

VOL.  
1

BEFORE FERGUSON, BEYOND FERGUSON



# Finding Our Way

*One family's struggle for a quality  
education and the American dream*

REPORTING BY RICHARD H. WEISS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDY DREW



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# Foreword

This story—and I hope many more to come—started with my work for an organization called Forward Through Ferguson.

Forward Through Ferguson is a successor organization to the Ferguson Commission that was called together by then-Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon to address racial inequities in our region. The governor wanted the commission to create a path forward in the wake of the police shooting of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. After convening many community meetings and doing much listening, the commission issued 189 calls to action—concrete steps citizens could take to initiate positive change. The commission established Forward Through Ferguson to promote the calls to action.

Of course, issuing a call and actually having anyone answer it are two different things.

Many of us were part of a team of storytellers working with Forward Through Ferguson, and believed that we needed to help give our community a greater understanding of the challenges we face. Just as important, we wanted to give our fellow citizens a sense of possibility. That's why Forward Through Ferguson called us "story catalysts."

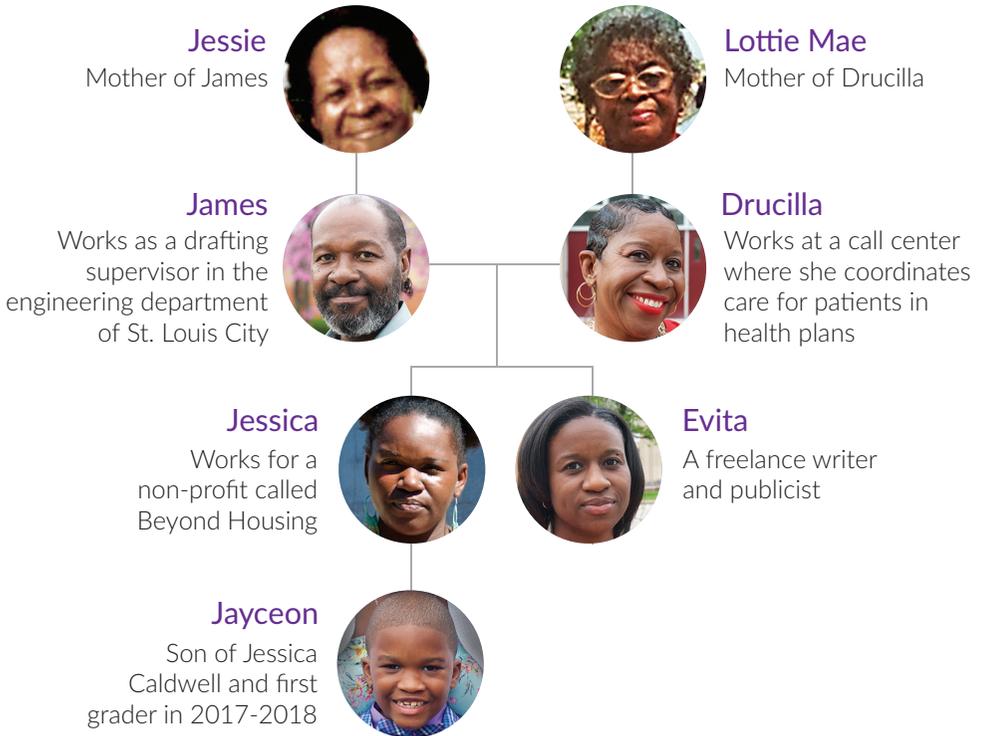
Many of us are no longer working for Forward Through Ferguson in an official capacity. But it hasn't lessened our resolve to act as catalysts for stories that will help make a difference. I am leading an effort to produce ten to 12 of these stories with a diverse and talented team of journalists. We aim to bring the work to you not just in print but in other interesting and dynamic ways. We are identifying sponsors who will help us convene meetings and donors who will support the effort.

So this is a start. It is the story of the Caldwell family. They are both representative and unique in terms of the challenges our community faces in addressing racial inequities in education. The story begins with Jayceon Caldwell who at the time in 2016 was just six. Jayceon is bright, curious and active. But his mom, Jessica, was dissatisfied with the support he was getting at school. She was prone to be on high alert because as a child she faced challenges in getting a quality education, as did her sister, and her parents and her grandparents and great-grandparents. This is a saga that spans generations.

In following their story, you will see that the Caldwells made some interesting and sometimes questionable choices. For instance, James Caldwell, Jayceon's grandfather, passed up a chance as an adolescent to go on scholarship to a fine prep school. He insisted that one of his daughters, Evita, forego an opportunity to participate in the areawide desegregation program and instead attend a city high school with a very poor academic track record.

You may question that judgment, but when you finish reading you will understand why those decisions were made. And it should give you a better idea of how life plays out in a zip code different than your own. We hope after reading this story that you will gain a greater appreciation for how our educational system works—or doesn't—for people of color.

## The Caldwell



If you are on social media you may have come across the hashtag, #staywoke. Most of us think of woke as something that occurs after a period of sleep. You might say that many of us have slept through a time when our neighbors have been subjected to any number of injustices. To be woke in the current parlance is to wake up to what's going on; to look at the world through the eyes of neighbors you may see but do not totally understand.

Those neighbors need to see you too—whomever you may be—White, Black, Hispanic, mixed race, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, young or old, rich, poor or middle class. Then we all need to take action.

And so with that in mind, subsequent stories will be about families of all kinds. Everyone has played a role in where we are today and nearly everyone—even people who some might consider privileged—have paid a price.

Recently I sat down with six white businessmen who have faced their own challenges in life, but also know they have benefitted from privilege. I asked them a few questions. What would make them want to read this story? And after reading the story, what would make them want to act?

Their responses woke me up. To a man, they said it was unlikely they would read such a story unless someone they knew and trusted recommended it to them. That could be a family member, a close friend or the pastor at their church.

Even with that, they would be reluctant to read a story that simply made them feel guilty. What would be the point of that if you couldn't do anything to solve the problems?

As the conversation continued, I recognized that telling a story can only be a start. We needed to use the story to propel us toward taking action. And so a part of our effort will be to take the story into homes, places of worship and wherever people are inclined to listen and willing to speak up. Then we can talk about concrete steps to address the issues raised in our stories.

We are in touch with people who are good at facilitating meetings like these and leaving people with a sense of purpose. If everyone does just a little bit toward making a difference, a difference will be made.

A final note: There is nothing new under the sun. I didn't invent this approach of focusing on generations of families. I borrowed it from a great journalist, Isabel Wilkerson, a former New York Times reporter and author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. In that work she chronicles the migration of African

Americans from the south to places like Chicago, New York, Detroit and Los Angeles. In doing so, she focused on several generations of families. Readers could identify with the moms and dads, grandmas and grandpas, sisters and brothers and take them into their hearts. Wilkerson is my hero and role model.

Not long ago she was interviewed by Krista Tippett, host of *On Being*, a National Public Radio program and podcast. Wilkerson described how African-American families arriving at their destinations were shunted to the wrong side of the tracks by all manner of laws and public policies.

Wilkerson believes changing laws and public policy is important, but insufficient. She calls for “radical empathy ... to put ourselves inside the experience of others, to allow ourselves the pain, allow ourselves the heartbreak, allow ourselves the sense of hopelessness that they are experiencing.

“And so,” Wilkerson said, “I view myself as on kind of a mission to change the country, the world, one heart at a time...I feel as if the heart is the last frontier, because we have tried so many other things.”

So we join Isabel Wilkerson in exploring that last frontier. We offer this story and those to come as a means to change not just policy but hearts.

You can help, first by reading this story. Second, by recommending it to your friends and family. Third, by getting in touch with us to learn how you can lend your support.

For now, many thanks for investing your time in this story.

Richard Weiss

Jessica and Jayceon  
Caldwell



## Episode 1:

# Drucilla and James

On a drizzly April evening, Jessica Caldwell stands outside Shaw’s Coffee, waiting for a school bus. That bus will deliver her seven-year-old son Jayceon, and Jessica will know as soon as he steps off the bus if Jayceon has had a good day.

She isn’t looking for a smile or a frown, though—she’s looking for that piece of paper.

Every day, per the student disciplinary system at Jayceon’s school, each student’s behavior will be rated green, yellow, or red.

Green is great; yellow not as good. Red indicates that a child has exhibited behaviors that must be stopped, or the student may face a suspension.

Jessica has grown disenchanted with the charter academy and its traffic-light behavioral assessments, and so has Jayceon. Jessica says Jayceon gets bored easily if he isn’t challenged. Now she is looking for another school for Jayceon, one without a color code; one that embraces his high energy approach to ... well, just about everything.

Jessica is nothing if not proactive when it comes to

Jayceon. Several months ago, Jessica moved for the first time in her life south of the so-called Delmar Divide and into The Hill, a mostly Italian-American enclave. She had been living with her dad in the Penrose neighborhood, and though his 1,200-square foot, nearly century-old home is quite comfortable and well-maintained, the sound of gunfire is not uncommon in the neighborhood. On her phone, Jessica keeps a video she recorded of a volley of nearby gunshots.

So Jessica went looking for an affordable two-bedroom apartment with a nice kitchen in a safer neighborhood. She found one on Zillow.com, just five miles across town in a brick building on Bischoff Avenue, across the street from a couple of venerable Italian restaurants.

If you go by the 2010 census, Jessica and Jayceon are one of maybe 100 African Americans in The Hill neighborhood, among nearly 2,300 white residents. Though she is now a minority in her neighborhood, that hardly bothers Jessica. The merchants and neighbors are friendly enough. Above all, she and Jayceon feel safe. Now she can focus on where to send Jayceon to school next fall.

“I want him to have the best of everything,” she says.

Jessica’s mom and dad, James and Drucilla Caldwell, wanted the best of everything for her as well. And James and Drucilla remember their parents and grandparents had hopes and dreams for them too that started with a decent place to live and a quality education. Education, after all, is how we all get a purchase on the American Dream.

Or so the story goes.

For the Caldwells, getting a quality education from generation to generation has itself been an uphill struggle. They are African Americans who grew up in segregated neighborhoods that for the most part offered them access only to underperforming schools. Those words “for the

most part” are important, because in Jessica’s case, she got a fleeting taste of excellence in education thanks to a magnet school experience that policymakers made happen as an attempt to right more than a century’s worth of educational inequities in our region.

It was that taste that lingered for Jessica as she browsed Zillow contemplating Jayceon’s future. Charter schools like the one Jayceon attends are another approach policymakers and educators created to aid underserved students. But based on Jayceon’s experience, Jessica is skeptical. She’s worked to ensure a quality education for Jayceon since preschool; she plans to keep working on finding her son the best place to study right on through high school and then on to college and maybe graduate school.

The Caldwell family harbors neither bitterness nor resentment when it comes to the education they received,



Jessica and Jayceon cleaning out Jayceon’s desk his last day of school.

though both feelings might be understood. They recognize that to a great degree their educations were separate and unequal when compared to the schools many white students attended. But they each remember wonderful, intrepid teachers who taught them lessons in character, grit, and determination. If they got less of this or that in K-12, well that makes the success they have enjoyed in their jobs and in building homes and families all the sweeter and more meaningful. As they see it, they got to where they are from a foundation they built for themselves.

Jessica says she has learned that you can't depend on the system to provide you with a solid education—it must be seized. And once it is in your grasp, you must be hyper-vigilant because it can be taken away, or go up in smoke based on decisions over which you have no control, made by people who you do not know.

Jessica is looking at private schools for Jayceon because she feels he could do more than he's being asked to do in his class with 24 other seven- and eight-year-olds. It's not just his quality of life that concerns her, it's the length of his life as well. Studies show children with less education live shorter lives. And disproportionately, African-American children get less education.

"I know all the odds that are against him," Jessica said. "Black kid, growing up to be a black man."

\* \* \*

**D**rucilla Caldwell's parents, grandparents and great grandparents grew up in Mississippi, members of a farm family. Family history is fuzzy, but Drucilla says they were likely sharecroppers, meaning they didn't own the land they lived on, but got paid wages (probably meager) to till the soil and harvest the crops. School came second to making a living. So when Drucilla's grandparents were small, they would learn some reading and writing at



**Drucilla Caldwell outside  
Sumner High School**

the schoolhouse, but as they grew they were more valuable to the family as workers. Drucilla guesses that her grandparents had what amounted to fifth- or sixth-grade educations.

Drucilla's family moved north to St. Louis, leaving the heavy labor of farming behind for new opportunities. Drucilla's mother suffered from alcoholism and Drucilla never knew her father. She and her older sister were raised by her grandmother and grandfather, Gertrude and Lealon Marion. The family settled into a home in the early 1960s at 5056 Minerva Avenue near Kingshighway in St. Louis's Academy neighborhood. Lealon would wake at 3:30 a.m. each weekday morning and drive his Chevy station wagon 15 miles, across the Mississippi River, to Illinois. He would arrive before dawn's early light at Granite City Steel.

Could Lealon and his family have lived closer to his work? Black residents were not allowed to live in Granite City when it was incorporated in 1891 by Frederick G. and

William Niedringhaus, who started the steel company. The town remained nearly all-White well into the mid-twentieth century. In 1960, the non-White population in Granite City, a town of 40,000, was 0.2 percent.

But Drucilla was happy with her home and neighborhood, even considering it “kind of ritzy” compared to some of the neighborhoods where other Black residents lived. “The neighborhood was just great back then,” Drucilla recalled. “All the families knew each other. If you did something wrong, they would chastise you and then tell your parents (in Drucilla’s case, her grandparents) and they would get you.”



The Marions enrolled Drucilla at Euclid School, at 1131 North Euclid Avenue, just a few blocks away. The Supreme Court had handed down the *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling with a mandate to end school segregation a decade earlier, but desegregation in fact would not become a reality for most St. Louis school children for many years to come.

As a child, Drucilla had no sense of what kind of education other kids were getting just a few miles away in the suburbs. She was happy with hers. The teachers were kind and nurturing. “The teachers were steady and older, not like the young ones you have today. The principal, I can’t remember his name, but he had been there for years.” Drucilla said they kept her focused on her studies, and so did her grandma and grandpa.

Drucilla went on to attend Sumner High School, a school with an all-Black student body—proudly so. Sumner High was situated in a community called The Ville. The Ville was a magnet for African Americans because until the late 1940s and a landmark Supreme Court fair-housing decision, it was one of the few neighborhoods in the region where Black residents could own property. Between 1920 and 1950, the Black population in The Ville soared from eight percent to 95 percent of the total population. Another source of pride in The Ville was Homer G. Phillips Hospital, which served as a major training facility for African-American physicians and other healthcare professionals. That’s where Drucilla was born.

The comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory graduated from Sumner in 1951, opera diva Grace Bumbry in 1954, R&B star Tina Turner in 1958. The Wimbledon champion Arthur Ashe, and Julius Hunter, the local TV anchorman who would sit down with U.S. presidents, both earned their Sumner diplomas in 1961.

So when Drucilla was in high school there, Sumner was

considered a launching pad for success, even stardom. Drucilla remembers too that the teachers were in control of their classrooms. Any child who stepped out of line would get a swift rap on the knuckles with a rattan, a punishment that Drucilla suffered once and never again.

“You couldn’t run over those teachers,” Drucilla recalled. “The discipline was there.”

While there were occasional fights and crime in the surrounding neighborhood, there were long-tenured teachers in school to keep students going in the right direction if they were already so inclined. And there were lots of extra-curriculars ... glee club, band, choir, and sports, of course. “We didn’t have metal detectors at the door or security guards,” Drucilla recalled. “We had hallway monitors and they were the teachers.”

But Drucilla did not consider college. “When I graduated in ’77 there weren’t a lot of grants (for minorities) you could get like you can today. I didn’t score high enough (on college entrance examinations) to get a scholarship and get into college.” She remembered her grandparents telling her: “If you don’t go to college, you had better get a job because you can’t stay in our house and do nothing.”

After graduation, she did just that. So much for school, at least for a while.

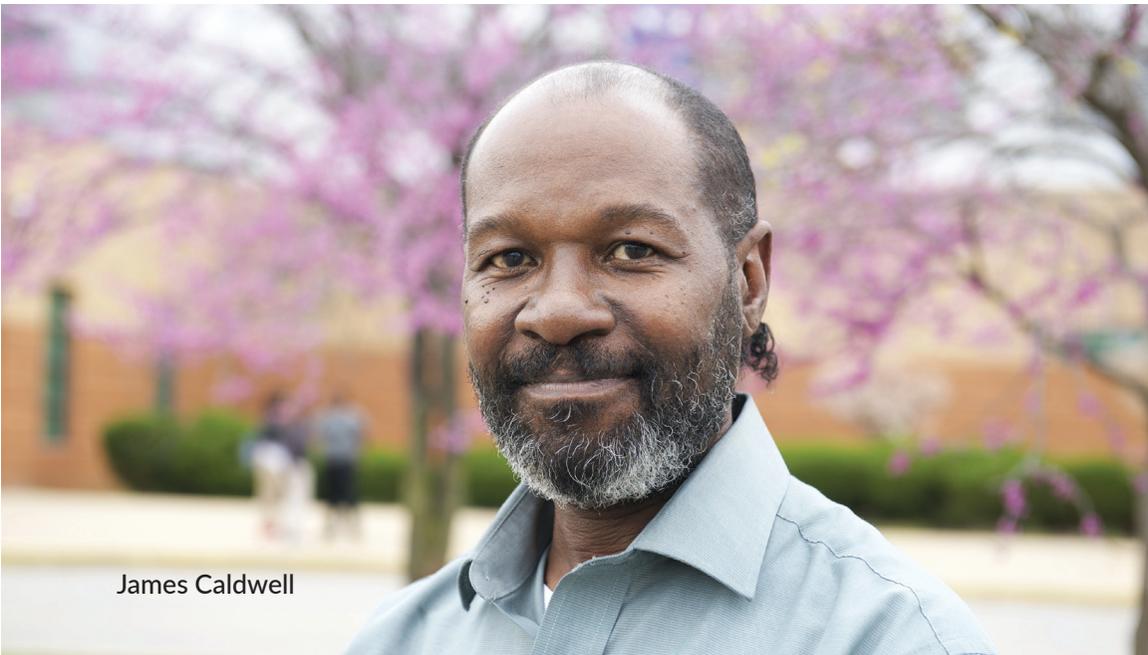
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Just a couple of miles away, James Caldwell was growing up in another sort of place—a housing project called Pruitt-Igoe. For anyone of a certain age in St. Louis, the name “Pruitt-Igoe” conjures images of decline and decay; for many of its residents, the name calls up a mix of sadness and unhappy memories. James has more than his share of those. He remembers as a toddler watching one man gunned down in the parking lot outside his building in a dispute over a roll of dice.

Like Drucilla's family, James's family had come up from the south. His family members on his mother's side have been able to trace their lineage back to the middle of the 19th century, to Cordelia Bullock, who had taken on the last name of her slave masters in central Tennessee. Cordelia Bullock was James Caldwell's great-great-great-grandmother. She gained her freedom and her children went on to become sharecroppers in Tennessee before some began to move north. James's family tree includes Anna Mae Bullock, the Sumner High student who would later gain worldwide renown—as Tina Turner.

In recounting their history for a booklet commemorating a family reunion, James's relatives said the Bullock descendants were "known as industrious, clever, intelligent, and highly motivated. Additionally they are kind, compassionate and caring."

Those traits carried over into James's life at Pruitt-Igoe, even in the midst of the mayhem in the housing project. He remembers a community in which parents and friends watched out for each other. Not everyone got into trouble, even though the police looked at you that way when you were standing on a corner passing the time with friends.



James Caldwell



James attended Pruitt School, named for Wendell Pruitt. (Pruitt, another distinguished Sumner grad, was a member of the famed Tuskegee Airmen who flew combat missions during World War II. He died in a training accident in 1945.)

“We had good teachers,” James says. “I remember one in particular: Wendell Allman. He was one who gave me a lot of attention.” (Allman, then was one of a few Black men teaching grade school in the city, would later go on to become the principal at nearby Columbia School, on St. Louis Avenue.) Pruitt School seemed like a fine place to him, and he did well with his studies.

One day, the high-performing kids at Pruitt were asked to take a special test. James got the second best score. He remembers the top two scorers were offered a scholarship to attend Country Day School, a private institution in a place in the suburbs called Ladue, one of the wealthiest zip codes in the region and, for that matter, the nation. That scholarship might have been James’s ticket to a different life.

But he turned it down.

James looked at the distance between his home and that private school and it loomed large. He would have to get up early in the morning and take public transportation to get to Country Day and, of course, find the money to pay for it. Even so, the idea was in some ways enticing. He'd imagined taking those preppies on, both in the classroom and in the gym. "I wanted to go out and challenge those guys," he says. "I have always been competitive."

Though he was small in stature, just 5' 6" and 115 pounds, James had pounded his way to wins in club boxing matches in his neighborhood. He could also handle himself in football and basketball.

But there was no one at Pruitt—a counselor or teacher—encouraging James to make the leap, and his parents didn't have a good sense of what the opportunity meant either.

At the time, Country Day was just dipping its toe into the diversity water. It graduated its first black student in 1969.

If James had accepted Country Day's offer, his White peers close in age would have included W. Bevis Shock, who would go on to graduate from Yale and become a prominent St. Louis attorney who backed conservative causes and served on the board of the Shakespeare Festival; Wesley McAfee Jones, who became an investment banker on Wall Street and a founding partner of Sage Capital in St. Louis; and Keith S. Harbison, an entrepreneur and president of Harbison Corp., one of the largest privately held companies in St. Louis.

So maybe James Caldwell passed up an opportunity when he said no to Country Day and no to a chance to build a network of pals with access to wealth and power.

He was headed in a different direction, one that might not seem to many as a way to go. But in fact, it would bolster his confidence and define him as a man.

James moved on to Vashon High School where one of his classmates was Michael Spinks, who would win an Olympic gold medal in boxing, and both the light heavyweight and heavyweight world titles. Michael's older brother Leon, also a Vashon alum, made a huge splash when he beat Muhammad Ali for the world heavyweight championship in 1978.

James had fought on the same team with both Spinks brothers at the Capri Recreation Center at 19<sup>th</sup> and Cole Streets in the shadow of Pruitt-Igoe. In one of James's first fights, he climbed into the ring with Anthony Dee, who was considered one tough customer. There was a nice crowd on



James Caldwell (far left) and family in Holly Grove, Arkansas, 1996. Pictured are six generations of women, stemming from James' mother's side. James' mother, Jessie, is pictured in the middle. Jessie's mother is wearing green. And to the left of her is her mother (Jessie's grandmother). Evita is in front and Jessica is in back wearing a white cap.

hand, each spectator having paid 25 cents admission to see the tournament. James remembers knocking Dee all over the ring, much to the surprise of the crowd.

“And,” James recalled, “it was like a tidal wave washed all the bad people away from me. People who had been bothering me all my life just stood back. I am still in awe about it to this day.”

James went on to become a city champion in his weight class. And the word went out that he was not a guy to be messed with, and you best stay away from his friends as well.

So James made it through Vashon with hardly a scrape. But others did not. One time an armed outsider walked in, somehow escaped the notice of ten security guards stationed throughout the school, and asked everyone in James’s study hall to give them their coats. “Super Fly” coats, inspired by the 1972 film of the same name, were all the rage at the time. When James’s classmate Don Harris was too slow to give up his, he took a bullet in his throat from a .45-caliber automatic. He died in front of James and his classmates in a pool of blood before the medics could arrive.

Despite experiences like that one, James said he got a decent education at Vashon. Classes were crowded—as much as a 35-1 student-teacher ratio. But, he said, “There were tracks 1, 2, and 3, and if you were in track 1, you got to be in more challenging classes. We got algebra while the others got basic math.”

James graduated a proud Wolverine in 1976, and went on to Bailey Technical School where he learned drafting skills—and met Drucilla. Within a couple of years he scored a job with the city and has been a civil servant ever since. “I haven’t missed a day of work since 1993,” he says proudly.

James’s Wolverine pride would echo in years to come.

Backstory: James Caldwell

# The Road Not Traveled

Country Day offered James Caldwell an opportunity to attend the private school in Ladue in the early 1970s, early in its efforts to pursue diversity. Country Day had graduated its first Black student, Michael O'Guin, in 1969.

The run-up to that event had been a long time coming. The school was founded in 1917, and its first campus was located immediately adjacent to where St. Louis Lambert International Airport now sits. Young men from St. Louis' upper-crust families would take a streetcar from their homes in the city's Central West End to get there. Along the way, they could look out the window and see Kinloch, an all-Black community decidedly unlike theirs. In the early 1940s, Eugene Hecker, head of Country Day's English Department and a bit of a firebrand, created a race relations committee in which he asked students to engage with their peers from Kinloch and also Sumner High School.

"Five Country Day students took five colored boys as their guests to hear Marian Anderson and at the conclusion



Mary Institute and Country Day School

of the concert all were presented to the gifted and gracious singer,” Hecker recounted in a speech to a local social planning council.

By the 1970s, each graduating class at Country Day (nicknamed CODASCO) usually included just a few African Americans. Some did not come from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds.

Two of the African-American students at Country Day in the early 1970s were Erik Lyons Bond and his brother Les. Erik and Les were the sons of Dr. Leslie Fee Bond, Sr., a physician, civil rights activist, and one of the most prominent African Americans in St. Louis.

Though they were of some means, the Bonds’ experience says a lot about St. Louis and the kind of place it was for people of color in the mid-twentieth century. When Les and Erik were at Country Day, the Bonds lived in a

fine home on Lindell Boulevard, one among many graceful mansions that stand across from Forest Park.

The Bonds were the first African Americans to own a home in that section of town. When Dr. Bond purchased the lot on Lindell in the early 1960s, he used the name of a relative who did not have a birth certificate. He knew this misdirection would make it harder for anyone to know that an African American was building on the property and cause an uproar.

In 1965, when the Bonds finally moved in into their new home, it was considered so significant an event that Mayor Raymond R. Tucker announced it at a meeting of the local chapter of the NAACP.

Leroy Witherspoon, Country Day Class of 1974, came from a background closer to James's. Witherspoon grew up in a working-class home in a segregated neighborhood at Hodiament and Horton Place. Like James, Witherspoon was a top student at his school, Enright Middle, and with the encouragement of a teacher, Marzell Buford, he took an entrance exam at Country Day. He aced it. Unlike James, when offered admission he grabbed it. But in his first months, Witherspoon had second thoughts. Just 12 years old, he was now facing a 6 a.m. bus ride of 75-90 minutes to the suburbs each morning. When he arrived, he would have to wait outside the school in the elements because the doors were locked until 8 a.m.

The ride home was more harrowing. He would get off at Delmar and face a walk of several blocks home in the dark. One night, he remembered being confronted by a man with a shotgun, then being chased by a dog, and when he finally got to his street, having to deal with a group of bullies.

"I said, 'I am not going to that school if I have to take the bus,'" Witherspoon recalled in an interview.

Mercifully, Marzell Buford came to the rescue. Her son,

Darney, had also been attending Country Day. After learning of Witherspoon's plight, Buford gave him a ride home with Darney every evening. Witherspoon graduated from Country Day, and went on to Monmouth College in Illinois for a couple of semesters. He then ran out of money and saw that his family needed help back home. He took on a series of jobs that eventually led him to the Mathews-Dickey Boys' & Girls' Club in north St. Louis, where he serves as program director today. He is also an inductee into the St. Louis Amateur Baseball Hall of Fame, in part based on his accomplishments at Country Day as a second baseman and shortstop.

Witherspoon said the connections he made at Country Day have helped him in his work at Mathews-Dickey, and he has stayed in touch with his classmates, both White and Black.

James does not move in these circles, and the fact that he missed an opportunity to network with the region's upper crust bothers him not at all.

To its credit, Country Day now provides a much more diverse environment in just about every way for its students. In 1992, it merged with Mary Institute to form Mary Institute and St. Louis Country Day School (MICDS). The administration in 2016 provided these figures regarding the makeup of its student body:

- **32%** of the student body self-identify as students of color
- Students come from **60+** local zip codes
- More than **40** languages and dialects are spoken in their families' homes
- **23%** of students receive need-based tuition aid, exceeding \$4 million



Two generations of Vashon High School grads: Evita with her father, James.

## Episode 2

# Falling Behind Without Really Knowing It

When the final bell rang in grade school, Jessica Caldwell didn't grab her backpack and head home. Instead, she ran from one after-school club to another: jazz, tap, gymnastics, choir, getting home about the time her parents got off work.

By third grade, Jessica, first-born daughter of James and Drucilla Caldwell, was such a model student she was named Student of the Year at Jefferson Elementary School. She earned As, showed initiative, and easily made friends. Sometimes she talked a little too much in class because it was hard for her to keep the words inside when she had something to say. But Jessica was motivated by more than just good grades and extracurricular achievement.

"It wasn't so much about being goody two shoes," she recalled. "I was heavysset. I thought the more I could move, maybe I could lose weight. It's crazy to be thinking about that in third grade, but I did."

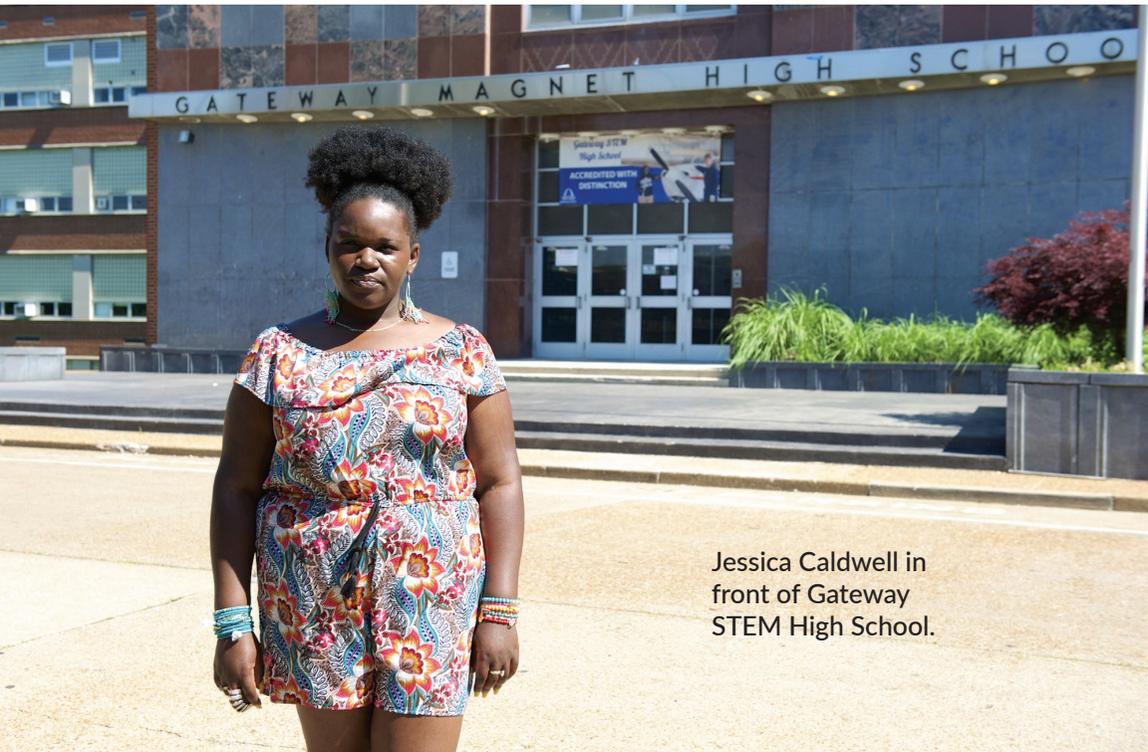
By then the Caldwells were living in O'Fallon Place, just a few blocks from the Pruitt-Igoe site where James had

grown up. Pruitt-Igoe had been razed in the 1970s and had lain fallow ever since, a weed-besotted lot protected by chain-link fencing.

When her parents became nervous about gang activity near their apartment, they moved their two girls to Penrose, then considered a more stable neighborhood, with small brick homes owned by firefighters, teachers, and retired General Motors workers. Jessica and her sister, Evita, were able to continue at Jefferson under a hardship transfer.

Drucilla and James Caldwell were committed to their daughters' education, with mom making it clear that they weren't done with school until they finished college. Jessica remembers her mother's reaction when they drove by the middle school she was supposed to attend. "My mom was not happy with the neighborhood. She was not havin' it."

Jessica ended up in Gateway Middle School in 1995, a magnet school with a diverse population, a commitment to STEM subjects (even before STEM was a trend), and



Jessica Caldwell in front of Gateway STEM High School.

enough floppy disks to impress Jessica. “That was cool for a kid,” she said. “Everything was new. To walk into a cafeteria that wasn’t long tables and benches ... we had chairs to sit in. We had clean bathrooms. We had a courtyard. It was amazing. I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, you all doing this for us?’ I hope we can keep it.”

In sixth grade, she met President Bill Clinton, watching his helicopter land outside the school. She got on the honor roll and stayed there, befriended a girl from India, and fell in love with the bass clarinet. Band competitions gave her the chance to dress up, and the teacher said band might be a ticket to college.

She went on to high school at another magnet, Gateway Institute of Technology (now Gateway STEM High School at 5101 McRee, not far from where Jessica and Jayceon now live). But in 1999, her sophomore year, everything changed. Band was dropped within a month of the start of school because the district couldn’t afford the instruments. “That was a big shock to me,” Jessica said.

What had happened? Politics and policy conspired to disrupt Jessica’s education and that of hundreds of others. The state of Missouri had reached a deal with the St. Louis School District and the plaintiffs in the city-county desegregation case. Under terms of the agreement, student-teacher ratios were rolled back at magnet schools like Gateway as a cost-saving measure. Gateway started the 1999 school year with 10 fewer teachers than it had before. It wasn’t just band that took a hit. Jessica remembers that her math class went sideways too, as the students sat around playing cards because the instructor provided them with little to do.

After graduating from Gateway, Jessica headed to Missouri State University, then known as Southwest Missouri State University. The campus was three hours away—close enough to home to drive, but far enough

away to feel as if she was getting out in the world. She'd fallen in love with the school during a visit, and thought the \$10,000 a year she and her family would have to put toward tuition would be doable.

But the first month in Springfield, she cried every day. She hated it. Everything was different. "It seemed like nobody was nice, nobody would speak to me. I wondered, 'What's wrong with people? They don't like me.' Even black people weren't welcoming."

She decided she had to get out, and looked into transferring to Howard University, a private, historically black institution in Washington, D.C. But a visit from her mom changed things. Drucilla introduced her to a church friend then living in Springfield who took Jessica under his wing, and the shock of being away from home eased. Jessica made friends, got involved, and adjusted to being the only black student in many of her classes.

But at college the A student became a C student. Gateway had prepared her for the sciences, but in advanced algebra, she had learned to play hearts. Though she was no longer quite the academic star she had been before, she remained focused on her one goal—to graduate—and she did, on time, with a degree in psychology.

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Jessica's little sister, Evita, five years younger, wanted to follow in her sister's footsteps. Like Jessica, Evita was a star pupil at Jefferson School. Like Jessica, her fifth grade year had been spent with the estimable Mary Spencer, a teacher who had spent four decades teaching at Jefferson School.

Mrs. Spencer was both feared and revered.

"Ladies, you'll put your knees together when you slip into your desks," she told Evita and her classmates on their first day.



Evita in front of  
Blewett Middle School.

"Do not sass. Do not sass any adult. If you do, I'm going to get you. I'm the momma. I have a loud voice. If I call you, you stop and holler, 'Ma'am!' You come and see what I want. Do you understand me?"

"Yesssss."

"I will fight your battles for you. You do not start fights. Is that understood?"

"Yesssss."

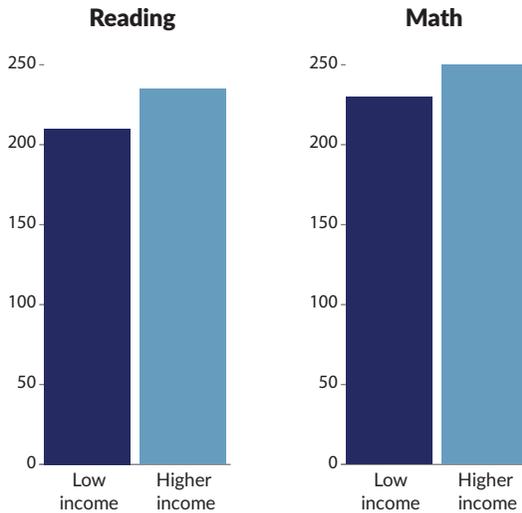
"We're high class," she told them. "We're not ghetto!"

By that time, Mrs. Spencer was facing an even greater uphill battle in preparing her charges for a successful future. Jefferson School (Mrs. Spencer liked to call it The Jefferson School, to distinguish it from all others) was situated in in a ZIP code with the lowest average household income in the city, according to the U.S. Census (and it has remained that way, according to census estimates up to 2015). The census also showed that eight in every 10 children were living with single mothers (and the percentage has risen since then).

Despite the best efforts of Mrs. Spencer and her fellow teachers at Jefferson, many children were heading to middle school reading well below grade level and performing poorly in science and math as well.

Still, Evita figured, she was getting pretty much the best life had to offer. “Most of us had parents who took good care of us,” she recounted in a story she wrote in 2015 for the St. Louis American and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. “But many of us were falling behind and didn’t really know it.”

**Gap in 4th grade scores on the  
National Assessment of Educational Progress,  
by family income, 2013**



Source: U.S. Department of Education

It was around that time that developer Richard Baron started working on a grand vision to turn around Jefferson and other nearby schools. Baron created the Vashon Compact in 2001, so called because it addressed the needs of the elementary and middle schools that funneled students into what was then the new Vashon High School.

Civic participants in the compact poured \$40 million

into those schools from 2001 to 2006, with Jefferson getting \$4 million in upgrades. On the roster of supporters were companies like Anheuser-Busch, Bank of America, Edward Jones, Express Scripts, Energizer Holdings, and Laclede Gas, to name just a few. The stakeholders believed that if they could make the compact work, perhaps the community would learn how to fix the entire school district.

Why should Baron even care? Well, his firm owned the O'Fallon Place and Murphy Park townhouses that surrounded Jefferson. Baron, who had been a legal aid attorney before starting his development firm, had long taken an interest in urban revival and believed that safe and secure neighborhoods went hand-in-hand with good schools. One could not prosper without the other.

Baron began building partnerships and raising money. The money went toward equipment, teacher training and enrichment programs for the students just as Evita was in the fourth and fifth grades. No one knew then for sure whether all the money and effort would make a difference in the lives of the students at Jefferson, but there was a lot of promise.

Looking back, it can now be said that test scores improved some, but not as much as the civic leaders and the school district hoped. The compact partners abandoned the program after six years.

The compact might be described as failure given that it could not be sustained. But it can also be argued that without those programs the student outcomes would have suffered even more.

Hundreds of students received a better foundation, schools got state-of-the-art technology, teachers and principals got training that could be applied at whatever school they found themselves, and corporate participants got a deeper civic knowledge of education issues.

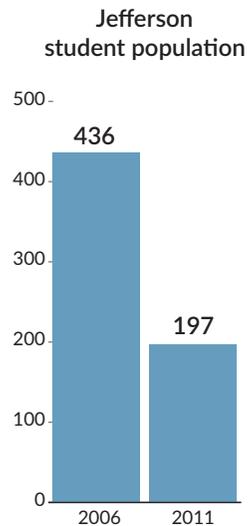
Current superintendent Kelvin Adams noted that the district has learned how to work with outside partners and is more proactive in getting them to support programs that will do the district the most good. In the past, he said, corporations would come with their money and their own ideas about how it ought to be spent, he told Evita as she was preparing her story that appeared in the Post-Dispatch and St. Louis American. But the district now has its own vision and asks civic leaders to get on board.

“There are three or four areas we think are important—early childhood education, college and career focus, health and wellness. So what we do now is ask the business community to support those things,” Adams said.

Though the compact has long been out of business, programs it brought to St. Louis Public Schools remain, including College Summit, a program designed to help underserved students prepare for a college education.

Evita remembers enjoying the arts programs that the Center of Contemporary Arts (COCA) brought to Jefferson and benefitting from the new computers that showed up in her classroom. COCA remains involved with city schools.

Even so with the end of the compact Jefferson went into decline again. Many veteran teachers departed and the school saw a succession of several principals. Test scores fell and enrollment dropped. In 2006, Jefferson classrooms were filled with 436 students, according to figures compiled by Missouri’s education department. But by 2011, enrollment fell to 197. At the same time, disciplinary incidents increased from 1 per 100 students in 2008 to 2.5 by 2011.



The area-wide desegregation program, which by then was considered one of the most successful in the nation, had a downside for those who remained in all-black city schools.

“What [the Vashon Compact] was fighting was the fact that the city schools were losing teachers and their families to the more affluent school districts, Clayton, Ladue and Parkway,” Baron recalled.

“We were training and doing in-service,” Baron said, “and just about the time we would really get some outstanding performance and started to see kids really improving... the teachers would be gone [to another district]. It was frustrating, to say the least.”

After her fifth grade year, Evita had hopes of following her sister Jessica to Gateway Middle School. She had done just as well as Jessica at Jefferson. But there’s a difference between being good and lucky.

Though coming from an underserved population and attending an all-black grade school, Evita wasn’t necessarily entitled to attend a city magnet school. For purposes of racial balance, the magnet schools were required to reserve spots for white students. Oddly, a child from suburban St. Louis who wanted to attend a city magnet school had a much better chance than Evita of gaining admittance. The program did have a provision that allowed siblings to attend the same magnet schools, but only if the older sibling was still at the school when the younger sibling got started. In the Caldwell’s case, Jessica had moved on to Gateway High before Evita finished at Jefferson.

Evita went instead to Blewett, a middle school just across the street from Jefferson, and another school with a record of poor outcomes. By this time, Evita was noticing that a number of her friends were getting on a bus early each morning to go to schools in the suburbs.

“Many of us lived under the illusion or delusion that St. Louis County was the Promised Land,” she would later write. “Many times friends and teachers asked why a smart kid like me wasn’t attending a magnet or county school. They would say, ‘You are too smart to be at Blewett. You should be in a county school.’ Or ‘you need to be somewhere else ... somewhere you can be challenged.’

“My peers and their parents often referred to county schools as ‘white schools’ even though many were quite diverse. Many of my friends’ parents would boast about how much nicer the suburban schools were than the schools their kids previously attended. More important, they insisted they were learning so much more.”

Though those students gained many advantages being bused to county schools, there were challenges too. Many had to get up as early as 5 a.m. and then ride a bus anywhere from 10 to 20 miles to get to their schools. If they chose to participate in extracurricular activities they might get home well after dark. Then there was the adjustment process. After attending all-black schools, many children were experiencing a diverse environment for the first time, and some of them found it jarring.

Some schools did better than others counseling and mentoring so-called “deseg kids.” But there were intangible and logistical issues that were hard to overcome. If you made a friend in the county, you wouldn’t necessarily get to hang out with that friend after school or on the weekends because you lived so far apart. For that reason and others, Blacks and Whites did not mix in the way some advocates envisioned. At lunchtime, Blacks and Whites often sat at separate tables.

Still, studies were showing that children who attended integrated schools performed better. And it wasn’t just the children of color from the city who enjoyed the benefits. The White students in the home districts were shown to do better as well.

As an adolescent, Evita did not have a particularly sophisticated appreciation for all the nuances, but she was getting a positive vibe from her friends who were in the program, and she wanted in.

She gathered the transfer materials, filled out forms and asked her dad to put his signature on the application.

He said no.

Evita would go to Vashon, just like he did. "If it was good enough for me," he told Evita, "it's good enough for you."

Twenty years had passed since James had graduated from Vashon. Though much had changed, the school had not gotten much better. The city had closed the outdated and dilapidated facility at 3015 Bell Avenue in midtown that James attended, and in 2002 opened a new, \$40 million high-tech Vashon a half mile to the north at 3035 Cass Avenue.

But student outcomes failed to improve. Nearly half the students who started at Vashon with Evita failed to earn a diploma.



Jessica (left) and Evita (right), with grandmother, Lottie Mae Smith (Drucilla's mother) at Evita's 8th grade promotion ceremony

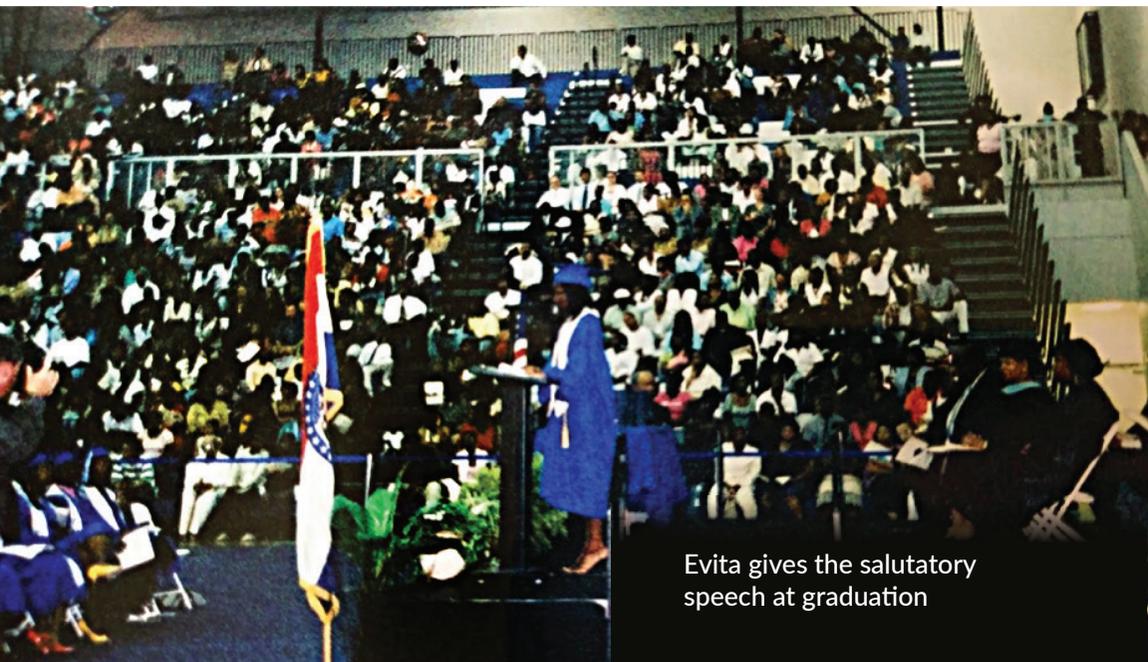
James has no regrets about sending Evita to Vashon. He had made it through, found a good job and had raised a family. And he had done it on his own, without needing special help from the courts, the policy makers and the planners. To James, character development, grit and determination are what you need to make it in this world.

Though James did not mention Malcolm X, something the Black nationalist leader said in 1965 sums up his approach: “Nobody can give you freedom. Nobody can give you equality or justice or anything. If you’re a man, you just take it.”

And then there was what his great-grandmother had to say. “She was my biggest influence,” James recalled. “She kept things dirt simple. ‘No one can represent you but yourself,’ she would say. ‘No one can help you make up for what you are lacking. That’s on you.’”

“To me it didn’t matter what school they went to,” he said. “I felt I could personally help my kids. I was going to take them beyond their school work.”

And he did. When Evita and Jessica were in grade school, he had them diagramming sentences well before



Evita gives the salutatory speech at graduation

they took it up in class. He kept his old calculus text on hand in case they would need his help in high school. James never missed a parent-teacher conference and he showed up for every band concert and tumbling exhibition.

“Any school can educate you if you are smart,” James said. “‘Go to Vashon,’ I told Evita. ‘I guarantee you with the teachers I know who are still there and with my ability to help you, you will succeed.’ That’s far more important than whether the school graduated all its students or whether the kids performed well on standardized tests.”

Drucilla, who had divorced James in 2000, did not share her ex-husband’s outlook and wanted Evita to become part of the desegregation program. She had a great appreciation for diversity, but perhaps more important to her was keeping Evita safe. Vashon seemed dangerous to her.

In 2006, as Evita was in her junior year, a student was murdered. All too frequently, TV crews were at the school, reporting on an incident.

And yet, just like her dad, Evita made it through Vashon, and with flying colors. She was a drummer in the marching band. She joined the Explorer program sponsored by the city police department, and she graduated second in her class. Defying the expectations of just about everyone except her parents, she also earned a superior score on state achievement tests. She remembers a Vashon counselor who was almost incredulous concerning her score. They had such low expectations for their students, Evita thought. And that bothered her.

By the time Evita graduated, her mother was working at the Washington University School of Medicine as a lab tech and so she qualified for help with tuition. Still, Evita would need to take out a student loan to make up the difference. She passed up a state school and enrolled at Saint Louis University, a private Jesuit institution, just a few miles from her home.

For the first time in her life, Evita would sit in a class with white students. It was mind boggling, she recalled.

“I suddenly found myself a minority,” Evita said, “and at times self-conscious and timid, afraid to speak up. At other times I wondered whether I was living up to expectations without really knowing what the expectations were.”

Evita remembered how unsettling it was when white students would ask where she attended high school. When she disclosed it was Vashon, she could see them recalibrating their understanding of her in their minds. For students who had grown up in St. Louis, “Where did you go to high school?” is a question fraught with class and race implications. The idea that someone who had gone to Vashon could now be their classmate at St. Louis University was cause for amazement. Sometimes they expressed their amazement aloud.

Evita felt her differentness acutely. It became so oppressive to her that she moved out of the dorm where she was living and came back home to live with her dad.

But while she was frustrated with those challenges, that frustration had a flip side. Unlike so many of her peers, “I had beaten the odds,” she said. Evita could take the same pride in herself that her father had.

Evita graduated with a degree in communications and was ready to become a journalist in the hope of specializing in urban affairs. Who better to report on such matters than someone who had grown up experiencing the trials and travails, the hope and the promise in her native city?

She put together her work samples from school and a resume. She started a blog on urban affairs to establish herself in her community.

She got almost no response.

Here was a young woman who had “beaten the odds”—

she had done everything she was supposed to do, and yet could not find a job in her chosen field. Falling back on some vocational training she had received at Vashon, she began working as a pharmacy tech at Walgreen's. She was making \$12 an hour and thinking about leaving town.

Finally, though, her ship came in—well, halfway in. She was able to get a night job as an intern for KMOV-TV (at just more than half what she was earning at Walgreen's). When her term was up there, she landed a temporary position at St. Louis Public Radio working with Don Marsh and his producer Mary Edwards on their talk show, *St. Louis on the Air*. But she was unable to land a permanent position, losing out to a candidate who been educated in the Clayton School District, a district with some of the best outcomes in the state of Missouri.

After several months without a job, Evita gained a tenuous toehold on a career path. Publication of her story in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *St. Louis American* drew the attention of talk show host Charlie Brennan, who recommended Evita to news director Beth Coughlan for an opening as a news apprentice.

Evita started at KMOX in the summer of 2016, but after the radio station was sold, she no longer saw a future for herself. For many months she worked as a freelancer, landing some gigs as a researcher and publicist with her compensation ranging from \$20 to \$50 an hour. But she needed a full-time job. At age 28, she could no longer get medical coverage from her parents' policies and was paying for her medical expenses out of pocket. With all those job experiences, Evita had more and more people in her corner ready to write glowing references. But here it was nearly seven years since her college graduation, and she was still without a full-time job.

Backstory: Drucilla Caldwell

# You Have To Find Your Own Job

As both Evita and Jessica were growing up, their mom also tried to advance her own education by attending Missouri College, a for-profit institution.

Drucilla Caldwell's experience shines a different light on racial inequities.

Beginning in the 1970s, for-profit colleges surfaced on the educational landscape as an alternative for students who could not afford or could not meet the rigor of a state or private university. The for-profit field became lucrative because students can qualify for federal loans just as with conventional four-year colleges. The schools get paid whether or not their students find jobs, whether or not they pay off their loans. Not surprisingly, the for-profit schools began marketing their services to disadvantaged and



minority students who might otherwise not continue their educations.

Between 2004 and 2010, black enrollment in for-profit bachelor's programs grew by 264 percent, compared to a 24 percent increase in black enrollment in public four-year programs, according to figures cited at Slate.com.

Many graduates of for-profit colleges did find jobs. But studies have shown a whole lot didn't. For-profit completion rates, default rates on loans and labor market outcomes for graduates fell far below those who went to state and private universities.

Drucilla attended Missouri College in 1997. Not for four years, but for six months. She wanted simply to earn certification as a medical assistant.

She took out a federal student loan and paid \$10,000 in tuition to attend. She never got certified, though she did find a job as an assistant in a doctor's office for a short time.

Did Drucilla get her money's worth?

"Naaah," she said. "Those schools try to cram so much in you in six months. I would have done better if I had gone to community college."

She added: "You spend all that money and then are they going to help you find a job? They say they will, but you have to find your own job."

Drucilla remained gainfully employed and was one of those who did pay off her student loan. She currently works at a call center where she coordinates appointments, transportation and care for patients who are in health plans, including Medicaid.

Drucilla's alma mater of sorts, Missouri College, went out of business in late October 2016.



Jessica and Jayceon on their front steps

## Episode 3

# Finding That Place To Call Home

Jessica returned to St. Louis after graduating from Southwest Missouri State in 2006 and moved back in with her dad in the Penrose neighborhood. Jessica had no trouble finding work, but her personal life went sideways.

It started with a family friend. The man was older and not like other men Jessica had known. He was often unemployed, but would find work from time to time as a handyman to make ends meet. The man was both edgy and charming. The two would talk for hours and Jessica, who hadn't ever had a real boyfriend, enjoyed his attention.

But after six months of dating, Jessica was crushed to learn through the grapevine that her boyfriend was moving in with a woman who was the mother of two of his children.

Even so, she continued the relationship, and later became pregnant. She had a decision to make. She wasn't ready to have a child, certainly not this man's child. But he wanted her to have the baby and told her the birth would be a blessing.

Jessica's father said he would support her in whatever

er she chose, but her mother only had one thing to say: “You’re not killing my grandchild.” On Jessica’s 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, she learned she was carrying a boy, and started reading to him in the womb.

The ex-boyfriend wasn’t there when his son Jayceon was born in January of 2010. Nor did he show up much over the next couple of years. In the meantime, Jessica believes he fathered at least a dozen children. When her son was 2½, Jayceon’s father stopped by, but it was mainly to ask Jessica for money. When she refused, Jayceon’s father walked over to Jayceon and told him he was out of his life.

Jessica made sure it stayed that way. She would build a life for her son, which meant building a career. After graduating from college, Jessica had landed a temp job at the Missouri Botanical Garden, then moved on to another temp position as coordinator for the Salvation Army’s Christmas program. She also served as a volunteer for a city-wide Christmas program called Toy Town. She wasn’t making much money, but enjoyed the work. It was gratifying to be in service of others, she said.

But it wasn’t paying the bills. She applied for work through a temp service and found a position in quality control at scrap metal firm. Her diligence paid dividends. A supervisor noticed and promoted her to an accounting position that paid \$12.50 an hour. At the same time, she took another job at the Botanical Garden working in the lead position at the ticket counter. “I was working two jobs and living the life,” she said.

But then the Great Recession came in 2008 and the scrap metal company laid her off. “I was devastated,” Jessica said. “They had me work all day fired me, then had me pack up all my belongings in front of everyone in the office and wait outside the building for my ride. Luckily I still had my part time position at the Garden.” Three months later in

Dec. 2008, the Garden named her a full-time supervisor for all the ticket counter staffers. “And at only 24 years old,” she said proudly.

Things were looking up, but it was five months later when Jessica learned she was pregnant. “I knew that I was going to need a new position as I didn’t want to stand on my feet all day. But someone had an eye on Jessica and reached out to help.

“One day I got a call from an older black woman, Gwen, who I had never met in my life, call me and told me there was a position in membership that I should apply for so I did.

That’s where Jessica finally got on a career track — fundraising and development. But there were plenty of twists of turns to follow.

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In 2012, when Jayceon was 2, Jessica moved into an apartment in Ferguson. It was Section 8 housing, meaning that Jessica could get a subsidy to apply toward the rent. But the subsidy was not all that much and she moved out in June of 2014 and moved in with her father in the Penrose neighborhood. It was only two months later that Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer on Canfield Drive in Ferguson, just a 15-minute walk from where Jessica and Jayceon were living.

Moving in with James helped her save some dollars, and she gets along well with her dad. But the neighborhood felt no safer. “I wanted to be someplace where I could open my window and not hear gunshots,” Jessica said.

It wasn’t long after that she found an apartment on the Hill, which was an answer to all her prayers. Two bedrooms, a nice kitchen, and a quiet neighborhood.

In 2016, Jayceon was just finishing first grade at KIPP Victory Academy, 955 Arcade Avenue, a drive of less than

10 minutes from where Jessica worked. It had taken a long while for Jessica to settle on KIPP. “I tell people that looking for a kindergarten was just as hard as finding a college,” she said. “I was so nervous.”

At the time, Jessica was making \$39,000 a year as giving manager at Beyond Housing, which provides support and services to assist low-income families. She still had \$38,000 left on her \$40,000 in student loans. At \$210 a month, she knows it’ll take a lifetime to repay. She says she’s OK with that. Drawing again on the perseverance that must surely be woven into the Caldwell DNA, she says she will find a way.

As the 2016 school year drew to a close, Jessica decided Jayceon would not be returning to KIPP in the fall and she made a point of telling the principal why. “Color coding behavior is affecting the students’ self-esteem when they don’t even know what self-esteem really is,” she recalled saying. The educators, she said, “were tearing down children before they got to know who they were as human beings.”

In fact, Jessica believed the school set up a process that provokes increased misbehavior as the students get increasingly upset as their colors move toward the red zone.

More importantly, she believed that Victory Academy was failing to tap into Jayceon’s potential.

“A lot of people are amazed by Jayceon,” she said proudly. “By 18 months he could count to 10. At two he knew how to spell his name.”

Isn’t this just the kind of thing all proud moms have to say about their children?

Well, perhaps, but her Jessica’s assessment was backed up by Jayceon’s kindergarten teacher, Hazen Fairbanks, now a teacher for a KIPP school in Minnesota.

Fairbanks grew up in Bemidji, Minn., in a family that she describes as indigenous, which many would identify as Native American. Her experience was different than that of urban African Americans, but also similar in many ways, she said. There was that feeling of having to fit into a different culture, the need to code switch by talking or behaving differently when with whites. And there was that feeling that she only came to realize as a grownup that well-meaning outsiders sometimes impose standards on a group of people without really listening to them. “If we aren’t asking people what they want for themselves we are just colonizing,” Fairbanks said.

“You need to know who they are,” she said. “I had a really close conversation with Jessica and I was able to hear what she wanted for her son.”

And yes, she confirmed, the child is pretty brilliant. “We were four weeks into the school year and my co-teacher was doing a lesson on building bridges. One in particular had to do with Japan. Jayceon picked up a book on it



Jayceon displays his spelling and music awards

and he read it perfectly. I said, 'You can read that?' I got a harder book and he read every word perfectly. He's very special. He's very curious and it would break my heart if he wasn't feeling like he could express his true self."

To be sure, KIPP Victory has lived up to its name in some respects. Figures shared on the charter's school website that year showed, for instance, that 42 percent of students



have made more than a year's worth of progress in reading; and that 62 percent have done so in math.

But the stat sheet also revealed that the student attrition rate was 20 percent and it would later climb to 31 percent, Jayceon included.

Jessica's first choice for her son was City Academy. It's a private school at 4175 North Kingshighway, immediately south of the Mathews-Dickey Boys' & Girls Club. It was founded by Donald Danforth III, a scion of one of St. Louis's most notable families. In just several years after its founding at the Mathews-Dickey facility in 1984, City Academy earned an outstanding reputation. It was sending its students on to the best prep schools in the region and City Academy alums were attending top universities across the nation. The school was also appealing to Jessica because every student's education is subsidized and if Jayceon was accepted Jessica might only have to pay about \$2,500 per school year. In a sense, Jayceon would be in a position to travel the road his grandfather had not taken when he turned down the opportunity at Country Day School more a half century earlier.

Unfortunately Jayceon did not gain admission. "He took the entrance exam and he passed," Jessica said. "But there were no students leaving at his grade level, so he was put on a priority waiting list."

Leaving nothing to chance, applying to Shaw VPA, a St. Louis district magnet school, just a few blocks from their apartment. VPA stands for visual and performing arts, and Jessica believed Jayceon would love the curriculum.

Moreover the student teacher ratio is 13:1 compared to 25:1 at KIPP.

Even so, academic performance at the school is questionable. State figures show that fewer than half (and

in some cases much fewer than half) were graded as proficient in reading, math, and science on the state's MAP test. The school is fully accredited, but with a score that is at the low end compared with schools across the region.

But those are numbers, Jessica likes what she is seeing with her own eyes: a happy kid, who loves going to school. "He got straight As on his last report card and he loved performing in the choir for a performance of *The Wiz*.

To be sure, there was a period of adjustment. Jayceon got into some fights. For that he and others involved were directed into anger management sessions on Fridays. But instead of getting flagged with red and yellow tickets, Jayceon got positive reinforcement when he behaved appropriately. "We would get treats," Jayceon said. "I learned to count to three when I got mad. I could stomp my feet till I felt better."

"He did a complete 360," Jessica said.

Mom got some positive reinforcement too. Jayceon's teacher would call Jessica to tell her how well her son had been doing. "She had told me at the start of the year that she wouldn't be calling me when he got out of line, that they would handle things at school," Jessica recounted. "But she also had a practice of calling the parents of two students each day, just to let them know how things were going. And when it was time to call Jessica, the teacher told her Jayceon was headed in the right direction.

So too is Jessica's life. She recently earned a promotion to annual funds manager at Beyond Housing with a nice pay raise to go with it.

This will help Jessica with her credit rating, which got a bit sideways with her student debt. She not only cut her spending, but also researched ways she could reduce her monthly payments on her student loan. In doing her research she learned it helps, too, to apply for credit cards

and then pay the full balance each month. Soon she saw her score rising from 545 to 610. When it gets to 700, and with enough savings, she can probably qualify for a mortgage and become a homeowner for the first time.

She envisions a small place with a nice kitchen and a backyard in a neighborhood that's quiet and safe, maybe not far from her apartment on The Hill.

## Backstory: Vashon School

# A School on The Hill

Jessica had no trouble renting the apartment on The Hill where she now lives. Things might have been different years ago when many landlords in predominantly white neighborhoods throughout the region would make up excuses for not renting when they learned an applicant was a person of color.

But The Hill, known for years as St. Louis's almost exclusively Italian neighborhood, has a history that very much includes African-Americans.

For many years after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, St. Louis was largely a White community, attracting first German and French immigrants, then Italian and Irish settlers. Before the Civil War, St. Louis' Black population was less than eight percent. The war and Reconstruction changed things, with newly-freed slaves moving north to escape Klan violence and the sharecropping system where Black farmers worked the land but did not own it.

The Hill drew many Black migrants because there were clay mines that lay underneath its streets, which provided jobs—and employers didn't care about race as long as workers were willing to work hard at a dirty job. So many Black workers did just that, for about 25 years before the Italians arrived from downtown to also make a living in the mines.

The first Italian immigrants to St. Louis actually lived in a place called Little Italy, which was a neighborhood near O'Fallon Place—where Jessica and Evita grew up. It's as if over the span of a century the two communities switched places.

But the intertwined storylines don't end there.

The Vashon family, for whom the high school is named and where James and Evita earned their high school diplomas, started educating black children at a small school on the Hill.

The St. Louis public school system established Cheltenham Colored School #10 on the Hill in 1877, because it was required to under a law requiring the district to open a school for black students if at least 20 children in a neighborhood were of school age. The school remained open until about 1911 when presumably the census for black children fell below 20 and the property was put up for auction.

Cheltenham was renamed Vashon School in 1890 to honor the eminent jurist, scholar and poet George Boyer Vashon (1824-1878) and his son John Boyer Vashon. George Vashon was a contemporary of and collaborator with Frederick Douglass, and other prominent abolitionists. The younger Vashon had come to St. Louis with his mother and other family members after his father died in a yellow fever epidemic while a professor at the newly established Alcorn University in Lorman, Miss., now Alcorn State.

Though the St. Louis School District closed the school on the Hill, it kept the Vashon name, and put it on a new high school opened for black students in 1927, four miles to the northeast at 3026 Laclede Avenue. Harris-Stowe State University now sits at that site; Vashon High moved in 1963 to 3405 Bell Avenue, where James matriculated, and then further north in 2002 to 3035 Cass Avenue, where Evita attended.

Living on in that small apartment on Bischoff Avenue as they now do, Jessica and Jayceon sleep just five blocks from the first Vashon School. In a way, then, the Caldwells have come full circle.

Though she hadn't known this history until it was shared with her, Jessica finds it meaningful. She is a student of history. In that small apartment on Bischoff, she has found room for many books addressing the African-American experience. They range from Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, written in 2010 and concerning the mass incarceration of African-American men, to Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, written in 1901. Washington's book speaks to her because it focuses on both the value of education and self-reliance.

In one chapter, Washington describes how his students built their own school to assure themselves of a quality education. Jessica will not be able to do that for Jayceon, but figures she can do the next best thing by building on her own experiences, and that of her family members. Every aspect requires scrutiny. Nothing, she says, is more important than Jayceon's education.



# Epilogue

Jessica and her family have been generous in sharing their story, but this is not the only place they are doing it.

Jessica has made appearances on behalf of Aim High, a program that encourages students from challenging environments to prepare for college. Aim High had helped both Jessica and Evita do just that when they were in middle school. When the organization asked Jessica to speak at a recent banquet, she wrote out some remarks. But when she got to the microphone, she set them aside and spoke from the heart, recalling how the program took “us out of the ‘hood” and showed her what was possible, even teaching her to swim, what she now regards as “an essential survival skill.”

Evita, James, Drucilla, and, of course Jayceon, turned out that night to watch Jessica deliver her remarks. It reminded Evita of her own experiences with Aim High and the time one summer when the student from Vashon first stepped inside John Burroughs, one of the region’s top prep schools.

Evita could have been forgiven if the experience inspired a bit of melancholy or even bitterness as she could easily see the difference between what John Burroughs offered its students compared to what Vashon offered.

Instead, she said, the teachers and teaching assistants gave her a sense of belonging, and a sense of possibility that she could find her place in a world outside the neighborhood where she grew up.

In recent months, Evita has found a more solid footing both personally and professionally. In 2017, she was accepted into the Focus St. Louis Emerging Leaders, a three-month program that introduced her to other, young up-and-comers. There she studied leadership skills and examined regional issues from different perspectives. Her participation gives her ready access to 8,500 Focus alumni, among St. Louis' most influential and well-connected leaders.

This summer, she landed a full time position at Charter Communications in customer service. For the first time, Evita is getting health benefits and she can access a tuition reimbursement program if she decides to return to school for a master's degree.

Job security means that Evita could get a newer car for the commute to her job in Bridgeton, a 2015 Corolla that replaced her 20-year old Taurus with 200K on the odometer and a balky AC.

At the same time, Evita says she will never put her her family, friends and neighbors in her rearview mirror. She has moved to an apartment in the Fairgrounds neighborhood in north St. Louis, just a stone's throw from her dad's place, two miles from where she went to grade school and a mile and a half from where she graduated from high school.

She supports Vashon's alumni association and regularly returns to mentor students and talk about her experiences in marketing and journalism. Her work caught Saint Louis University's attention. The communications school recently presented her with its Young Alumni Award.

"That was meaningful to me," Evita said. "It let me know how far I've come and to keep it up, to keep going.

"I am always honored (and even a little surprised still) when someone asks me to come and speak to students. I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to do."

# The Team

**Kate Arthur** will be a storyteller for our project. She is a writer for Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois, where she finds and tells stories of some of the 21,000 students, faculty and alumni. Kate is an advocate for underrepresented groups, working to promote an inclusive campus that elevates the status of women and affirms students and faculty of color and the LGBTQ community. In partnership with Illinois artist Ricardo Lewis, she is documenting the lives of young African-American men portrayed through his (In)Visible Men portrait series. The series illustrates the challenges black men have on a predominately white campus, bridging education and art.



**Sylvester Brown** will be a storyteller for our project. A native St. Louisan Sylvester has been a journalist and social justice advocate since 1987 when he started Take Five Magazine, a pro-active, community-based, investigative publication. In 2001, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch hired him as a Metro columnist where he worked for eight years on columns that were provocative, controversial and above all well read. In 2012, Sylvester began "The Sweet Potato Project," a summer program aimed at teaching "at-risk" youth entrepreneurial skills.

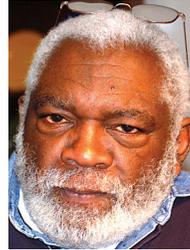


**Lindy Drew** is the photojournalist for the first chapter of our project on the Caldwell family. She graduated from the International Center of Photography and then Washington University in St. Louis with a Masters of Social Work and Public Health. She uses documentary photography to promote



cross-cultural understanding, health, and wellness. In 2014, she co-founded and began photographing for Humans of St. Louis (HOSTL), a 501(C)3 nonprofit that shares an intimate look into the lives and struggles of the people of St. Louis, one photo and story at a time. More of her work can be seen at: [www.lindydrew.com](http://www.lindydrew.com).

**Sylvester Jacobs** will serve as a photo-journalist on our project. He is a native of Muskogee Oklahoma, who grew up in the Jim Crow era. An Army veteran, he spent his formative years as a photographer in London. Sylvester's exhibitions included the Serpentine Gallery, the Photographers Gallery in London, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, and the Free University Amsterdam. Books include the photographic essays *Portrait of a Shelter*, *Portrait of England*, and *Born Black* (an autobiography). Sylvester moved to St. Louis ten years ago, recent St. Louis exhibitions have been mounted at The Chapel and Old North Restoration Group.



**David LaGesse** will serve as a senior editor for our project. Over nearly three decades, David wrote for a number of regional and national publications, including *U.S. News & World Report* and the *Dallas Morning News*. His work has also appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Money* and *National Geographic*. With his spouse, Laura Stanton, they have volunteered in inner-city schools, helping teach skills to the next generation of journalists. Together, they also operate LaVidaCo Communications in Clayton.



**Ricardo Lewis** is an artist who uses creative expression to facilitate dialogues on social justice. His recent work includes the (In)Visible Men, a portrait series of African American men, using art to educate and challenge stereotypes. He retired as associate dean of students at Illinois State University after a 30-year career in student affairs. Ricardo continues to engage and mentor students and young professionals.



**Wiley Price** will serve as a photojournalist for our project. A member of the Missouri Photojournalism Hall of Fame, Wiley has worked as a photojournalist at Missouri newspapers for more than 20 years, including The St. Louis American and 10 years at Suburban Journals of St. Louis. As a freelancer, his photos appeared in St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The Kansas City Star, Detroit Free Press, The Washington Post and Ebony magazine.



**Gloria Ross** will serve as a senior editor for our project. Gloria began her career in journalism as a reporter and later moved into public relations, working in communications at Bank of America (then Centerre Bank) before joining the United Way of Greater St. Louis, where she worked for 20 years. After leaving United Way in 2006, Gloria formed Okara Communications, which provides communications services to nonprofit organizations. More recently she has provided commentary in local media on social justice issues. Gloria is a past president of the Press Club of Metropolitan St. Louis and a current member of the Greater St. Louis Association of Black Journalists.



**Laura Stanton** will serve as graphic designer and data visualization specialist for our project. She is an award-winning artist who spent two decades on the staff of The Washington Post. She produces engaging and explanatory images from sometimes knotty information, having tackled federal budgets, investigatory reports and world emergencies. She previously served on the staffs of the Chicago Tribune and The Dallas Morning News. She and her husband and business partner, David LaGessee, recently published a book: *Superpowers of Visual Storytelling*.



**Richard Weiss** will serve as executive editor and storyteller for our project. He is an award-winning writer, editor and writing coach with more than three decades of experience at newspapers, much of it at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. After leaving the Post-Dispatch in 2005, Weiss started his own company WeissWrite LLC, a writing, editing and coaching service for anyone with a story to tell.





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