate you," I will continually reply, "I love you." And the child will repeat, "I hate you." I continue to say, "I love you. If you knock me on the floor, I am going to get right up again and help you anyway." I think for the first time in that child's life, he has not had an equal battle.

The acceptance of challenging behavior and the highly structured program would seem to be a contradiction, but they are not. What makes a difference is the personal caring that the students in Westside Prep receive.

The determination mentioned earlier is one important factor that gives the children security in the structure and knowledge that they can rely on their teachers. Mrs. Collins recalls:

One child took a year to read Jane Eyre. She tore the book, her nose bled in the book, she ripped out pages. Everytime she destroyed one, I bought another copy. She now reads avidly, and she tells me she will never forget me nor Jane Eyre. But her last copy was so tattered . . . she is leaving school at the end of this year . . . I am wrapping it and giving it to her as a year-end gift. It is a story she will remember and tell her children. I never gave up. I don't give up on the children.

Much of the children's thirst for new things to study is due to Collins' enthusiasm for her profession. Most important, though, is that she believes in her students. "You have to show that you believe in them—that you know there's nothing they can't do." Paul Martin, "One Teacher's Triumph," Success Unlimited (Chicago: W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation) 1980

Students face strong challenge in the curriculum. They tackle high school algebra in the sixth grade. They read Tolstoy and Dostoevski, among others. They study biology and political science. The first reading lesson for the youngest students, four-year-olds, is "Little Red Hen." The moral from the story is that one does not get to eat if one does not work. The goal for these beginners is to be reading in four months.

First graders read Tolstoy's *The Plum Pit*. Many people are not aware that Tolstoy wrote for children. The more advanced students go on into literary classics. They read chapter by chapter and then have class discussion. Whereas children often are deprived of oral expression (being told to "sit down and be quiet"), these sessions offer opportunity for exchange of ideas and thoughts.

Most children have so many experiences where adults speak to them negatively and only when something is wrong. At Westside, everyone speaks in the positive. "I am glad to see you today," or "How nice your braids look." Even if a child arrives late, the greeting is more likely to be, "I missed you. I am happy you got here," rather than, "Where have you been?" Also, everyone touches a good deal, and that touching further expresses the personal warmth.

We cannot play games with the children. Dick and Jane stories won't do. Mom never works; Daddy comes home every day at the same time with his attache case. The house is nicely painted; roses climb the fence.

Our boys and girls would go home and think something is awfully wrong with their own families because they are not like Dick and Jane's. I let the children see the world. I try to be very realistic, which I think they respect in me. I say to the children, "Your friend is someone who tells you what you need to know, not what you want to hear." And they learn it's all right to be poor. Poor is not indifferent. It's all right to be angry sometimes.

As word of the school has spread, requests for placement have far exceeded accommodations available. Currently 200 students are enrolled, some 800 or more are on a waiting list.

The Westside Preparatory School is founded on a premise of the teachers' giving themselves to the students. Boys and girls who are given money or objects do not get the same feeling of self-worth that comes from an adult's attentive comments, "How do you feel today?" or "Is there something I can do to help you with your paper?" These remarks communicate love, and their effect is a near-miracle.

"What's going on here is basic education," emphasizes Collins. "People keep saying we should return to the basics. Well, I never left them. 'Learning to Live' courses never taught anyone to read or write or multiply. That takes training, and that's what we are doing here; but it's done in a way that makes kids hungry to learn." Success Unlimited

Westside Prep charges a monthly tuition, unless a parent can't afford to pay; then there is no charge. Success Unlimited

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