

Parish youth work to save Louisiana coastline

From the teachers desk:

Donna's Dream

I experienced such a rotten time in grades one through 12 in public school at a small north Louisiana town that I vowed someday to be a teacher. If teachers were monsters, why would I aspire to be like that? Simply because I knew it did not have to be "like that." I thought of Jesus Christ, the greatest teacher ever known.

With teachers calling me "stupid" and never believing in me as a potential success of any kind, I was very close to my daddy, who did believe in me. He taught me the most important lessons in my life. He was always there when I fell down. He never gave me a hand to get up; instead, he never let up until I had got myself up. Then he instructed me to brush myself off and to thank Jesus for giving me the next step that I would take on my own. He showered me with praise at that point, and on we went, grade after grade, until, a few short months before my senior graduation, I had to drop out of high school.

The teachers who had given me holy hell all those years were now sure that they had been right after all: You see, she is stupid.

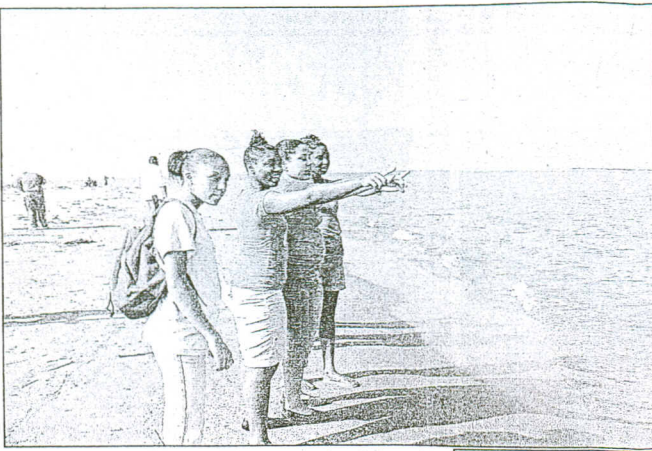
Shortly after dropping out of high school, I did finish my GED. I asked the administrator whether, since I had almost finished at a particular school, it would be possible to say my GED was from that school. He said that although that had never been done, he was sure going to try to get it done for me. That June, I received a GED from the school that had not yet seen what stupid can do...

My dream was to be smart and to be recognized for being smart.

I wanted to be a teacher who showered praises for students' strengths and helped them learn how to overcome weaknesses, therefore helping them dream a dream or plan a goal. And if there were no dream, I wanted to plant a seed of permission that it is okay to dream, and that it is okay to take God's time in reaching that dream...

I have learned that different people learn in so many different ways and by so many different methods. No one way is right or wrong; but each way is suitable for a specific person. To criticize in a judgemental way someone who cleans floors instead of writing books is where the problem lies. Do what you do with great dignity and pride, because your work reflects your character.

I did go on to become a teacher in agriculture, journalism and special education. This summer, I will also finish ele-



Photographs by Beth Dawson

Left: Velma George, Yolanda Woods, Ashleigh Williams and Jameaka Sterling catch sight of dolphins. Above: Jeffery Mahan carrying three bundles of bitter panicum cuttings from the United States Department of Agriculture Plant Materials Center in Golden Meadow, La. Below: Pelicans on a rock formation.

mentary education before I go on to work on my doctorate. So, am I really stupid?

In June 2005, I realized a very important dream when I got to go canoeing and photographing with C.C. Lockwood and his wife Sue. At that point, C.C.'s love of and devotion to our Louisiana coasts infused my soul to do something about the coastal needs myself and to involve my school in East Feliciana.

The seed planted at that workshop took a year to germinate, but by October 2006, the dream was alive and taking sprout.

Mr. Joseph Jones gave me permission to form the bitter panicum project centered on the name of the marsh grass that a group of students and I nurtured until this February 25. That day we loaded a parish bus and headed to the Grand Isle State Park where Jackson High School made a significant contribution to our Louisiana coast at the Gulf of Mexico. You have heard me say before, *What starts on the coast is literally felt all over the world.*

The bitter panicum grass has been recognized as reducing storm surge by one foot for every mile of bitter panicum. As Jeffery Mahan's dad reminded me, the roots filter salt out of the water, which is another problem the coastal areas face.

The problem is that salt-water intrusion alters the entire area it affects. Why? When you drive south and see dead cypress trunks standing, you can bank on salt-water intrusion as the reason. Salt-water culture and fresh-water culture have different characteristics and requirements to sustain life. Both have a place in the environment, but *place is the key word.*

So now Donna's Dream—to care for the coast with some of

the greatest students in the world at Jackson High School here in East Feliciana,—is another of my dreams come true...what next?

It was so much fun, and such a great learning experience for JHS students and me as well as for many parish residents that we have started plans to do the bitter panicum project all over again.

Dr. Pam Blanchard made arrangements for us to partner with Grand Isle State Park. The students, parents and retired teachers on our team all made their mark as having the best crop of bitter panicum ever planted at the park.

The grass was dead to the untrained eye, but as Garrett Thomasee at the United States Department of Agriculture Plant Materials Center in Golden Meadow, La., pointed out, the grass was only dormant. Mr. Ed, the man responsible for the grounds area at the Grand Isle State Park pointed out that the grass had started sprouting. There were some winter weeds firmly fixed in the pots, but he said they would die with the hotter temperatures of the coast.

Normally, an instrument designed to plant in the sand called a dibble is used. This works well for the cell culture technique often employed by LSU coastal roots, but this time we used post-hole diggers to accommodate our one-gallon pots. We used those pots to save money, because that is the size we had, but they worked perfectly on all counts.

Now back to dreaming. Your homework is to dream a dream, and to go figure how you will get there. Know one thing: If you want it badly enough, no person or demon will stop you. It is guaranteed many demons may stand in your way, but never stop believing in your-



self. Your court is never empty. There is always one being there, and that is God. Just know, if you fall, you have to get yourself up. Brush yourself off...and the next step is easy. Just thank Jesus for that next step and I will thank my daddy forever for the most important lesson for me to learn: To dream and to believe is to achieve!

God made me who I am and not what someone thought I should be. If I can do it, so can you!

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