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U-46 board member calls for closing black male achievement gap

BY MADHU KRISHNAMURTHY

Elgin-area school officials say they will work harder toward closing the achievement gap for black male students.

Officials at the state's second-largest school district acknowledged they are failing more than 1,200 black male students in the classroom at a weekend symposium highlighting the academic challenges and obstacles those students face. The Brother 2 Brother symposium focused on how different the educational experience is for 6 percent of students in Elgin Area School District U-46 schools who are black.

School board member Traci O'Neal Ellis thanked the administration Monday night for being bold enough "to acknowledge that we are gravely missing the mark when it comes to meeting the needs of black male students."

Ellis added that U-46 CEO Tony Sanders has committed to addressing the issue, and she vowed to hold the administration accountable.

According to John Heiderscheidt, the district's director of safety and culture, black male students are disciplined at least twice as much as male students of any other race in the district. Those students also receive longer out-of-school suspensions than their white peers.

Though out-of-school suspensions fell 83 percent from about 7,000 during the 2007-08 school year to about 1,200 in the most recent year, black male students are still overrepresented, Heiderscheidt said during the weekend discussion.

"It was very informative and moving," Sanders said.

Ellis called the disciplinary data on black male students disturbing.

"This is important because we talk a lot about closing achievement gaps," she said. "We cannot close the achievement gap until we close the discipline gap, because we cannot educate students who aren't in our classrooms."

About 76 percent of U-46's black male students are eligible for free or reduced price meals. They also represent more of the district's special education and homeless student populations than any other group. Just 4 percent of black male students are identified as gifted students or take Advanced Placement courses.

Ellis supports hiring more black teachers -- currently roughly 2 percent of the district's teaching staff -- and more teachers of color for general education classrooms.

"It's good for all students to see a diversity of teachers in their classrooms," she said. "But particularly, if we are serious about addressing black male student achievement, that is a critical component that they see people who look like them."

She also called for ensuring the district's teachers and curriculum are culturally competent, and creating a plan for meeting these goals.

"This falls in line with our strategic plan and our equity policy," Ellis said. "There is a lifetime cost to not doing this work because if we are failing to properly educate any segment of our children, including our black male students, that correlates to lower graduation rates, which has a significant lifetime impact on our communities and on our economies."

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Elgin Sports Hall of Fame banquet a welcome walk down Memory Lane

BY JOHN RADTKE

Walks down Memory Lane don't happen often enough.

So, it was a special evening Sunday at the Elgin Sports Hall of Fame Foundation's 38th annual induction ceremony and recognition banquet at The Centre of Elgin.

I had no sooner arrived inside the Heritage Ballroom when the first familiar face to approach me was none other than Melissa Parker, the all-state point guard on the 1995-96 **Elgin High** girls basketball team that finished second in the Class AA state tournament and was receiving one of the two Team Recognition Awards.

From that point on, the next four hours were filled with a ride back in time, to a time when those Maroons electrified the Elgin area with their 31-2 season that culminated at Redbird Arena in Normal when they became the first girls basketball team from an Elgin public school to reach the state finals.

I had the pleasure of sitting with Lee Turek, their coach, and reliving that season all night before he took the podium and formally introduced the eight players from the team who were able to make it to the banquet -- Parker, Leslie Schock, Karisa Turek, Tina Wenckaitis, Suzy Smith, Anna Hallock, Julie Janota and Karly Kirkpatrick, and assistant coach Mark Sharf.

"It took one practice to fall in love with that team," said Sharf. "It was one of the most determined group of athletes I've ever had the privilege to be associated with."

"It's been 21 years but it seems like yesterday," said Turek, who won 359 games in his tenure at Chesbrough Field House. "The dedication we had from those girls and their parents is what helped make it such a special season. The memories are many. We knew years before this was a special group of young ladies and now to see how they have all become such successful individuals is very satisfying."

In his speech to the sold out crowd of over 300 Turek recalled the tournament trail.

"We had been sent west the previous two years and lost to Freeport in the supersectionals but in 1996 the IHSA sent us on the eastern path. We had an easy regional but then in the sectional at Larkin we had to beat two very tough teams in Hersey and Buffalo Grove," he said. "We got past them and went on to play (Naperville North) in the supersectional at Palatine and we knew that night we were not going to be denied -- it was our last shot with this group."

The Maroons were not denied that night, winning 58-42 to punch their first ticket to Redbird Arena.

Once in Normal, the first opponent was the icon of girls basketball in Illinois -- Chicago Marshall and legendary coach Dorothy Gaters.

Remember, this was still two-class days when the Elite Eight went to the state finals instead of just the Final Four.

Turek says it feels like yesterday and I'll concur with him on that. I can still vividly recall Parker waving her arms and jacking up the Elgin crowd in the closing seconds of the Maroons' 61-52 win over Marshall in that quarterfinal.

Then came the semifinals against undefeated Morris. Second-ranked Elgin beat Morris 53-41, took a few hours to rest then came back out to face No. 1 and defending champion Stevenson, led by Parker's future Illinois teammate Katie Coleman and all-American Tauja Catchings.

The victory ride ended on that Saturday night as Stevenson won the state title game 50-35.

"Twenty-one years later and I haven't watched the tape of that game and I probably never will," Turek said.

Sunday's gathering allowed us to reminisce with several of the players from that team, including Parker and Schock, who were appreciative of the opportunity and recognition.

"It's been a special time," said Parker, who Turek fondly recalled as the 'straw that stirred the drink.'

"The best part of being with this team is to get back together and not miss a beat. It's something we'll always cherish. I know Leslie and I both feel we wouldn't have been as successful without our teammates."

"It definitely flashes me back," said Schock, who went on to a successful career at Northwestern and is now a world history teacher at Palatine High School. "Being here tonight with my friends, family and teammates is very special. I got to share our memories and it was just very special."

In countless interviews with Parker that 1995-96 season, she many times would end the interview with the way Sunday's ended.

"Awesome."

Yes it was.

- In addition to Elgin's girls basketball team being recognized, so too was the 1967 Larkin football team that went 9-0 and was ranked No. 5 in the state (there were no playoffs in 1967).

"This is a night that will go down in my memory for a lifetime," said Ray Haley, the legendary hall of famer who coached high school football for 35 years, 27 of them at Larkin.

Haley, whose daughter Jennifer was one of the five ESHOF inductees this year, had a team in 1967 that posted six shutouts and allowed only 27 points all season, 6 against the first team defense. The Royals' offense put up 190 points in those nine games, and the program was in just its fifth year of varsity football.

"I always said you win with good kids, good parents and determination," Ray Haley said. "In my 35 years I think that 1967 team was the best team that ever played in the (Upstate Eight Conference)."

- The induction speeches Sunday from Katy Carter Potts, speaking on behalf of Bethany Goldsmith; Steve Laird and Greg Huxtable speaking on behalf of Greg's brother Dave; and Jen Haley and Jessie Henderson, were special but the most touching moment was when over 100 young boys and girls from the Elgin Sharks running club circled the Heritage Ballroom to applaud the induction of Bob Pleticha, the Sharks' founder who was inducted for his achievements in weightlifting. Hearing all those young people chanting "Coach P, Coach P," had to bring a tear to Pleticha's eye.

- Adding to the special moments -- Deryl Carter received the Vic Masi Service Award and seeing "D" and his kids -- Corry, Katy and Deryn -- on the podium together with mom Marlene smiling nearby was very cool. I go way way back with the Carter family and to see Deryl get his just due Sunday night was very heartwarming.

As was the entire night.