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Joe Fisher would make kids dreams come true

Barbara Frye

LaChea Jenkins lives in the Kimberly Gardens townhouse development. She has three sons, the oldest of whom, Rico, dreams of growing up to buy his mother a house.

Rico says things that make her cry. "He's a fantastic child with a lot of ideas," she said Friday. "He said, 'Momma, you know what? Someday my dream's gonna come true.' Chills went down my spine."

Rico is 14, a most unpredictable age, but Jenkins isn't worried. "I believe in him," she said simply.

It's that kind of faith that Joe Fisher wants to build on. As a member of the Faith African Methodist Episcopal Church in Laurel, he is piloting a project called "First Generation College-Bound." Fisher meets periodically with students and their parents in the Kimberly Gardens and adjacent Cherry Branch developments to show them how they can go to college.

"I've always been a dreamer, and I think there are a lot of kids out there who feel that way," he said last week.

He wants the spotlight squarely on the program, and not on himself. "I am a resident of Laurel and I care about the community," he summed up.

Fisher grew up in subsidized housing in Southeast Washington during the '60s. He insisted to a reporter that he does not want to become another ghetto-to-graduate school parable. "You hear the same old story all the time. I don't want the

stereotype to come out."

Fisher has a tale to tell, though, that might ring true for kids like Rico, and even he would agree that examples of success are worth pointing out.

His parents never finished high school, and his father hauled refuse until he was trained as a mechanic. Still, he said, "I grew up with middle-class values." He and his seven siblings, he explained, were taught not to fight, to treat people nicely, to work out disagreements rationally and to take care of their home.

School was another story. He remembers it as "painful."

"Kids would always fight, and some would get seriously hurt." It was not an easy place to learn.

Fisher grew up in a house his parents did not own, and he dreamed of someday buying his own house. Though crowded — three bedrooms and one bathroom for 10 people — it was not such a bad place, he recalled.

The development his family lived in was new, part of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty. People had hope, he said, recalling a visit to the neighborhood by Lady Bird Johnson. "It made me feel like the government really cared."

Fisher's voice tenses as he remembers the public programs that helped lift him up, but were dismantled during the Reagan administration. His father took advantage of a government-funded job training program to become a mechanic and, after college, Fisher got a government-sponsored internship to teach while attending graduate school.

"My success has been because of Democrats' programs," he said evenly.

Ironically, he did not want to go to college. "I didn't see the importance of education." A cross-country champion and all-Met runner, he was headed for the military, like two brothers before him, when a track coach from Penn State saw him running and told him, "Son, you keep running like that and you're gonna get a scholarship."

Sure enough, Fisher got the money and went to Morgan State College and Catholic University. During graduate school, he taught juveniles in the Baltimore City jail. "I learned a lot from that. They were a bunch of good kids who were in the wrong place at the wrong time." He organized a PTA and was able to get parents to come. "They were pretty good parents. They just didn't know what to do," he remembered.

"First Generation College-Bound" draws on that experience. It is as much for parents as for students. "When a parent stops hoping and dreaming, you're gonna lose a kid," he said, before quoting a poem written by a homeless girl: "Please forgive my parents for the way they look and I look because they stopped dreaming when I was 10."

He has also taught in the Baltimore City schools and now he teaches at Harper's Choice Middle School in Columbia.

Of his parents' eight children, three went to college. One brother even earned a doctorate in divinity. Of his three other brothers, one is an

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officer in the military, one an electrical technician and one unemployed.

One of Fisher's three sisters is a retired office manager with State Department, one an office manager with Amtrak, and one unemployed.

At a meeting at Kimberly Gardens last Friday, Fisher told a group of about 30 adults, teens and elementary schoolers that many of the kids he grew up with in Southeast Washington had become "statistics."

It hurts him, he said, to know that most other college graduates have old high school friends to get together with and tell stories about college. There is no one in his old neighborhood to share such stories with.

But college gave him the opportunity to do things that make him proud, he told the group. "My brother and I moved my mother out of a government housing project. It took knowledge to do that."

Now Fisher has two kids of his own, a daughter, 12, and a son, 10. "They have already talked about going to college." Fisher said he wants them to go, but does not have any specific occupation in mind for them. "I want them to expand their minds and be an asset to society."



Staff photo by Jason Lee

Joe Fisher tells youth from low income families how they can go to college.

But Fisher does not forget the kids who haunt the same places he did 25 years ago. "I know there are some innocent kids there. I know people there that really care. It's not their fault."

Fisher eventually wants "First Generation College-Bound" to reach all the way down, to the youngest elementary school students, and to get to the parents. "For me to do what I want to do, it's going to take about 20 years," he said.

Right now, he is concentrating on high school students and their parents. Fisher gives them information on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, colleges and financial aid, shows them how to fill out the forms, and waits with them during the painful acceptance and rejection season. He invites speakers who are chasing their dreams.

At last Friday's meeting, for example, students and their parents listened to actor Tico Wells. Wells is a 1979 graduate of Laurel High School who has become a successful actor on television and in movies.

He got the attention of the youngsters at the meeting by starting with a videotape of his roles on the "Cosby Show," "China Beach" and other well-known TV shows. Then, he talked about living in Laurel's Grove neighborhood and in the Village Square development at Route 197 and Contee Road. Eventually, through hard work and the support of his family, he was able to study drama at Bowie State College and New York University.

Now he lives in Los Angeles and has just completed work on a movie, "Five Heartbeats," in which he has a starring role. The film will be released in February. Wells said he is also doing some work as a director.

"There's a whole world outside of Laurel. There's a whole universe out there that we don't even know about," he told the group. "You can do anything you want to do ... if you keep your goal right in view."

After the meeting, almost everyone in the room stood in line to get Wells' autograph.

Rico Washington, Jenkins' 14-year-old son, said the presentation by Wells and the encouragement of Fisher has made him certain that he wants to go to college. "Before, I was undecided ... I was not thinking about it."

The Laurel High ninth grader said it was his mother who attended the first meeting at the Kimberly Gardens community room. She tried to talk Rico into joining her, but it wasn't until Joseph Fisher called him on the phone that he was persuaded. "When he

called me and told me he wanted me to come I was like, 'He really cares.' "

Now, Rico wants to be at every meeting. "As long as it continues I'm going to go," he said.

"Some of these kids are hungry to do well," Fisher said, pointing to a ninth-grade girl with a B in algebra, an 11th-grade boy who plans to become a lawyer and an eighth-grade boy who wants to play basketball and study law.

Even so, attendance has been modest — between 15 and 30 students and parents. Jenkins said she thinks people are skeptical. "We used to go to (tenant) meetings, and it was always, promises, promises, promises." She said Prince George's County, which owns Kimberly Gardens, had raised hopes too many times with false pledges of better landscaping, better furnishings or tighter se-

curity.

But these meetings are different. Jenkins said. "If they only knew what they were missing. It seems like Mr. Fisher is somebody we've been waiting for for years to come into the community. I said to him, 'If only you could have come here four years ago, some of these kids might not be out in the street right now.' "

Her neighbor, Brenda Smith, agrees. "He has really been an inspiration for the community," she said. She described how Fisher knocked on every door when the program was beginning and talked to people to find out if they were interested.

Smith, who is president of the Kimberly Gardens civic association, points out that her oldest daughter, Valeta, is an honor roll student at Eisenhower Middle School. She hopes that Valeta and her little sister will go

to college some day, perhaps with the help Joe Fisher.

"He has been a blessing to the community," she said. "I can see it coming up off the ground. I can see things are just happening

So far, Fisher runs the program with occasional help from other volunteers at Fa AME. He has applied for a grant from the county to pay for mailing costs, college tours, gasoline, and, perhaps, a part-time staffer. He has also been asked by the Aval apartment complex in Capitol Heights to bring the program there.

There is a huge commitment of volunteer time involved, Fisher admits. But he points out that his wife is also an enthusiastic supporter of the program.

"I'm going to become a very serious advocate for low- and moderate-income parents," he said. "I've got to do it."

