

To Be Young, Gifted And Encouraged

When Joyce Oatman created a challenging program for her inner-city students, she discovered something amazing

While there are no clear-cut solutions to the problems confronting the nation's elementary and secondary schools, a great deal is being done through various programs and approaches. And it's clear, as the following report on Chicago's Joyce Oatman and her inner-city students demonstrates: One person can make a difference.

ONE GOOD WAY TO FIND out what's really going on in a high school is to wait until the teachers are otherwise occupied and talk with the kids. Teenagers are usually pretty astute judges of their world. So when I went to a Midwestern High school recently, I was impressed that they all spoke highly of their school and what it was preparing them for.

"In five years, I will have graduated from college with a degree in hotel management," one girl told me. "I will have my first job with a major hotel company. Ten years from now, I expect to own several hotels."

"Five years from now, I will be getting my master's in English from Harvard," a boy said. "After that, I plan to go to law school and become a lawyer."

There are plenty of high schools in America where that kind of talk is only to be expected—boarding schools in the Northeast, prep schools in Los Angeles, suburban high schools around the country. But these two young people were students at drafty old Tilden High, on the South Side of Chicago—inner-city kids from the kind of backgrounds that might make an outsider think they had never stayed in a hotel or heard of Harvard, much less planned to own one and attend the other.

They were bright, articulate and self-assured—in part because they have an educational resource you can't get at those fancy schools. They have Joyce Oatman.

She's one of those people who seem to energize a room by entering it, her nonstop talk and upbeat message persuading by their very persistence. For 34 years, Oatman has been teaching at public high schools in Chicago—since she left a graduate fellowship in chemistry at the University of Wisconsin. "I always knew I wanted to teach," she says, "and it was cold and lonely up in Madison, so I just came to Chicago and started teaching."

Early on, her principals identified Oatman as a special teacher. At Crane High School on Chicago's West Side, she was placed in charge of the college-preparatory program. Although the school was in a neighborhood of housing projects, she placed dozens



Joyce Oatman with some of her students at Tilden High in Chicago.

of kids in college. But five years ago, that success seemed threatened. Chicago State University, which had accepted many of her students, announced that it would begin raising its admissions standards by increasing the point requirement on the ACT standardized exam by one point a year. Most of Oatman's college-bound students were scoring only 14 points. She believed she had just two years to get their scores up to 18—which is still only average. "I had to get four points from somewhere," she recalls. (Actually, the point requirement will not reach 18 until 1993.)

Oatman read every educational textbook she could get her hands on and began enrichment programs for her students. She brought them to school early in the morning and talked them into staying late and coming in on Saturdays. She worked with them on basic skills like reading and math but also talked to them about how to think critically and about issues as diverse as philosophy and the environment.

Looking for ideas, Oatman went to an educational conference in New Orleans and wandered into a seminar on gifted children. When she described what she was doing at Crane, the moderator said it had all the earmarks of a program for gifted children. "I thought she was crazy," Oatman recalls. "These were inner-city kids."

But then she noticed something remarkable: Her students were starting to perform like gifted children. Those ACT scores started going up to 18, and then past, into the 20s. Oatman's improvised teaching methods were bearing fruit. The first class of eight Crane seniors in her intensive program graduated last year. Seven are now in top colleges, including the University of Minnesota, the University of Iowa and the University of Illinois. Their averages range from C to A-. The eighth student recently applied to college.

This year, Oatman moved to Tilden and brought her ideas with her. Her Tilden TAG (Talented and

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This summer will be a little brighter for more than a hundred north Portland youngsters thanks to a grant from Kaiser Permanente.

The health maintenance organization is giving \$8,000 to launch a new program bringing a month of reading, art, theater, and sports activities to immigrant and low-income students at Beach Elementary School. The school

is located at 1710 N. Humboldt in the same north Portland neighborhood as a number of Kaiser Permanente medical facilities. Some 75 percent come from families considered low-income under the federal nutrition program.

"With the grant from Kaiser Permanente, we can now begin the program for the first time this summer. We'll be able to offer kids constructive

activities that they might not otherwise have during summer leave. Just as important, it will be a safe, positive place for them to be during the day," states Beach School principal, Mike Verbout.

Verbout says that from June 24 through July 19, more than 100 of the school's 770 students will be able to participate.



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