LESSONS FROM GERMANTOWN HIGH'S HISTORY: RACE, CLASS AND THE FUTURE OF URBAN EDUCATION

By Erika Kitzmiller

On February 24, 2007, newspaper headlines throughout Philadelphia focused on a teacher attack that occurred at Germantown High School. According to reports, two students assaulted their math teacher, Frank Burd, after he reprimanded them for using an iPod in his classroom.

While this was not the first school assault in the school district that year, the severity of his injuries created a media frenzy that fueled a new awareness of school violence and safety throughout the city's public schools.

Several months later, the school district hired one of my colleagues to become Germantown High School's new principal. As a graduate student who felt restless

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outside of schools, I asked to follow him there to watch his practice in the hopes that I might be able to document and analyze the process of transforming an urban comprehensive high school.

Was the past all that glorious?

Germantown High's women's swim team in 1944. (Photo from 1944 yearbook courtesy of Germantown Historical Society.)

While I witnessed many remarkable transformations that year, I often heard about Germantown High School's storied past more than its current challenges when I spoke Germantown teachers, alumni, and residents. I was curious about their emphasis on the past, and so I formulated my own questions and investigated whether the high school's past was as glorious as these individuals seemed to believe.

After examining this question for the past several years, I found evidence suggesting that Germantown High School was indeed a place that transformed the lives of its students, provided them with a first-rate education, and enabled them to secure a more prosperous future.

Germantown alumni recalled their high school experience as a fond memory that afforded them opportunities that other Philadelphia youth did not necessarily enjoy. David Alcorn, who graduated from Germantown High School in 1940, was one of these alumni.

Luck of the Irish

Alcorn's parents were Irish immigrants who arrived in America with a primary school education. His father worked as a gardener for Germantown's famed Wister family, and eventually,became a conductor on the Philadelphia Transit Company. His mother found employment as a domestic with a local family and worked at home when she married Alcorn's father.

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David Alcorn described Germantown High School as a "perfect society" where he felt academically challenged due to a close relationship with his mathematics teacher, Dr. Anna M. Mullikin.

A PhD teaching high school math

Mullikin was the first woman to receive a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Pennsylvania. When she graduated, her advisors urged her to find employment as a high school teacher. Her gender, not her intellect, barred her from university employment. She followed the advice and accepted a position at Germantown High School.

Mullikin lived a few blocks from the high school and conducted daily tutorial sessions with exceptional students, such as Alcorn, teaching them advanced mathematical concepts and skills.

One afternoon, Mullikin pulled Alcorn aside and told him that her brother, who was not as bright as Alcorn, had accepted a job as a chemical engineer. She told Alcorn that this position offered a very high salary. Alcorn recalled that he had never heard of chemical engineering, but for a son of two Irish immigrants, this line of work appealed to him because it might provide him with a more secure economic future.

With Mullikin's support, Alcorn earned one of the city's coveted Mayor's scholarships, which entitled him to a four-year scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania. In the fall of 1940, he became the first member of his family to attend college, earned a degree in chemical engineering, and had a lucrative career throughout his lifetime. Alcorn's education at Germantown High School provided him with the skills and opportunities to escape his class and ethnic origins.

The struggle of African American students

While David Alcorn credits his high school with the skills and opportunities that prepared him for his future, other students had different experiences.

Marion Campbell and Savannah Holman, two African American students who graduated from Germantown High School in 1936, recalled that their race and gender often shaped the opportunities and memories that they forged as students and graduates of their local public high school.

In 1936, Campbell and Holman were a handful of black students who attended their predominately white, upper and middle class high school. In her interview, Campbell recalled that her teachers routinely separated black and white students in their classrooms.

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According to Campbell, her teachers usually seated the white students alphabetically in the front of the classroom, and then, relegated the black students to the remaining seats in the back of the classroom. She remembered that her guidance counselor had discouraged her from enrolling in the academic course and urged her to enroll in the commercial course, which she believed was better suited to her disposition and future aims. Campbell ignored these recommendations and took the academic course.

Even though Campbell defied the teacher's recommendation, she and Holman painfully remembered the racial discrimination that they experienced as students at Germantown High School. During their senior year, their algebra teacher gave both of them an F minus in the course.

At the time, Campbell and Holman worried that this failing mark might have barred them from graduation. It did. So they retook the course the following semester and graduated a semester late.

At the time, Campbell felt bitter and angry. Her family needed her to work to support them during this great time of need. More than 70 years later, Campbell still asks herself, "How can any student earn an F minus?" She knew that her teacher was racist, but there was not much that she could do about it. She and Holman complied with the school's demands, took their algebra course the following semester, and earned the academic credential that they knew they both deserved.

Gordon Howard, a volunteer at Germantown Historical Society, holds a scrapbook from a student in Germantown High's class of 1924.

As Germantown High School closes its doors, its 99-year history reminds us that our nation's public school can indeed alter the life trajectories of the young men and women who attend them. However, these institutions also have replicated and reinforced the very inequalities that many hoped and believed public schools might address.

Listening to and documenting the multiplicity of experiences that Germantown High School students, such as David Alcorn, Marion Campbell, and Savannah Holman, reminds us that we need to recognize the paradox between educational opportunity and educational inequality that has existed at Germantown High School since its founding. Once we have done that, perhaps, we can begin the difficult process of crafting social, economic, and political policies and practices to alleviate educational inequality for the youth who will attend our city's

public schools in the future.

(Dr. Erika Kitzmiller, an assistant clinical professor of education at Drexel University, holds a PhD in history from the University of Pennsylvania. Her doctoral dissertation was on the history of Germantown High School. In the fall, she will begin a fellowship at Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute. She wrote this reflection at the request of Germantown Beat.)

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