

EDUCATION AT THE CROSSROADS

Even for parents with multiple options, choosing the right school remains as difficult as ever.

Eric Singletary didn't need saving.

He was a straight-A student at Kelly Miller Middle School in one of the most neglected wards in northeast Washington, D.C.

When his recreation league coach, Calvin Woodland, offered him and a few other young people a chance to hang out with George F. Kettle at his riverfront resort house for the weekend, he went. Kettle later became a well-known philanthropist, working with the "I Have a Dream" Foundation to offer low-income children the opportunity to go to college. Kettle saw academic promise in Singletary and offered him an opportunity to meet with administrators at Sidwell Friends School, an elite independent private school in northwest Washington. Singletary impressed his interviewers, passed all the required tests and was admitted. Kettle paid his initial tuition.

Upon entering Sidwell, Singletary immediately faced cultural differences. The students lounged intermittently on the carpets by the lockers in between classes. They spoke of "vacationing" overseas for the summer and winter. Many of them drove themselves to school in sports cars rather than taking city buses as Singletary did.

As an African American at Sidwell, Singletary was in the minority, rather than in the majority like he was in his public school. Among other challenges, he had to repeat the ninth grade. The work load was sometimes overwhelming. But he eventually excelled socially and academically.

"It took me a whole year to adjust. I cried like a baby when I had to repeat. I learned time management, how to study," Singletary says. "I think sports helped me make the adjustment socially."

Last school year he returned to Sidwell to work as the

school's head basketball coach and physical education instructor. Once one of the final training camp roster cuts for the NBA's Houston Rockets and Vancouver Grizzlies, Singletary played professional basketball in Germany and Portugal and stateside in the International Basketball League before returning to the District and taking a job as an assistant coach at Gonzaga High School during the 2006-2007 school year. As Sidwell's coach, Singletary knows that if his 5-year-old son, Aaron, attends Sidwell, he could rub elbows with the offspring of some of the most influential people in the world, including the president's children. But like many Black parents deciding whether to send their children to elite private schools, Singletary is reluctant to take advantage of the opportunity. He prefers that his son solidify his identity around other Black children and administrators and within a more diverse student body — at least for his early years.

At a time when the United States has an African American president and African Americans are the second-largest consumer group in the country with a combined buying power of an estimated \$892 billion-plus, quality education remains a thorny issue for Black parents.

Nikki Taylor, a history professor at the University of Cincinnati, has the means to put her high-achieving daughter, Kaia, in a private school. But she chooses not to.

"I think it was a hard-fought battle back in the 19th cen-

By Ericka Blount Danois

tury when freed slaves were the first to demand free and public education to all people, and it was a long-fought battle to get those schools integrated," she says. "I thought it would just be like a snub to our ancestors."

Her decision is also based on her uneasy experiences as a child. Taylor attended public schools in Toledo, Ohio, before going to majority-White Country Day School. At Country Day, she was told by counselors that she had a "fat chance" of getting into the University of Pennsylvania, which she ultimately attended before going on to graduate school at Duke. Taylor says being one of the few African Americans at Country Day made her conscious of her "unique disability as an African American and as a poor person."

She was determined for her daughter to have a more empowering experience. So after initially living on campus in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., as a professor at Vassar College, she decided to commute from their home in Brooklyn, N.Y., so her daughter could attend a diverse public school, Midwood's P.S. 217.

After moving to Cincinnati, Taylor's daughter attended a suburban public school. But Kaia got more flak from the students than the teachers for insisting on celebrating Black History Month. Students would ask why Kaia even cared or why there wasn't a White History Month, Taylor says. One bully teased her daughter so much that Taylor was moved to press charges.

This year, for Kaia's first year of high school, Taylor has chosen to endure a one-hour commute so Kaia can attend Walnut Hills, one of the best public schools in the nation. Taylor pays \$801 a month because the school is out of their zone. It's a price she's willing to pay, especially for the socio-economic, religious, racial and political diversity the school offers.

It's a decision that doesn't come without qualms for Taylor. She says of Kaia, "I think her having a strong sense of self and a strong sense of identity and consciousness about the world and her place in it as a Black woman are infinitely more important than power and wealth."

Eric Singletary agrees. In his first year as a freshman at Sidwell in the '80s, he woke up at 6 a.m., got dressed and took the No. 32 bus, riding along Wisconsin Avenue for an hour, depending on traffic, and often arriving just after the 8 a.m. bell. On days when he resided with his grandmother, he had to leave home earlier and take two different buses and the subway to arrive on time. In the evenings after sports practices, particularly in the winter, he rode home in the dark, showered, ate and went to work on his mountainous load of homework. He often fell asleep as he was working.

The school stepped in when he struggled during that first semester. The father of Ian Graham, his friend and teammate, was on the athletic board. They all met with the school; his mother and his grandmother decided that Singletary would live during the week with the Grahams, a wealthy White family, in Chevy Chase, Md., a few miles from Sidwell.

"It worked out to be a good thing 'cause I needed that proximity," Singletary says. "They are still like family to this day. Ian and I went to Rice University together. They were down to earth, even though they were wealthy. When I thanked them, they said, 'You've done more for us than we did for you.'"

The Grahams treated the 14-year-old Singletary like family, disciplining him, taking him on family trips overseas, debating race and political issues over dinner, and contributing to his baseball and basketball camps. Still, when it came to issues of adolescence and growing into a Black man, because his own father was in jail and their relationship was amicable but often strained by distance, he often consulted his Sidwell coach and mentor, Jeffrey Gold. Singletary credits his experiences growing up in his neighborhood and mentors he had there, his mother and grandmother, and his early experiences in public school for grounding him and allowing him to not just survive, but to thrive in any environment while maintaining his identity.

On an August day at the Kopano household in Baltimore, Bomani, then 8, was busily composing a song on the piano. He has mastered many European classical pieces and can play them from memory. By age 3, he could identify all of the countries in Africa. When he was 7, his teacher at the charter school he

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attended spoke to the class about Columbus discovering America. That night, without telling his parents, he plucked Ivan Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus* from their bookshelf and took it to school. His parents, Baruti and Monifa, have enrolled him and their youngest son, Olu, 5, in Chinese lessons, golf, music and other extracurricular activities to complement their education.

Olu's first school experience was at an Afrocentric private school that gave him a good foundation and worked well at self-esteem building but lacked resources. Bomani first attended a public charter school that had good intentions but lacked musical instruments, a gym and other resources.

The Kopanos then looked at private institutions such as The Park School in Baltimore, a progressive place that doesn't give students grades until middle school. They were impressed with its resources and its outside-the-box methods.

"There was a science class and they were studying a particular star, and the teacher said, 'We can best observe that star in Arizona,'" says Baruti. "One of the kid's dads had a jet and they flew to Arizona to see it."

Though the Kopanos' main reason for not enrolling their children in Park was financial, (the tuition for both boys would have been \$20,000 per year), the school's lack of socioeconomic diversity prompted them to question whether the institution's values matched their own.

Karenga Kisasi Arifu, a father of three who lives in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, N.Y., attended a Black independent school in Newark, N.J., for his pre-K years and learned lessons in Black history that he still remembers today. After his parents separated, he was often the only Black student at the schools he attended in Hermosa, Calif. He moved back to Newark for high school, but used his uncle's address to enroll in the largely White school district of South Orange, N.J.

He wants his three children to have a different experience. He is sending his oldest son to the Brooklyn Brownstone School, a school started by the Stuyvesant Heights Parents Association.

He and his wife have visited private schools such as Berkeley Carroll in Park Slope and were impressed by their resources — laptops in the classroom, parents raising thousands of dollars, a swimming pool.

"But it also reinforced when I saw the Black students with 'the look.' It really looked like a part of their soul was missing," Arifu says. "It's a look I've seen, like, 'I'm here, but I'm kind of not.' I see that as a price to pay."

The New York school experience is unlike that of other major cities. Parents camp out overnight to get their 2-year-olds on the waiting lists of Manhattan private schools. The lottery system for out-of-zone parents makes the most coveted public schools harder to get into than the private schools.

Elissa Moorhead, director of design, programming, and exhibitions at Weeksville Heritage Center in Brooklyn, applied to six private schools for her daughter and four public schools. Her daughter, Mahsati, 6, was accepted into four private schools and none of the public schools. In the fall, Mahsati began attending one of the premier private schools in Manhattan. She is exceedingly happy there, but Moorhead's dream is to have her in public school. During Moorhead's visit to one private school, she noted on its display board that the children were studying the effects of

poverty. On the surface, it seemed well intentioned and a value she would want instilled in her child. But on closer inspection, Moorhead saw that all of the children, many of them White, chose Africa as a continent in need of help.

"I was like, 'Why don't you pick an area like Bensonhurst? Or Appalachia?' I don't want my kid to walk past the board and associate the downtrodden with Africa," says Moorhead, who attended a majority-Black public elementary school that had a majority-Black faculty and students from various socio-economic backgrounds. "But that's a nuance that White people don't get even when they have good intentions. How does that affect the self-esteem of a child who's one in 14 in her class already and on scholarship?"

Jeanie C. Carr, executive director for the Black Student Fund (BSF), an organization that provides financial aid to Black students in the D.C. metropolitan area, says the BSF works with teachers and administrators as advocates for Black parents when the curriculum isn't culturally sensitive. Over the years, the fund has had to stop participating with some schools because they didn't understand the importance of not only having successful Black students, but having Black faculty as well.

"You can't have a child in an environment where there is no one in power that looks like them," says Carr.

For Drake Holliday, a Bronx, N.Y., native who jokingly says he went to Howard University to "cleanse his soul" after his experience at Milton Academy, a boarding school in Milton, Mass., the decision to send his 15-year-old son to Milton seems rife with contradictions. Particularly when describing his experience at Milton, which he says felt so often like "you had to explain so much of your existence."

But Holliday says his son, Devaughn, asked to look at his yearbook and had questions about his high school experience. When he asked about going to the school, Holliday told him to set up an appointment for a visit. He did, subsequently took the entrance exams and now attends Milton.

"It was his decision. He decided he needed more challenges in his life. I am glad he is going in the 10th grade, because I wanted him to have some experience in a public high school," says Holliday. He fully supports his son's decision and says he wishes he had someone like himself to walk him through the experience when he was a kid. "There's some grounding in public school. There were some people who got eaten alive at Milton. Either they came out [as] someone else, or didn't come out at all."

For Eric Singletary, the stakes are higher. His son's mother doesn't understand why he won't take the opportunity to put him in a school as reputable as Sidwell, particularly given his own success. One of the Obama children is in his physical education class. How could he deny his son whatever opportunities would come with that?

"That would be the ultimate, keeping up with the Joneses," says Singletary with a laugh. "Why would I pay for elementary school when I know it's a time when parents are still doing more teaching anyway? For me, there's no rush. I have a preference for that grounding. You get a strong sense of self being with your own. Then you can go into any setting and be comfortable."

Ericka Blount Danois is an award-winning writer in Baltimore.