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FEATURE

Class Struggle

Rising to the Challenge of Teaching Reservoir Hill's Children



Part three of a series.

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JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

A parent volunteer paints faces at John Eager Howard Elementary's "Fun Day," an end-of-the-year celebration and awards ceremony.



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Fourth-grader Avery Johnson shows off his goldfish to Principal Sandra Ashe.



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Ashe and secretary Robin Bedford-Hill, who ran the school office, are both leaving John Eager Howard.



JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

Maryland Institute students Annie Howe (left) and Kate Cusak and John Eager Howard fifth-grader Chris Odoms display the fruits of a collaborative art project.

By **Eileen Murphy**

Reservoir Hill faces the same challenges much of the rest of Baltimore City does: crime, a scarcity of services, community factions, an ever-present trash problem. How the people in this midtown neighborhood navigate daily life sheds light on the problems the rest of us face in our communities, and on how interconnected those problems are. Throughout this year City Paper is exploring Reservoir Hill and its residents' efforts to keep their community healthy. The series, which began [May 16](#) and continued [June 20](#) with a look at the neighborhood's [sanitation woes](#), turns this week to the education of Reservoir Hill's children.

It's 8:30 a.m., the quiet before the storm of a rainy May day at Reservoir Hill's John Eager Howard Elementary School. The students are safely in their homerooms; the locker-lined halls are mostly empty. And in the well-appointed front office buzzing with staff and volunteers, principal Sandra Ashe settles into a leather armchair and picks up the microphone for the school's public-address system.

Petite and professionally dressed, Mrs. Ashe prepares to speak to the children by smoothing out her maroon jacket and sitting up straight, collecting herself. The words she says this morning are meant to set the tone for the whole day, so she greets her students in a soothing voice. "It's a dreary day, but that's a good thing," she croons into the microphone. "Rain is calming." Her voice picks up a little. "We've got a lot to do and not a lot of time to do it."

Mrs. Ashe moves smoothly to the theme of this morning's talk: being dissed. "When someone says something to you, you have the option not to respond," she says. "It usually has nothing to do with you. . . .

"You can offer some assistance--"Do you need a hug?" You can ignore their behavior and just go on. Maybe you need to get a grownup."

She continues in this vein, advising the children to see another's rudeness as a reflection on the speaker, not themselves. She wants these kids to believe that their futures are more important than some

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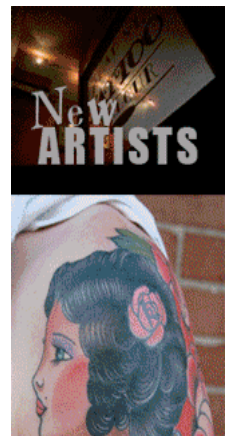
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JEFFERSON JACKSON STEELE

in the here-and-now. She embarks on a theme that she will return to again and again over the course of the day. "We don't say these things at John Eager Howard. We do not use violence. We use peace."

As she closes her morning greeting, Mrs. Ashe alters her tone yet again, now adopting the punchy enthusiasm of a cheerleader. Even her posture changes as she psyches herself up. She sits forward, nearly on the edge of her chair. "Let's get busy. Let's confirm our positive attitudes."

"Think I can!" she shouts into the mic, and a rousing reply comes from every corner of the building. "*Think I can!*" Even the office staff and volunteers respond--without looking up from their paperwork--with a zeal that belies their seemingly casual affect. The air vibrates.

The enthusiastic response enlivens Mrs. Ashe further. "Work hard!" she shouts. "*Work hard!*" comes the elated reply. "Get smart!" "*Get smart!*"

Even the most cynical observer feels belief stirring. The day has begun.

John Eager Howard Elementary is the only public school in Reservoir Hill. The neighborhood is also served by three other public elementary schools, all located in nearby Bolton Hill: the well-respected Mount Royal Elementary, whose middle school John Eager Howard students will attend; Eutaw Marshburn Elementary; and the Midtown Academy, a charter school whose bylaws require it to draw 50 percent of its students from Reservoir Hill. Neighborhood homeowners and residents with money usually send their children to private schools; families with skills and free time can send their kids to Midtown, where parents are required to perform a minimum of 90 hours of volunteer work at the school each year. The kids who end up at John Eager Howard tend to have families without a lot of time or money to spare.

Those families are often troubled in ways that money alone wouldn't fix. There are horror stories told at John Eager Howard--about a third-grader turned over to social services after she revealed to a teacher that her prostitute mother enlisted the girl to serve "customers"; about a little boy caught stealing food out of the cafeteria to feed his little brothers and sisters after his mother left town for a few days.

But this sort of dysfunction isn't immediately apparent at John Eager Howard. The school does surprisingly well on standardized testing--so well, in fact, that in 2000 the state awarded John Eager Howard \$42,000 as a bonus for the dramatic improvement in its Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) test scores. The inner-city John Eager Howard, whose student body lives in a neighborhood with an estimated 95 percent poverty rate, now scores higher than some Baltimore County schools.

Just about everyone who talks about John Eager Howard, from other principals to neighborhood activists to volunteers and parents, credit Mrs. Ashe for the school's dramatic improvement. The principal came to the school in 1991 from West Baltimore's Lemmel Middle, where she was an assistant principal, and she's the force that drives John Eager Howard. She has created a network of like-minded teachers and support staff, and together they present a unified front to the children.

Many of Mrs. Ashe's changes to the school are practical in nature: She keeps canned food and extra clothes in her office to pass out to children and parents in need. (During the winter, students have been known to arrive at the school without coats, or wearing shoes that are falling apart.) Other changes, though, affect the culture of the school. Mrs. Ashe sets high standards. She makes the kids feel safe by creating an environment in which they know what's expected of them. Too many of them live in homes where there are no rules, or where the rules change suddenly and arbitrarily.

While the students know what's expected of them, that doesn't mean they always deliver. When a student gets in trouble at John Eager Howard, the reaction he or she is most likely to encounter from the school's adults is disappointment. Most of the children respond to the scoldings with genuine remorse. No one likes to disappoint Mrs. Ashe.

In a city where children can be vulnerable, targets of a slew of urban dangers, John Eager Howard is an oasis. The painted-peach halls are more than safe; they feel comforting, homey even. The students who walk through them still shuffle their feet and ignore directions and disobey authority, as kids do, but they are kids, not hoodlums.

Even the school office is inviting, at least if you haven't been sent there against your will. The phones ring nonstop. Students wander in and out, some with guilty and desperate looks on their faces, others proudly delivering paperwork entrusted to them. Volunteers mill about; teachers check their mailboxes and commiserate over students stricken with spring fever. Throughout the day, the faculty lounge will remain nearly empty as teachers opt to hang out in the office during their breaks. On this May morning, Heather Hanna, a second-grade

teacher who is eight months pregnant, relaxes in an armchair and answers questions about the impending birth. After she leaves for her classroom, the office staff and other teachers finalize plans for a baby shower that afternoon.

Mrs. Ashe is the school's principal, but school secretary Robin Bedford-Hill is the day-to-day authority most students recognize. Miss Hill runs a tight ship, but she loves the children, and they know it. She knows every student's name and knows the facts about many of their home lives. She takes a special interest in the success of these kids; she spends some of her free time tutoring John Eager Howard students who fail the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), a national, standardized test in math and reading. Miss Hill also serves as the program coordinator of the Reservoir Hill Afterschool Enrichment Program, which provides afternoon activities for neighborhood kids. She's even brought her family into the John Eager Howard fold; her eldest daughter, a student at Woodlawn High, is the president of the school's Youth Council, a group of teenagers that help young children in Reservoir Hill.

As the minutes tick away before the opening bell, students milling on the playground file in through a cafeteria entrance; others rush in the front door, fresh from a parent's car or a short walk from home. (John Eager Howard is a zoned elementary school, so all students live within walking distance.) The kids ring a bell to enter through the locked front door, and Miss Hill buzzes them in, sometimes without even looking up from her paperwork. Still, she notices and acknowledges each child. Miss Hill's nearly preternatural awareness of the 335 students is only one of the many ways in which she plays mother to them.

"No, baby, you're not late yet," she tells a little boy with a frightened look on his face. (He's in just under the wire; a few minutes later Miss Hill begins to keep a list of the students whose timing isn't as good.) She signals an older girl to come into the office and chides her for wearing short shorts, an infraction of the school's dress code, even on casual Fridays. As Miss Hill lectures, the girl's practiced apathy gives way to grudging acknowledgment.

The kids try hard to behave the way they're taught. When they pass an adult in the hall—even one they don't recognize—they invariably say, "Good morning, miss," "Good afternoon, sir." At John Eager Howard, every adult is greeted with an honorific. The adults call each other Miss This and Mr. That, and the esteem this implies trickles down, creating an atmosphere of respect and trust.

The halls are quiet once classes begin. All the halls, that is, except the one outside Room 109, the music room. In the morning, the sounds of "Old MacDonald" echo through the hall as children sing along with a cartoon video; later in the day, little ones plink out "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" on xylophones as the teacher accompanies on piano.

At 11 a.m., kids stream into the cafeteria for lunch. It's a large, echo-filled room, and high-pitched voices bounce off the walls, becoming higher and bigger as they make their way across. John Eager Howard is a Title I school, which means that more than 90 percent of its students qualify for free breakfast and free lunch. As they finish their meals, the kids flow out to the playground for recess, where Tyrone Sol—officially a recruiter for the school's adult-education program Even Start, unofficially the school's security guard—watches over the children at play.

Mr. Sol, a lifelong Reservoir Hill resident, is a familiar face to the neighborhood's kids. Now in his 40s, he attended John Eager Howard as a boy. He has worked at the school for five years; before that, he ran the neighborhood baseball league, a 30-day summer league for kids ages 8 through 11. After spending his days at the elementary school, he heads to the Umar Boxing Club, just blocks away, where he serves as education director in the afternoons and evenings. Between the two jobs, Mr. Sol spends 14 hours a day with children. The only way he gets to see his own kids is by enrolling them in the programs he runs; his 10-year-old son, Tavon, is a student at John Eager Howard, and starting this fall, his 7-year-old granddaughter, Antoinette Hana, will attend as well.

Mr. Sol shows up at the school in the early morning, during the 30 minutes or so when the kids congregate on the playground and wait for the first bell. Even before he pulls up, the students are well behaved. Some kids run around, some scale the fence that surrounds the playground. A small contingent plays football, faking each other out and giggling maniacally. Most stand or sit and talk in small groups. Nothing screeches to a halt when Mr. Sol arrives; to the children, he represents protection, not correction.

That peaceful dynamic gets blown open during this day's lunchtime recess. Just after noon, an overwrought Mr. Sol bursts into the building, rushing the kids in from the playground, through which four federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agents are chasing an armed suspect. His voice raised and his eyes blazing, he paces, gesturing wildly as he reprimands the students.

"We do *not* run behind the police officer! That guy could have done anything--pulled a gun, *killed children*," he shouts. "We have talked about this!"

The students chatter excitedly. They're turned on, excited by the danger and action of the drama unfolding on the playground. Some kids make their way over to the cafeteria

windows, where they watch as the federal agents hold the suspect to the ground and handcuff him. It's just like television.

The students are safe now, but Mr. Sol will not be mollified. As he lectures the children, his voice eventually settling into a more even rhythm, it's clear that the sudden intrusion is not an isolated incident. Mr. Sol emphatically reminds the children that he has tried to prepare them for this kind of thing, and that they have not followed his instructions. His rage, his exasperation, shames some of the children, but most are still vibrating from their adventure. Little girls giggle and little boys strut as they relive the excitement over and over.

The incident is a terrifying reminder that there's only so much Mr. Sol, Mrs. Ashe, anyone can do to make the school safe. Their control ends at the school building's walls. John Eager Howard does not have a metal detector at its entrance, but it does keep its doors locked at all times. Its interior courtyard is filled with modular metal patio furniture that's too heavy to be dragged up to and across the school's roof (lighter patio furniture was constantly being stolen via that route). For all the horrors the media trains us to associate with inner-city public schools, there's little to fear from the kids in the building. The danger is from the world out there.

Before Mrs. Ashe arrived in 1991, John Eager Howard was "a school in disarray, a school that was not really part of the community," says Barry Williams, formerly the Baltimore City Public School System's executive officer for the mid-city area. In the past decade, "the school has become an oasis," says Williams, currently the system's managing director of student support services.

A school's MSPAP scores are the most obvious measure of its success, and John Eager Howard has shown dramatic improvement since 1993, the first year the state test was administered. The school's composite score (an average of the test's five subject scores) for the third grade has nearly tripled in the past eight years; the composite for the fifth grade has nearly quadrupled. Although both grades are still performing below the state's standard satisfactory score of 70 percent, John Eager Howard is outperforming the Baltimore city average and, in the case of the fifth-grade scores for 2000, missing the statewide average by only three percentage points.

Such gains have earned the school extra services and resources, but John Eager Howard remains an underfunded school with a student body that lives largely in poverty. The school system allots resources based on enrollment projections; Mrs. Ashe estimates that due to faulty projections, John Eager Howard has about 100 more students than it has money to cover.

Williams credits Mrs. Ashe's leadership for improving John Eager Howard's academic standing despite the odds. "As instructional leader, the principal is charged with making sure good instruction is going on," Williams says. On Mrs. Ashe's watch, he says, "teachers had to be there on time, ready to work with the students. Teachers always had to be prepared. . . . [Mrs. Ashe] was very good at giving assistance to teachers."

Mrs. Ashe says she kept a close eye on what teachers were teaching at John Eager Howard--insisting on "consistency and continuity in instruction." She required faculty members to complete lesson plans on a regular basis, strongly emphasized writing skills in the curriculum (a key, she says, to boosting MSPAP scores), and claims she could walk into any of the school's classrooms at any time of day and know what the teacher would be teaching.

Academic improvement is just the most quantifiable outcome of the changes Mrs. Ashe has implemented at John Eager Howard. She has reached out to community and support groups, inviting existing programs to become part of the school. John Eager Howard hosts Even Start, a federally funded program that brings parents into the school to attend parenting and professional-development classes and to fill volunteer positions. The Community Arts Program at the nearby Maryland Institute, College of Art brings young artists into the elementary school and the entire Reservoir Hill neighborhood. John Eager Howard is part of the coalition behind the Reservoir Hill Afterschool Enrichment Program, which enlists volunteers from the community, artists from the Black Cherry Puppet Theater and Baltimore Clayworks, and the staff and facilities of the city-run John Eager Howard Recreation Center for afternoon children's activities and a summer camp. The school hosts professional-development courses run by Coppin State College, training future teachers as well as offering services to neighborhood residents. Everyone, from senior citizens to high school students, from religious groups to college clubs, has something to contribute at John Eager Howard.

Those partnerships speak to a more elemental change, one Mrs. Ashe herself is most likely to trumpet. John Eager Howard has become, as Williams calls it, "a very warm school." Most everyone who ventures into the school office gets a hug before leaving, from the principal or one of the secretaries.

Williams says Mrs. Ashe's approach resonates strongly in the black community, from which John Eager Howard draws all but a few of its students. "Particularly with African-American

children," he says, "they perform better when relationship skills are enhanced. They need to know that they count."

There are measurable results of this dynamic: Williams credits the school with high rates of parental involvement and low rates of teacher turnover, the latter a sign that a principal has beaten the usual urban-school problem of attracting and maintaining staff.

"I think changing the culture of the school helped change the academic," Mrs. Ashe says. "You have to have an organized, warm school environment. Teachers need to feel that you believe in them. They need to be heard."

But there are equally important, intangible results, from what Williams describes as the "warm fuzzies" a visitor feels at John Eager Howard to the individual students' personal pride in the school's improved MSPAP scores.

Ultimately, all the hugs, all the statistics, all the partnerships, serve what Mrs. Ashe considers to be the most important thing she can teach her students: "We refuse to let poverty stand in the way of excellence."

In a double-sized room just down the hall from the school office, the chalkboards sport a very different kind of lesson than those seen elsewhere in the building: "Affirmation for the Month: Every stage in a child's life is there for a purpose. If we can respect and respond to her needs fully during each stage of her life, she can be done with that stage and move on."

The students who occupy this classroom keep the same hours as the little ones elsewhere in the building, though they learn different lessons, and shoulder much more responsibility. As participants in the Even Start Program, they're moms and dads looking to improve their skills--both professional and familial. Some of them attended John Eager Howard not all that long ago. Now their children sit at the same little desks.

Monday through Thursday, adults file into this classroom to learn computer skills, study for their high school equivalency diploma, or GED, and talk about the challenges of parenting. Officially a "family literacy program," Even Start currently has 15 parents enrolled at John Eager Howard. Although the program receives referrals from city social-services agencies, the best form of recruitment is word of mouth. Even Start operates for the 10 months of the school year and the six weeks of summer school.

On this day in late May, Jean Barnes, an Even Start instructor, and Gwendolyn Cobbs, the program assistant, aren't teaching. It's a planning day, so the two women are filling gifts bags and getting ready for an end-of-the-school-year luncheon.

Catering trays soon arrive, overflowing with fried chicken, biscuits, coleslaw, and desserts. The parents, most of whom have been in the school since early morning, gradually wander into the classroom. Finally Mrs. Ashe shows up, and the luncheon begins in earnest. Everyone takes a seat at a makeshift conference table. One parent eats with her baby in her lap.

Mrs. Ashe thanks the parents for their contributions to the school; most perform duties in the office and classrooms as part of their Even Start participation. She also commends them on their achievements, both tangible and intangible. She stresses that personal growth and contributions to the community are just as important as receiving a GED or gaining computer skills.

"Many of you have grown," Mrs. Ashe says. "You've helped out, you've been here for the children." She singles out one young mother and commends her for having changed her behavior in interpersonal relationships. The mother, embarrassed by the attention and what seems to be a backhanded compliment, at first looks annoyed but eventually breaks into a wide smile.

As the luncheon winds down and the school day ends, the talk wanders from the parents in the program to plans for next week's Fun Day, an annual end-of-the-year playground festival. Carol Turner, the teacher who usually runs the event, now splits her days between John Eager Howard and Lockerman-Bundy Elementary, and she hasn't had time to properly plan for the occasion. But Turner is adamant that Fun Day will happen the following Friday. Besides giving the kids an outlet for all that end-of-year energy, the event follows the school's annual award ceremony, where kids are honored with trophies for everything from academic achievement to good attendance. Keeping tradition is an important part of life at John Eager Howard. It's another concrete form of the stability the school provides for its students.

The stability that students and staff cherish at John Eager Howard was dealt a blow this summer when Mrs. Ashe left to become the principal at Rosemont Elementary in Coppin Heights. (Although publicly funded, Rosemont is run by Coppin State College and was hailed in *Time* magazine last December for its innovative management partnership.)

"It was time to take on a new challenge," Mrs. Ashe says of her decision to leave. "I had been there 10 years. I feel like we made a lot of progress. . . . John Eager Howard had good

momentum, good progress for the past couple of years, moving in the right direction."

John Eager Howard's new principal, Erma Jefferson, comes from a three-year stint at Thomas G. Hayes Elementary in East Baltimore. She's attempting to fill some mighty big shoes; Mrs. Ashe is immensely popular with the Reservoir Hill community. Jaws dropped all over the neighborhood when word of her departure got around.

Like Mrs. Ashe at John Eager Howard, Ms. Jefferson oversaw a period of steady improvement in Thomas G. Hayes' MSPAP performance. But last year the school's scores abruptly dropped 38 percent. Ms. Jefferson declined to comment specifically on the dip but did note that Hayes had a lot new teachers and students repeating grades last year.

Williams says Ms. Jefferson has "a very different style" from Mrs. Ashe, but he believes that it's not "good to have a clone follow" an outgoing principal. He describes Ms. Jefferson as "a gruff exterior over a giant heart" and says that he is confident that the quality of education at John Eager Howard will continue to improve. Ms. Jefferson has already made some academic changes as she readies to make her mark at John Eager Howard: She extended the pre-kindergarten program to run all day and instituted block scheduling, which means that homerooms will have 90- to 150-minute segments of reading and math instruction. She intends to hire a writing instructor and plans to put greater emphasis on improving CTBS scores across the board.

The changes in leadership and academic emphasis aren't the only ones afoot at John Eager Howard. Ms. Jefferson has brought in her own secretary; Miss Hill will leave the school system on Sept. 30 and is looking for a new job. Mr. Sol says he will join Mrs. Ashe at Rosemont, where he says he "might be doing something a little different" than the role he played at John Eager Howard. Some teachers will also follow Mrs. Ashe to her new school.

Funding for John Eager Howard's Even Start program runs out Sept. 30, and school officials say they haven't heard yet whether it will be renewed. As of press time, the school's application was still pending, just like those of five other local Even Start programs, according to a spokesperson for the state Department of Education, which distributes the program's federal monies.

These kinds of personnel changes and funding uncertainties are common in any public school, but in a struggling neighborhood like Reservoir Hill, they seem all too representative of a larger pattern: Whenever a structure is in place that works well for the community, something happens to threaten the very stability that made success possible.

For her part, Mrs. Ashe is not worried about what will happen at John Eager Howard. She believes she created habits--in the teachers, in the children, in the community--that will remain even as she leaves. "I expect for them to continue to do well. We have established a good climate, a good work ethic, good routines, how to create nurturing classrooms, establishing good relationships between the school and parents.

"Everything has been put in place for success," she says. "The school has a taste for success. I feel that they will settle for nothing less now."

Next in the series: What's it like to grow up in Reservoir Hill?

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