

East End school's first class is finishing high school with a sense of hope

By BILL LOHMANN Richmond Times-Saturday, June 4, 2016

Quinton Wingo wants to be an astronaut. He can't say for sure that will happen — if not, he says, “I'll just do whatever pays well” — but science is his favorite subject and he loves learning about space, so flying aboard a spacecraft would be his “dream job.”

Considering how far he has come, maybe it is not so wild a dream.

Wingo graduated from Trinity Episcopal School last weekend, an independent high school in Bon Air, a world away from the neighborhood where he spent part of his childhood — Fairfield Court, a public housing project in Richmond's East End. In August, he will head to Christopher Newport University, where he hopes to play football.

Wingo experienced what might charitably be described as a challenging upbringing, bouncing from home to home, and, as a result, he lacked the sort of stability and direction one would seem to require to find a path to a promising future. What might have been a journey to nowhere, however, took a dramatic and happy detour at the end of his elementary school days when he signed up to attend a new middle school for not much



more of a reason than because he had friends who planned to go there.

Wingo became a member of the first class of the Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School, a sixth-grader in a small, tuition-free, faith-based, independent school in the East End that draws largely from children living in Richmond's public

housing. The school opened in 2009 in a renovated house where students and parents didn't know quite what to expect. “It was a leap of faith then,” said Lynette Jordan, whose daughter, Emerald, was among the first students. “Now, it's an honor.”



Lorin Johnson (from left), Charlotte Woods, Iyanna Weathers and Kyla Coleman, who all graduated from Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School four years ago, recently caught up at a graduation party at a home in Manakin-Sabot. Tuition-free, faith-based and independent, the East End middle school draws largely from children living in Richmond's public housing.

In the ensuing years, the school has achieved numerous milestones: It is now in a larger one-story brick structure — rented under generous terms from Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority — that formerly housed a public preschool on 29th Street, across from Creighton Court, another public housing project.

It has earned accreditation from the Virginia Association of Independent Schools. It has added a fifth grade with plans to add a fourth in September and expects to have a total enrollment of just over 100 students next fall. Its graduates now attend a variety of high schools, including some of the best private schools in the area. And this spring, members of the school’s original class of sixth-graders, including Wingo, are graduating from high school.



Of the 17 graduates, 12 will be attending college (and another will enter the Air Force). Those heading to college will be going to places such as Randolph-Macon College, North Carolina Wesleyan College, Richard Bland College and Bridgewater College. Their success represents a significant achievement for a school with a mission of having roughly three-quarters of its students from public housing and the well-documented complexities that includes.

An equally important victory is the enduring bond the students seem to have developed to a place where high academic expectations are only part of the equation. They still come back after school or in the summer for tutoring, weeknight dinners and access to laptops and Wi-Fi, a safe place to hang out or a fist-bump from someone like Paul Bateera, the graduate support coordinator.

Even though they have four years of high school behind them, the students look back fondly at AJC for giving them something more than academics.

“I didn’t have too many places to turn,” Wingo said during an interview in a classroom at the school, “but I always had AJC.”

Those are the kinds of words Mike Maruca likes to hear. Maruca helped come up with the idea for a school to serve students of limited resources, then shepherded it to fruition and now serves as head of school. He has attempted to build what he calls “a community of affection” that is, he said, “the foundation of all that we do.”

“Without that, the work feels false,” Maruca said. “With it, there’s the increased possibility of long-term change and hope. Hand in hand with that community are times-tables and geography and writing great paragraphs, all of which we have to do better every single year.”

Or, as he constantly tells his students — many of whom live or have lived in neighborhoods where violence and isolation from the wider community are commonplace — “We’ve got to read, we’ve got to write and we’ve got to try to love each other.”

Members of that first class of AJC students chuckle as they recount Maruca’s mantra, but they also took it to heart and still do.



“We had no choice but to be a family,” said Jamaica Ross, who graduated from Trinity and will attend Virginia Wesleyan in the fall. “Everyone knew everyone’s business. We used to argue and fight like siblings, but we all come back here. This was definitely a home away from home for all of us.”

The school, which came out of meetings at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church in Richmond’s West End where Maruca met others who shared a similar vision and had the resources to make it a reality, feels like a success. However, Maruca is reluctant to take too much credit for anything that’s gone well; he expressed that four years ago in an interview about the school (“Learning With Class,” Sept. 16, 2012), and he said it again recently.

“For some of our kids, the mountain is very high, unimaginably high, especially if you haven’t walked in their shoes and lived their lives,” said Maruca, a former Jesuit priest who was the founding director of Sacred Heart Center and, for 10 years, was the middle school head of The Steward School. “Any successes the kids have enjoyed are primarily because of what they and their families have done.

“There’s no secret sauce. It’s primarily about hard work and relationships and keeping at it every day. For years. Just like with any child, yours or mine. It can be draining and exhausting. It’s labor-intensive, and we often fail. I try to avoid words like ‘transformational.’ I prefer something like ‘incremental progress that sticks.’ ”

The hard work doesn’t end with the last bell of the school day or when the eighth-graders walk out the door, diplomas in hand. “The long haul,” Maruca called it.

Mary Simpson, who once worked at AJC as a college intern, came back last year as director of graduate support, meaning she and those she works with are in daily contact with AJC graduates, helping whenever and however she can. In response to a question about what sorts of things she does, she offered a sampling of her seemingly endless array of tasks: driving to college visits, job interviews and doctors’ visits (removal of wisdom teeth is a popular one), shopping for prom and homecoming dresses and serving as, in her words, “personal alarm clock,” “cheerleader” and “expert hugger.”

Maruca praises local independent high schools that have accepted AJC graduates and provided scholarships. At Trinity, which has enrolled a dozen AJC grads over the years and has two more coming next year, the students have done well, said Laura Weiler,

Trinity’s head of student life.



“They come to Trinity with a strong sense of self and also with the ongoing support from AJC that enables them to thrive,” Weiler wrote in an email. “What we value most about AJC is the importance they place on community and accountability. The sense of community at AJCS is unmatched. You can feel the love that

everyone involved with the school emanates in a tangible way when you are on their campus.

“Mike Maruca and the staff and volunteers there are truly changing lives and working to better Richmond.”

Even with scholarships and other financial aid, things such as transportation remain a huge obstacle for families who might not have even heard of Trinity or St. Catherine’s and reside across town from them. AJC has partnered with UP RVA, a new nonprofit that

aims to “build a bridge” between economically disadvantaged children in the city and surrounding independent schools.

UP RVA provides daily transportation to AJC graduates attending private high schools, including, besides Trinity, Collegiate, Saint Gertrude and Benedictine, St. Catherine’s and St. Christopher’s and Steward. The rides are free, but the days are long: The vans pick up students at AJC beginning at 6:40 a.m. to take them to their schools and delivers them back to AJC late in the afternoon or, for those involved in athletics or other extra-curricular activities, in early evening.

Every link in the chain of support is critical. Any break could sabotage the whole deal.

“We have kids who I think would have made it no matter what,” said Toby Desch, founder of UP RVA. “What our goal is is to take the middle- or back-of-the-pack kid and love them up, give them tools and watch them succeed.”

The success stories of students in the private schools notwithstanding, Maruca said AJC’s greatest impact might have come with students who are not all-stars but the kids with the greatest struggles and challenges who keep coming back, “touching base, and staying connected in that community of affection with Mary, Toby, Paul and others.”

“You can’t measure that,” he said. “They’re kids, not products.”

The school, whose namesake was a groundbreaking African-American educator and activist, is financed entirely by individual donors and local foundations and supported by a small army of devoted volunteers. Gordon Wallace, a businessman and chairman of the board who has been involved with AJC since the beginning, said he has been “overwhelmed with the spirit and quality of the volunteers, the staff and teachers that have been attracted to this mission. It’s very energizing and empowering to see so much good in so many people.”



Wesley Wright, another board member who has been involved since the outset, said he is “excited about the fact ... that with small classes, personal attention and a very caring approach towards these young people they respond to it.”

“We’ve been successful so far, and I believe we’ll continue to be successful, but you just never know,” Wright said. “Mike will tell you some days are really hard. You’ve got to keep on keeping on.”

Devoted and self-deprecating, Maruca, 58, tries to set the tone for his staff by being willing to do whatever needs to be done. Wright calls him a “Pied Piper,” though Maruca, a baseball fan, prefers to think of himself as “a utility infielder.”

“I go get the kids who miss the bus, help out when we’re short-handed, pick up trash in front of the building and worry constantly about whether we’re making a difference,” he said. “The teachers are doing all the heavy lifting.”

“He’s touched our lives,” said Lynette Jordan, who has sent two daughters to the school, both of whom will be attending St. Catherine’s next year. “My family is always going to be indebted to him. He could have gone anywhere but chose to open up a school in our community. It’s just amazing. I tell him all the time, ‘Mr. Maruca, you have no idea what you’ve done. You opened up doors (the students) had never seen. You showed them you can be whoever you want as long as you work hard.’”

Said Toshawn Webber, Jamaica Ross’ mother, “They made sure these kids didn’t fall through the cracks.”



Kids like Quinton Wingo.

“It’s not smoke and mirrors,” Wingo said. “It’s the real deal. Everyone here chipped in a lot, keeping us on track. No one ever gave up on me. I’m just returning the favor, trying to work hard.”