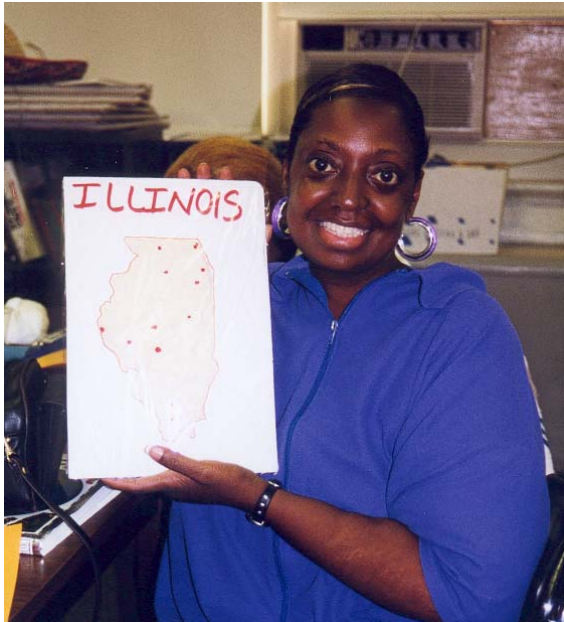


Introducing Marlene Dandridge – an enthusiastic parent passing on the gift of learning

This is the first of a series of personal stories about individuals who participate in Imagine Chicago's education and community development programs.



It was little more than 11 years ago when Marlene Dandridge, shortly after the birth of her second son, learned that she needed a heart transplant. Can you imagine how it would feel to hear this at age 26 with two small children to care for? What an array of emotions must have run through her mind! Equally astonishing was the fact that in less than one day, a donor heart was located for Marlene and successfully transplanted.

But the most exciting development was yet to come. Two months later, Marlene was able to hold her 9-month-old son, Tyrone, for the first time. To Marlene, it was as though she had been given a miracle. Every day, she reflects on the blessing she received from her "donor" and renews her commitment to making a contribution to better the lives of those around her as a way of showing her gratitude.

For more than 10 years, recipients of these contributions have included the children and teachers of the Suder

Elementary School located on Chicago's west side. Having been raised as the youngest of 6 children in the Henry Horner Homes, Marlene knows this area well. Her older son, Curtis, began participating in pre-school activities at Suder in 1987. Now her younger son, Tyrone, attends the 6th grade at the school. Marlene's volunteer efforts include a wide variety of office support and teacher's aide activities. Periodically, she helps handle teaching assignments in support of substitute teachers. As she says, "When the students know a substitute is coming in for the day, they expect to be able to make *the most* of the situation. When they see me, they shape up because they realize that I know where to find them, day in and day out. Some days, I have just taken over teaching the class."

Because of Marlene's active involvement at Suder School, she has been very much aware of the school's participation in the Urban Imagination Network, a program designed and facilitated by Imagine Chicago. The 5-year program links 6 museums with 7 Chicago public schools with the objective of improving reading comprehension in science and social studies.

Since parent support and coaching are key to helping develop the reading capabilities of individual students, Imagine Chicago added a parent training program in 1998 to the Urban Imagination Network. It is focused on effective parenting, helping children read, and strengthening museum connections. Sessions are rotated among participating schools and museums. During the 1998-99 school year, more than 100 parents attended the monthly workshops on curriculum topics that corresponded with what the children were studying in school. This fall, 180 parents are active.

As Marlene talks about her monthly classes, she can't help but speak more quickly because there is so much she wants to share. She's learned to think about

Chicago history from a frog's point of view. She's listened to "Abraham Lincoln" deliver the Gettysburg Address at the Chicago Historical Society. While history came alive in a new way for Marlene, she was most excited about studying geography. Having spent her entire life on the West Side of Chicago, Marlene found the opportunity to learn about the crops, animals, climates and peoples of countries around the world to be very stimulating. She feels as though she has taken some imaginary trips during the course of her studies. Researching topics at the Field Museum has brought a whole world into her learning!

Marlene's voice goes up yet another pitch when she starts to talk about computers. She was thrilled to have the opportunity to re-acquaint herself with computers having initially learned about them while studying at Traincol Business School in the mid-80's. The Urban Imagination Network parent program has provided her an opportunity to do Internet research and learn current computer technology.

Expanding her understanding of science and social studies thrills Marlene. But she also relishes the opportunity to meet parents from different schools around the city, and to visit the partner schools and museums. Making new friends in other parts of Chicago and having the opportunity to talk with them about a wide spectrum of issues both inside the classroom and out, is a special bonus. Marlene really enjoys conversations about current events and timely subjects which give her an opportunity to air her views and exchange ideas with other parents. Marlene says that she comes away from these interactions with some new perspectives, but even more importantly, a renewed sense of self confidence in her own thought process.

On June 16, 1999, 33 parents graduated from the Urban Imagination Network parent training program at a ceremony held at the Chicago Historical Society. Marlene takes great pride in the fact that 9 of the 12 parents from Suder

School who began the program were among the graduates. When asked why there was such a high success rate among this group, Marlene responded, "That's just the way we are here. I'm sure we have more volunteer parents than most schools in Chicago. We are very committed to making the most of the educational opportunities for our kids!"

Marlene is very excited that the parent program is continuing during the 1999-2000 school year with monthly workshops again organized around core content areas that the children are studying. When asked what area she hopes receives particular focus, Marlene without hesitating says, "Computers, computers, computers". Marlene is eager to make use of the 2 "PCs" donated through this program to each school's parent resource room by a corporate donor. And she looks forward to expanding her research with high quality reference materials donated to the parents by individual supporters of the program.

Marlene is thriving on her newfound opportunity to learn under the auspices of the Urban Imagination Network and Imagine Chicago. The training has not only paid big dividends for Marlene and her sons, but for the many students at Suder School with whom she interacts on a regular basis. Now, when she assists in the classroom, she feels increasingly confident and knowledgeable about the subject matter that is being studied. While the program was originally designed to help parents support their own children, we know that in Marlene's case, her learning is being shared with many young beneficiaries.

- Barbara Morris