

Proving the Possible

by Michael Cummins '08

Working with Teach For America, Michael Cummins '08 is helping students from 'the Delta' persevere in their journey to graduate from the college of their dreams, including some as far off as Brown.

We stick out pretty good down here, I guess. Us teachers, that is. When I arrived in Helena, Arkansas three summers ago, fresh from an Ivy Championship spring, it seemed that everyone



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and anyone knew I was a teacher. Some will tell you it is the fuel efficient sedans that tip them off, others will reference our penchant for attempting to buy things with credit cards at stores where the option has never been available. Whatever the distinction, I have always known the people of Phillips County to have no trouble spotting a "TFA".

Before I became just another familiar face around town, just about every visit to every store triggered the same presumptive question, "You must be a teacher for America?" as prelude for the same ebullient praise. I have always accepted the praise and thanks as graciously as I know how, careful to never forget my "yes ma'ams" and "yes sirs". Sometimes being a teacher in the Delta makes me feel like I am a Yankee living in the Bronx.

In my classroom, like all the others at my school, students begin each assignment by writing a heading that includes our core values, "Work hard. Be nice!" As a faculty, we plan on how to instill an effort-based mindset, to help our students truly believe that the single greatest determinant to their success in any endeavor will be the effort and tenacity with which they seek to accomplish their goals. I am proud to work in an environment that holds up "working hard" as its most revered value. It reminds me of being on Meister-Kavan in early February, with freezing rain frostbiting my teammates and a mad-man for a coach reminding us that "Harvard isn't out practicing in this!"

As an athlete, it never seemed hard to find an appropriate measure for success. I learned early on that success would

most often be boiled down to wins and losses, with all the hard labors of a season swept beneath the simple veneer of a W-L record. As a teacher at KIPP Delta, I have come to adopt a different kind of W-L record. At KIPP Delta, our scoreboard is all about college. Effort forms the foundation, but ultimately it is the outcomes that matter.

The current America reality is that only 8% of students in the bottom quartile of household income will graduate with a bachelor's degree by the age of 24. In nearly all of the Delta communities in southeastern Arkansas and northwestern Mississippi, this number is even lower.

These numbers, long weighed down by the low expectations of even the best intentioned, cannot represent the life outcome for kids from the Delta any longer. Our students are changing the prevailing reality for themselves and the generation of students behind them by proving the possible. A collegiate education can and should be the expectation for every child, regardless of the socioeconomic status that he or she is raised in. It will take effort, from teachers, students, parents, and communities. But it is possible, and our students are proving it now. Chance is proving it at Brown. Richard and Dominique are proving it at Vanderbilt. Jamarcus and Chris will prove it at Arkansas Tech, just as David will prove it at Johnson & Wales.

If you ever run into a teacher in the Delta, there is no need to offer thanks. We get far more praise than we are worth. Ask instead where you can find our students. If you have a moment, watch them prove the possible, praise their efforts, and offer them encouragement on their journey to and through college.

Michael Cummins '08 was a member of the Brown Men's Lacrosse team from 2004-2008.

