

Documentary film shines light on CMS teachers in high-poverty schools

By Ann Doss Helms

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Billingsville Elementary teacher Shanna Rae, with her all-male fifth-grade class, is one of seven CMS teachers featured in the documentary "Souls of Our Teachers." Students are Quentin Aiken, foreground, Elio Lopez and Jorge Matamendez. DIEDRA LAIRD - dlaird@charlotteobserver.com



Shanna Rae walks with her students to their next class at Billingsville Elementary. The boys behave in Rae's room but admit they act up in others. DIEDRA LAIRD - dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

As a ninth-grader in the urban schools of Rochester, N.Y., Shanna Rae was pregnant, unmarried and a mediocre student. But one teacher insisted she could be more than a statistic.

Now Rae tries to do the same for fifth-graders at Billingsville Elementary, one of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's most impoverished schools. The mother of four sons, who teaches an all-boys class, is appalled by persistently high failure rates for students like hers.

"If we're not educating our children the way we feel they should be educated, the streets will educate them," the 32-year-old says.

Rae is one of seven stars of "Souls of Our Teachers," a documentary created by public-education boosters to inspire teachers and volunteers to work in Charlotte-Mecklenburg's high-poverty schools. It debuts tonight for an invitation-only crowd. In August, organizers will rally business, faith and community leaders to help them spread the word.

The 27-minute show follows the pattern set by "Souls of Our Students," in which students talk about being different from classmates. That documentary has become part of Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' anti-bullying curriculum and has been picked up across the country.

Rabbi Judith Schindler of Temple Beth El and Maria Hanlin of Mecklenburg Ministries, who led both efforts, hope the new show will be equally powerful in celebrating teachers and motivating change.

"Our 'Souls' programs are about the power of stories to transform lives," Schindler said.

It's personal

Billingsville, southeast of uptown Charlotte, is the kind of school where CMS desperately needs to attract its best teachers.

More than 90 percent of the children come from low-income homes. Almost 20 percent are homeless or lack stable housing. Many are immigrants; Rae has taught children who don't know how to eat with a knife and fork or use American bathrooms.

On Wednesday, Rae's social studies discussion about politics and poverty quickly turned personal. One boy cried as he told classmates about the nights he spent sleeping in the desert as his family came to the United States. Another told about his father losing his job, a third about having to move in with relatives.

Rae listened and gave hugs.

She's big on academics; one of her proudest accomplishments is having all her students pass the state reading exam for three years in a row. But when children's lives are in turmoil, it's never just about academics.

In her classroom, the boys are well-behaved. But they sheepishly admit that when they go to art, music and other classes, many of them are known for fighting, cursing and acting up. They struggle to explain why.

"You give us more respect than they do," Javonn Miller tells his teacher.

"She don't hide nothing. She keep it real with us," says Demario Wallace, who started the school year by telling Rae he always scores Level 1 on state exams, the lowest possible rating.

On last week's reading test, he hit Level 2, just three points shy of a grade-level score. Rae believes he'll clear the bar on his second try.

Just the beginning

Rae understands. Mrs. Nightingale was her ninth-grade global studies teacher when Rae got pregnant by the boy she'd dated since they were 13.

She remembers Mrs. Nightingale telling her, "This is not the end of your world. This is just the beginning." She invited the young couple to her house for a cookout.

"I think she saw something in us that we didn't see in ourselves," Rae says.

Rae, whose grades in most classes were nothing to brag about, aced an important New York exam in global studies. She began to see herself as someone who could go to college, something neither of her parents had done.

The boyfriend, Tremaine Rae, became her husband. Both graduated from college. They have four sons, ages 1 to 15.

When Shanna got a job with CMS six years ago, they came to Charlotte, where Tremaine now works with a job-training program for dropouts.

Shanna tries desperately to keep her students from needing his help. Last year, more than half of CMS's black and low-income students failed their reading or math exams in elementary and middle school.

"This is not acceptable," she says. "To me, the future is dire for our students."

'Follow that child'

Rae wants her students heading to middle school ready for success. When a lesson plan bores her, she researches something better. She loves to act things out for her students.

She also makes sure their parents know how the kids are doing, and when they need to improve their work or behavior.

"Can't call them? Can't reach them? Go to their homes," Rae says. "Don't know where they live? Follow that child. You'll find an adult."

She can't prevent heartbreaks. At least one of her former students is in prison.

But she also hears from those who are flourishing. Her kids, from one of Charlotte's poorest areas, have become student leaders at Alexander Graham Middle, where they mingle with some of the city's most affluent families.

Rae wants to become a principal, but job openings are scarce in these times of budget cuts and layoffs. It's tough, she says, to know colleagues are at risk of losing their livelihoods.

Superintendent Peter Gorman says even though CMS is cutting jobs, the district is always looking for great teachers willing to take on the toughest assignments. Low-income children need great teachers the most, and are often the least likely to get them, he says.

Maria Hanlin, executive director of Mecklenburg Ministries, says that's why it's so important to roll out "Souls of Our Teachers" now. She knows morale is low: "We hope it really will lift up our teachers."

Rae says it already has.

"I'm very humbled that somebody would recognize that what I love to do is a great thing."

Read more: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2010/05/27/1460817/tackling-tough-tasks.html#ixzz0p9XwHbE8>

‘Souls of Our Teachers’ details

Creators: Mecklenburg Ministries, Temple Beth El, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Communities in Schools.

Donors: Knight and Levine foundations covered the \$36,400 cost of the documentary. Wachovia/Wells Fargo will pay about \$12,000 for facilitator's guides and a gathering of community leaders in August to introduce it. No tax money was spent.

Watch it: Debuts on WTVI at 9 p.m. Friday and will air on the station frequently after that.

Buy it: The DVD is \$25 at www.soulsofourteachers.org. In August it will be available with a facilitator's guide for \$50.