

Sunday, April 30, 2006

Students Say KIPP Bridging Gap in Their Lives

By Andrea Eger

Owners of The Gap, the charter school's benefactors, witness the program's success in Tulsa firsthand. "KIPP inspires us to go to college."

Student after student said that is what sets their new school, KIPP Tulsa College Preparatory School, apart from the schools they used to attend.

Doris and Don Fisher, co-founders of The Gap and billionaire benefactors of the national nonprofit KIPP Foundation, stopped to chat with students last week during their national tour of new KIPP schools.

Sponsored by Tulsa Public Schools, KIPP Tulsa is part of a national network of 45 charter and contract schools in the San Francisco-based Knowledge is Power Program, which aims to get low-performing, minority students back on track.

After a tour of the school Friday afternoon, the Fishers sat down for a question-and-answer session with 10 of KIPP Tulsa's inaugural class of 90 fifth-graders.

They asked almost every student their opinion of their new school and mostly got variations of the same answer in return.

"What I like about KIPP is that they inspire us to go to college. They didn't do that at our old school -- all we did was play and play and play," Taree Williams said.

Breann Williams said that at KIPP, she has learned

"that you have to earn everything you deserve."

"We have to believe in ourselves that we can learn and we can go to college," she said. "Almost all black kids mostly don't go to college because they're influenced in the wrong way."

Don Fisher seemed especially impressed with Marquis Johnson, who said he likes the challenging curriculum, or as he put it, "stuff that I never heard of," and also being able to call his teachers on their cell phone if he needs help with his homework.

One girl asked the Fishers how they became so successful.

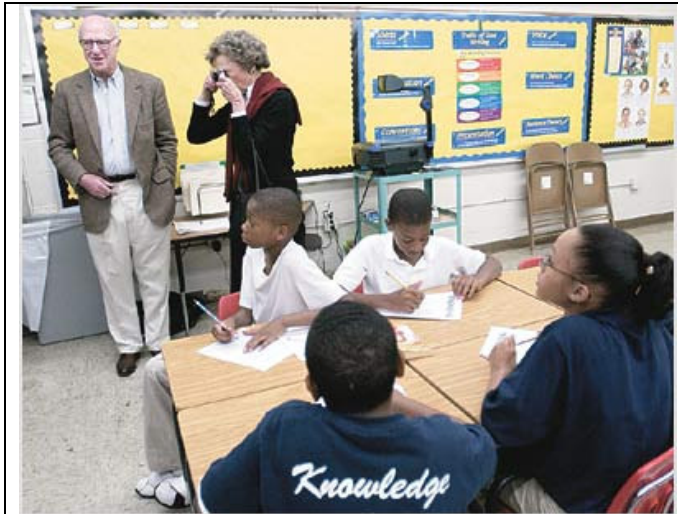
When Don Fisher explained that he had become an entrepreneur after graduating college, Marquis piped up and said, "An entrepreneur? That's what I want to do with my future!"

Fisher said that along with hard work, luck had played an important part in his and his wife's success.

"What you will find is luck is a big part of your life. You all are really lucky that the KIPP school opened this year," he said. "Later in your life, you will realize that going to KIPP was one of the best things that ever happened to you."

In an assembly sponsored by Tulsa-based Williams afterward, Richard Barth, CEO of the KIPP Foundation, said potential exists for expanding the Knowledge is Power Program in Tulsa.

"This is just the beginning of KIPP here in Tulsa," Barth said. "We will watch what happens over the next few years, but there is no reason why there shouldn't be more KIPP schools here in the great city of Tulsa."



Don Fisher visits with KIPP Tulsa College Preparatory students as his wife, Doris, takes photographs during a tour of the KIPP Tulsa school at Lindsey Learning Academy on Friday.
STEPHEN HOLMAN / Tulsa World