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As is often the case, I have to read in the paper what David is up to rather than learn it at home . . . but perhaps I wouldn't have it any other way.

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School of Second Chances

The teachers at Oak Hill Academy approach their jobs with the faith that even the most hardened juvenile delinquents can achieve -- and the knowledge that many still won't

By Karen Houppert
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The six teenage boys, incarcerated at the District's Oak Hill juvenile detention facility in Laurel file into their classroom after lunch one late January afternoon. They are surprised to see strangers -- five women and two men -- sitting in the chairs that the boys typically occupy.

The students find some empty seats and shrug out of their matching brown coats and mismatched scarves. They are curious about the visitors in a lean-back, fold-your-arms, prove-it kind of way.

"I'm James Forman," begins a 40-something man. "I'm a professor at Georgetown Law School and -- "

"You related to *the* James Forman?" interrupts 17-year-old Carleto Bailey.

"I'm James Forman Jr."

"That your father? James Forman your dad?" Carleto demands.

"Yes, I -- "

"Wasn't he some big civil rights guy? NAACP? Or SNCC?"

"SNCC," Forman says, seemingly surprised that Carleto has heard of his father, who was executive secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee for years in the 1960s before becoming active with the Black Panthers.

"He's a good guy," Carleto continues. "You tell him that."

Forman smiles. "He passed a few years ago, but he would be happy to hear this," the professor says. He scans the room. The Oak Hill students, all African American, are dressed identically in khaki pants and royal-blue polo shirts. They have chosen seats on the edges of the room and, after sitting down, have pushed their chairs back as far as possible against the wall.

Forman's Georgetown law students -- African American, Arab, Latino, Caucasian -- are in jeans and sweaters. They lean forward, intent and maybe a little bit nervous. "I teach a class on juvenile justice at the law school," Forman continues. "And I thought this would be a really good way for law students to learn about juvenile justice. There is a certain amount you can learn from reading, but you also need to see and experience things. So I thought they would learn a lot from coming out here and hearing about your experiences."

Carleto raises an eyebrow. This is a new one.

"And the benefit for you is that they know things about the law that you don't. Ya'll have certain things you know. They have certain things they know. It can be a learning opportunity for everybody."

Forman suggests they go around the room and share their names and an interesting fact about themselves.

Dead silence.

He smiles encouragingly. "My name is James Forman, and I helped to start this organization, See Forever, that now runs your school," he says.

Carleto, who has been leaning back on the two rear legs of his chair, brings it down with a bang that sends his short dreads swinging forward and his black plastic rectangular glasses sliding down his nose.

A few Georgetown students jump.

He looks out over the top of his glasses. "My name's Carleto Bailey," he says. "My interesting fact is that I'm funny."

He gives a wide smile of bright white teeth. The Georgetown students laugh. Oak Hill student Ashawntea Henderson, 17, who sits next to him, rolls his eyes. But Carleto's not done: "And I'm smart."

But as it turns out, these Georgetown folks -- like his other teachers at Oak Hill Academy -- aren't going to accept Carleto's assertion at face value. They want more than good grades, more than the right answers on a multiple-choice test. They want him to prove that he can think.

Forman shows the group an excerpt of a film about juveniles incarcerated at New York's Rikers Island. Afterward, the law students want to know whether a label makes a difference. It's a hard question. "Inmates? Residents? Scholars?" one of them asks. "Does it matter what you're called?"

Carleto studies the woman's face to discern what she wants to hear back. It is blank. He struggles. "Not so much," he says, finally. He looks at her. She seems unconvinced. He worries that he has given the wrong answer and tries again.

"Back in the community, there are certain [police] patrols in the neighborhood who say, 'I know what you're up to.' When we come home, some of us are trying to do right, but they basically criticize us because you're already labeled."

"What are the labels?" Forman asks.

This one is easy for Carleto. He sinks down in his chair and throws it out.

"Trouble," he says.

Carleto Bailey is trouble. He is also, as he rightly noted, smart. But he has arrived at Oak Hill Academy with a few disadvantages: He has been poorly educated in the D.C. public schools, was frequently truant and has had multiple run-ins with the law. The D.C. Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, which runs Oak Hill, won't release information on the specific crime that landed Carleto here because he is still a juvenile, but we do know this is Carleto's second time at the detention center. His academic knowledge is spotty at best. He can tell you who James Forman is, but not where the comma falls in a letter's greeting. ("Dear, Fidel" he writes in a mock letter to Castro during English class.) He is a fairly typical Oak Hill "scholar."

And, once upon a time, he would have been written off. But today, staff at the fledgling Oak Hill Academy are determined to view the kids' captive time here as a window of opportunity to fill in some of the gaping holes in their education. Part of the reform initiative of Vincent Schiraldi, director of Youth Rehabilitation Services, the school opened its doors only last year and takes a unique approach to teaching delinquent youth.

What would happen, Oak Hill Academy co-founders Forman and David Domenici wondered, if you seduced these kids with content that was meaningful to them? What would happen if they had lots of good, caring teachers in small classrooms? What if one assumed the kids could learn -- and behaved as such? In other words, what would happen if the District's most challenged students got a private school education, albeit on a campus of a decidedly different nature?

"The bottom line," says Domenici, "is that the kids most at risk need the highest quality programming, but they've gotten the worst."

It is this conviction that drove Domenici, who is also the school's principal, and Forman to create three public charter schools for underprivileged and troubled students in the District over the past 11 years. Called the Maya Angelou schools, the two high schools and middle school attack educational deficiencies from all angles. Students attend small classes taught by specially trained staff. The high school day stretches from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., with three meals provided. Some kids, whose home lives prove too chaotic for study, are offered supervised housing in the neighborhood. And it works. Last year, 93 percent of Maya Angelou graduates were accepted into two- or four-year colleges, Domenici says. (According to the District's Office of the State Superintendent of Education, 29 percent of students who enter ninth grade in D.C. public schools and city charter schools enroll in postsecondary educational programs within 18 months of graduating high school.)

It is a good model. But even though Domenici and Forman were used to teaching court-involved youth -- about 40 percent of Maya Angelou students had spent some time at Oak Hill -- working inside the gates posed a new set of challenges. Youth Rehabilitation Services has been under a court monitor for 23 years due in part to a history of abuse and poor conditions. When Schiraldi took over the department in 2005 and began his reform efforts by implementing a less punitive and more therapeutic detention model at Oak Hill, he saw immediately that changing the school was essential. "How could I look at my staff at Oak Hill and say we are about excellence when the kids were sitting in a school that was a total waste of time from 9 to 3 every day?" Schiraldi says. Kids sat and watched movies all day. Little, if any teaching was going on, Schiraldi says. "It was a miserable, miserable school."

Schiraldi immediately began lobbying the D.C. Board of Education hard to hire someone new to operate the school, and as soon as he got the okay, he put out a request for proposals. Domenici and Forman submitted a

plan that Schiraldi says "blew the other ones out of the water," and in 2007 were awarded a \$12 million contract to run the school for the next three years.

Domenici's and Forman's partnership is a somewhat unlikely one. Domenici is the son of former New Mexico Republican senator Pete Domenici. He went to Stanford Law School, worked in corporate law for a few years and then gave it up to teach and work with teen delinquents. Forman is the grandson of Jessica Mitford, who was the daughter of a British baron and a celebrated civil rights activist and journalist. Forman, who graduated from Yale Law School, worked as a law clerk for Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and as a D.C. public defender. After seeing how few good schooling options his teenage clients had, he joined forces with Domenici, whom he met through a mutual friend, to start an independent school for 20 students in 1997. A year later, it became part of the first Maya Angelou public charter school.

At Oak Hill Academy, principal Domenici fights with an occasionally maddening bureaucracy for basics: functioning boilers, permission for a college tour for a group of six students, classes uninterrupted by corrections staff who sometimes will call three-quarters of the students out in the middle of class to take their meds. Forman is chairman of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School Board of Directors and board member of its parent group, the See Forever Foundation. He attacks hurdles from the other side, fundraising and advocating for juvenile justice reform.

"When David came out to run the school here, it was like "Ocean's 12": Go find all the people you can trust from your previous mission," Forman jokes. That included past colleagues and even a few Maya Angelou graduates. Samantha Crandal Simpure, who had been at a then-coed Oak Hill herself when she was 15 on an accessory assault charge, went to a Maya Angelou school and now runs the Oak Hill Academy welcome center. "I tell them, I was here, too," Simpure says. She tells each new student about how she was 17 years old and didn't know her multiplication tables, how she rode the bus to school each day hooked up to her Walkman, hoping no one knew she was listening to a recitation of times tables. "I say: 'You're at an intersection in your life. You know what's down the street behind you. Nothing you can do about that. But you have a choice about what's up the road ahead.' "

Many of the 90 Oak Hill students, ranging in age from 14 to 19, come in performing way below grade level, and nearly half have been diagnosed with learning disabilities. They are at Oak Hill for an average of 10 months, cycling in and out on a schedule that has nothing to do with a nine-month academic year. Out of necessity, they are grouped according to the cell blocks they live on to keep opposing gangs separate. Thirteen-year-olds can be in classes with 18-year-olds. More than half have been committed to Oak Hill for violent felonies. Fights are common. (Before the month is out, Carleto will get into a fistfight in the hallway that will delay his release date.)

Through the use of small classes -- typically five to 14 teens work with one teacher, a teaching assistant and a guard -- the school organizes the curriculum around four-week themes designed to pique students' curiosity and get them to think critically about the nature of democracy, social justice and their role in the world. For example, during the Relationship theme, students parse the types of relationships ranging from those between humans and the natural world (ancient river civilizations) to those between individuals and groups (Pharaohs and their subjects) to those between humans and ideas (liberation theology). At the same time, in English class, students will be working on the standard five-paragraph essay via the guiding question: "Why do relationships matter, and how can relationships be both good and bad for people?" With the current unit, Change, the D.C. public school system's learning standards are woven into the social studies curriculum under loose headings such as "Changes in the Way Humans Think About the World and Their Place in It," which becomes a way of introducing the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment and the Magna Carta. It's a philosophy that emphasizes learning through making cross-discipline connections long popular in affluent, progressive schools but typically eschewed in schools for underprivileged kids, where rote learning and a return to such basics often rule.

Oak Hill Academy has also created a course called Advocacy, which the Georgetown law students are co-teaching, emphasizing this month's theme. Domenici believes learning how the law works in a democracy "is essential to teaching them to be good citizens."

"We always believed that one of our roles should be to help kids self-advocate or advocate on behalf of a community," Domenici says. "We think this is a good skill for students individually and also one that our democracy demands."

But this is an ambitious agenda, and Oak Hill Academy faces significant obstacles. Can you teach teens to think critically when they're missing the basic underpinnings of education? How do you teach empowerment in a setting that demands rigid compliance to keep kids from misbehaving?

Although he sometimes grows discouraged, Domenici does his best to buoy his staff members when they learn that one of their most promising students got into a fight on the unit or "graduated" from the program only to commit another crime and be sent back. "I talk to staff about the fact that, day to day, our job is to do the absolute best work you can in the domain that is within your control," he says, reminding them that they don't control all the pieces of the puzzle. "And if you do that well, you have done the moral and just thing."

His staff members must keep the faith while straddling what are to them two equally potent realities: First, knowledge is power, and through possessing it, every student is capable of success. And, absent the right support, failure lurks right around the corner. It sounds like this: "I think Carleto has a good chance of finishing high school and going on to college," Domenici says. Pause. "Also, he is highly at risk of not doing that."

It is a cold day in late January, and Oak Hill is in the midst of the four-week session on change. Dressed in jeans, a blue shirt and a gray corduroy jacket (the heat's not working), Oak Hill social studies teacher John Adams paces around the room and then stops to bend over Carleto, who is doodling on a piece of paper at his desk.

"Pay attention," he says, taking Carleto's pencil. "Carleto, what is today's essential question?"

"What is historical change, and how is it different from other kinds of change?" Carleto says, reading from the board where Adams has scrawled his topic.

"Yes," Adams says. He ignores a student who is wandering around the room aimlessly, until the student snatches a hat off a classmate and tosses it toward the hallway. A youth development specialist, which is how corrections guards are referred to under Schiraldi, appears to be deeply engrossed in a magazine in the back of the room. But she snatches the hat from mid-air, scowls at the disruptive student and tucks the hat in her pocket. "Please sit," Adams tells the student.

Not quite sitting, not quite standing, the student perches on the edge of Adams's desk.

Good enough.

Adams continues: "What's the difference between personal change and historical change?"

Silence.

"Anybody?"

More silence.

"Ashawntea?"

"Historical change is like a revolution," Ashawntea says.

Adams throws out a list of changes -- getting a raise in salary, moving to a new house, the election of President Obama -- and Carleto accurately sorts the changes into micro and macro, personal and historical.

"Obama's campaign was all about change," Adams says. "Do you think he is talking historical change?" He wants the students to think about the president, who has been in office now for two days. What might his first 100 days look like? he asks the students. "What advice would you offer him?"

Carleto looks stumped.

"Just throw out some ideas," Adams prompts. He tells the students that they are going to craft their own letters to the president, advising him on how to set his agenda for change.

Carleto slaps his pencil down on the desk. "Obama's not reading our letters," he says. He folds his arms across his chest, skeptical that the president will lay eyes on this letter -- and skeptical, perhaps, that the teachers really want to hear his ideas.

Later, Carleto will acknowledge that he knows quite a bit about the president, as he is reading Barack Obama's "Dreams From My Father." "It started off as a good book, but it got excellent," he says. He struggles hard to articulate the book's themes and appeal. "I don't know how to put it," he says finally, "but growing up with -- no disrespect, but -- a Caucasian mom and an African father, he still made it through."

Sitting in a guard's room off the gym on a February evening, the echoing sound of classmates bouncing basketballs around the cavernous gym, Carleto goes on to tell his own possibly apocryphal story.

"As a child, he was very fun, happy -- as far as kindergarten through sixth grade. Starting in first grade, he was on the honor roll and was also making it to school every day," he says, beginning in third person, but quickly lapsing into first. "In the late stages of middle school; at the end of eighth grade, I started smoking weed, doing stuff I wasn't supposed to be doing."

He takes full responsibility. "No one peer-pressured me or anything. I was liking what was going on when I was high," he explains. He, like almost all the teens at Oak Hill, denies being involved in a gang. Still, Carleto says that his best friend since elementary school was killed in 10th grade in "a neighborhood thing." "Nowadays, anyone can just ride up on you, and you can be mistaken for someone else and be shot," he says, explaining that his buddy was shot because of a "miscommunication." "It wasn't intended for us," he says, insisting that he and his friend, nicknamed "Smoke," were just waiting for the bus. Then he announces, "I don't want to talk about it."

So he doesn't, though it clearly haunts him: He will doodle "R.I.P. Smoke" on the cover of his blue folder or on a piece of loose-leaf paper or the corner of the chalkboard.

He's happy to talk about Oak Hill Academy though, where he has a 3.5 grade-point average after six months. (Domenici says Carleto is in the top 25 percent of students at Oak Hill and tests fairly high on assessments.) Carleto likes the school even though it is a bit easy for him, being a senior in with freshman. He complains that

the classes are too short and that the guards are always interrupting them to move on just when the class is getting warmed up. That really bugs him, but he doesn't say much. He says that he will be leaving Oak Hill in two months and intends to finish his schooling at Oak Hill's transition center in the District, from which he says he will graduate this June. When he gets out, there are a couple of things he wants to do right off, he says. First, he intends to see his girlfriend, then go out to a restaurant and then go to "the Adidas shop in Georgetown, where my mom will get me some stuff -- and my dad, too."

He says his mom was pretty upset when he got arrested and sent to Oak Hill. "She was . . . I'm going to say she was kind of like surprised at my actions, what I done," Carleto says. "You know how they say 'Whatever hides in the dark, comes out?' . . . She was not ashamed of me, but disappointed in me." Meanwhile, she makes the long, 45-minute trek from the District to Laurel to visit. "Every weekend, both days!" he says.

He is alternately vague and specific when he describes his family life. He has four brothers -- ages 27, 23, 16 and 11 -- and reports that he and his two younger brothers live with his mom. He says his mom works as a secretary, but he struggles to remember where. "She was working with, what's that program downtown by the Washington Monument, dealing with Smokey the Bear? . . . I'm trying to think. It's right by the Holocaust Museum. It's a brick building. She works there."

Later, Carleto's school case worker, Essence Jones, will offer a somewhat different account of Carleto's life. Although Carleto is in 12th grade, he will not graduate in June as he says. He is still six credits shy, Jones says. And it will be at least three months -- not two -- before his release.

Carleto's father is not part of his life, Jones says. The teenager had been living with his aunt before coming to Oak Hill. His mother, who has a rap sheet dating to 1982, has been in and out of jail for years, arrested repeatedly for a string of felonies and misdemeanors, including possession and distribution of drugs, as well as prostitution. She has been in prison since 2005, serving three consecutive sentences totaling seven years for assault with a dangerous weapon, attempted distribution of cocaine and violation of bail.

She is not visiting Carleto on weekends.

By the end of February, still in the midst of the unit on change, the Oak Hill teens file into their advocacy class, jostling each other, edgy. It is unseasonably warm outside, and they do not want to be here. Reluctantly they take their seats, and Carleto positions himself so that he can see the patch of brown grass and mud in the prison yard, visible through the door someone has wedged open. Occasionally, a breeze wafts into the room.

Today, the law students decide to tackle the topic of disproportionate minority confinement. If youths of color are 35 percent of the general population in the United States, but 62 percent of the prison population, this is disproportionate minority confinement, the law students explain. They refer the teens to a handout each has on the desk in front of him, an article excerpt from New American Media, "Racism of the Juvenile Justice System Revealed," to explain that this isn't simply because people of color commit more crimes: "African-American youths are 4.5 times more likely, and Latinos 2.3 times more likely, than white youths to be detained for identical offenses. About half of white teenagers arrested on a drug charge go home without being formally charged and drawn into the system. Only one-quarter of black teens arrested on drug charges catch a similar break."

Although youth of color are 100 percent of Oak Hill's population of inmates and, indeed, 100 percent of all 721 juvenile delinquents currently committed to Youth Rehabilitation Services care in settings across the city, disproportionate minority confinement is a hard concept for the teens to grasp. Georgetown student Abby Fee tries a pie graph, a bar graph, a sketch of disproportionate Xs and Os. Blank stares.

Then it slowly dawns on Ashawntea what they're talking about. "Hey," he says, suddenly sitting forward. "They're switched around! Basically, there's more of us juveniles in prison than white juveniles -- even though there's more of them."

"Yes," Fee says. "So the population outside the system looks a lot different from that inside the system."

Ashawntea sits back in his chair to mull this over.

Fee and the other law students move the teens from the statistics to a speculative discussion about the reasons behind these figures. They have prepared a role-playing game to coax the teens into thinking about this from different perspectives. Then, they want the students to practice advocating for change. "So, we're going to have three roles," Fee says, dividing the teens into pairs. "One group is a 15-year-old; one group is playing a math teacher; and one group is playing a city council member."

Carleto and his partner learn that they are to play a city council member who is preparing a presentation on reforming the police department. Carleto doesn't want to be a city council member. He doesn't even want to be here today. He wraps and unwraps his pencil in the bottom of his T-shirt. He puts his glasses on, then takes them off.

"How could you maintain better relationships" with police? Fee asks, settling herself into a chair to help Carleto and his partner work through this.

Carleto throws his pencil down on the table. Won't answer. She asks again. Silence. Finally, he offers a sullen challenge. "Stop harassing people for no reason?"

"How do you want them to treat people?"

"Equally," he says. He picks up the pencil and tap, tap, taps it on the desk. Fee tries to get him to be more specific.

"Don't arrest for small problems. Instead, take them home, and tell your family what you're doing," Carleto's partner says, unconsciously slipping into second person.

"And how do you think they can help crime be stopped or decreased in general?" Fee prods.

A long pause. Could be their minds are whirring busily; could be they're spacing out. Fee, a teacher before enrolling at Georgetown, takes it in stride. She taps the paper a couple of times and repeats the question.

"Don't have 10 or 15 cars patrolling and then have an area where you barely see a police car," Carleto says.

"Patrol each ward equally?" asks Fee.

Carleto writes that down, then adds: "I see a lot of cruel things they done that ain't right." Fee nods, encourages him to write it down.

Carleto's partner grabs the pencil and speaks as he writes. "The majority of police shouldn't carry guns. I could say, 'The majority of police are racist.' "

"But how would you fix that?" Fee prods.

"A camera on their car to catch them if they're doing it -- but a secret one," Carleto suggests. He sits up straighter in his chair. "And don't just pull over people because they're black. They can say anything, that's the reason why I pulled you over, because your headlights are off or whatever." Suddenly, Carleto is on a roll, and he rattles off a list of improvements.

"Call to order of the city council," says Georgetown student Dania Ayoubi.

Carleto and his partner stand in the front of the class. "Hello, I'm Mr. Jones, and I am a city councilman," Carleto says, glancing down at his paper and twisting the tail of his shirt with his free hand. "We have some complaints from the different communities and wards about police, and these are some of our suggestions about cracking down on officers." He sounds nervous as he begins the list. "Stop harassing minorities and other ethnic youths, and treat them equal to the same race that you are. Also, police don't arrest if there is a situation at the school like a fight or anything. I feel they should not be arrested but taken home. Then tell their parents why this happened and what the reason was for being stopped by the police." He moves briskly through the suggestions and twice, tentatively, tries actually making eye contact with the audience. In conclusion, he says, "verbally abusing" youth won't be tolerated any more. "Basically, we want to crack down on the officers and have them removed, if so."

Another pair of students rises to begin a presentation, but the teens are interrupted by the crackle of a guard's walkie-talkie. "Time to go!" the guard announces.

The law students are surprised -- they are not quite done -- but politely acquiesce.

"Wait!" Ashawntea says, standing up. "We got 10 more minutes."

"It will take you five minutes to get your stuff together and get your coats on," the guard says.

"But we have 10 minutes!" Carleto insists. He and Ashawntea sit back down and fold their arms. "It's only 2:20. We got 10 more minutes still."

The guard takes a beat, then shrugs and concedes Carleto's point. He goes back out into the hall to wait.

Carleto shoots Ashawntea a look of surprise. His advocacy worked.

"Yesss!" Ashawntea hisses under his breath.

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