

DREAM-WEAVERS

The Trenton Public Education Foundation

By RUSSELL ROBERTS

Pamela Pruitt is in the business of dreams.

Pruitt is the President of the Trenton Public Education Foundation (TPEF), an organization that only a few years ago was lying moribund and idle. Now it is as vital and alive as any group on the Trenton public education scene as it spreads its message of hope and opportunity to both parents and students alike.

“The Trenton Public Education Foundation seeks to become the premier urban public educational foundation in New Jersey,” said Pruitt.

That’s a tall order – to be a statewide leader. But to make dreams come true for students you’ve first got to have big dreams of your own. And no one will ever accuse Pamela Pruitt and TPEF of not trying to reach for the stars when it comes to the children.

JUST WHEN SHE GETS OUT, THEY PULL HER BACK IN

It was just a casual invitation to Pruitt – would she like to attend the first meeting of the reconstituted TPEF? Formerly a dynamo in the Trenton public schools system, TPEF had fallen by the wayside in recent years. But Dr. James Lytle, Superintendent of Trenton Public Schools, remembered all the good that TPEF had done for the district and the students, and thought it worthwhile to revive the organization.

Pruitt, the Vice-President for Business Development at WIMG/Morris Broadcasting in Trenton, needed something else to do like a polar bear needs an air conditioner. In a lifetime of varied careers as diverse as a hit songwriter for Smokey Robinson to a marketing executive for Delta Airlines, she has learned how to juggle myriad responsibilities and projects. But even she thought that her involvement in several other initiatives, plus the launching of her own consulting business, had piled her plate extremely full.

But Pruitt was intrigued. Her recent spearheading of the Black Gospel Awareness Project had demonstrated to her the powerful difference that becoming involved in young people's lives could make for them. So she agreed to attend just one meeting of TPEF to see what it was all about.

"I went kicking and screaming [to that meeting]," Pruitt laughed. But go she did, and by the end of the night she realized that TPEF's commitment to Trenton's youth was so strong that she just had to be involved.

GETTING INVOLVED

The Mission Statement for TPEF says that it seeks "to enhance the educational experience of students from the Trenton Public School District by leveraging community resources and creating opportunities." In other words, get involved. Make a difference in student's lives. Tap into the resources of the many wonderful companies and organizations in Trenton, and utilize them to help kids make their way through an often-confusing time in their lives by giving them the opportunity to develop skills that they can use once they graduate. By doing so, Pruitt feels, kids will realize that there is something good waiting for them when they graduate high school – a chance to become a productive member of society instead of standing around street corners.

”TPEF believes that mentoring is an important element in the successful growth of young people,” said Pruitt.

With such corporate powerhouses as members as the College of New Jersey, Verizon, Capital Health Systems and the Times, TPEF is well situated to being able to make a difference in student’s lives through mentoring. The first TPEF mentoring project is in the area of communications. Five Trenton students who have shown an interest in communications as a career will get to spend up to five days per week between February 1 and April 29 with one of the mentoring partners, learning the ropes while finding out if the communications field is truly where their interest lies. The days the students are utilized is left up to the mentoring partner. If a student decides to leave the project, another is selected from a back-up pool of 20. Students will be selected not only on their interest in the field, but also based on other criteria such as attendance, punctuality, and character.

“We’re not going to just pick top ‘A’ students,” Pruitt said. “We’re looking for students who want to better themselves.”

NOT YOUR FATHER’S INTERNSHIP

TPEF has tried to make this program far different from typical internships in several ways. The first is to provide bus transportation to and from school to the mentoring partner’s location. The second is to make the students participating in the mentoring program select two topics devoted to family and health, and requires them to present a project in the medium of their choice at the end of the mentoring program that will link their family/health topic with their mentoring partner.

Another thing that makes the TPEF communications mentoring program different from a typical internship is that it is intended for **all** high school students – not just seniors or juniors.

“Our initiative is geared toward 9th through 12th graders,” said Pruitt. “Our goal is to start younger and younger and younger. You can only take baby steps to affect change. We’re going back to the 9th grade, and we’re going to try and take these children and bring them forward, so they have an interest in doing education a little differently.”

Pruitt feels that catching students early, before they decide that school isn’t for them and that graduation holds no prospects, is the key toward turning around kids’ lives.

“Our goal is to start in 9th grade, and let them have a future to look at,” she said. We’re going to try and help them see the real world, rather than waiting until they’re seniors and say ‘O.K. Sally, here’s this opportunity,’ and Sally’s too scared to step out there because she doesn’t know this world out there.”

Personally, Pruitt is doing her part to have an impact on these kid’s lives. She is going to serve as their “personal mentor,” meeting with them and discussing any problems or concerns that they might have.

In April, she will take two students to a luncheon in New York for the American Women in Radio and Television (AWRT) organization. In the morning, the students will have an opportunity to shadow a member of the AWRT board. Again, it’s the experiences that the student receives that Pruitt feels will help these kids make a choice to stay in school, seek a diploma, and then pursue college and a meaningful career.

“They’re going to have a variety of experiences,” she said. “We want them to have dreams – to have these ideas of where they can go.”

NON-DANGEROUS MINDS

TPEF also has another objective, and that is to change the negative perception of the Trenton School District and the quality of education that it offers. Pruitt herself had trepidations the first

time she had to go to Trenton High, expecting the stereotypical urban high school. But *Dangerous Minds* it was not, and she was pleasantly surprised.

“It was not like that at all,” she said. “It was very tame.” She found that the school offered programs that the casual observer would not connect with Trenton High, such as golf in the sports curriculum.

“[Trenton High School] is a wonderful institution,” she said. “I’ve met some really incredible young people at Trenton Central.”

Impressed by what she found, Pruitt felt that more people needed to know the type of atmosphere that Trenton High offers.

NEXT UP

TPEF is not just hoping that this one communications initiative pans out. The group is moving forward on several fronts, including a program with Commerce Bank to introduce students to the world of banking.

All of this is just fine with Pruitt, who feels that the more experiences and opportunities that students have, the more they’ll realize all the colors of the rainbow that life can offer.

“This is what the Trenton Public Education Foundation is all about,” Pruitt said. “We’re at the heart of opportunity. We want to give hope to these children.”