



**G. Asenath Andrews**  
Principal, Detroit's Catherine Ferguson Academy

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*“We work hard to build their self-esteem. These kids have amazing brains, something they don’t know. I will tell them, ‘Did you know you were smart? Did you know you were amazing?’ Sometimes what I hear back is ‘Oh, you mean me?’ I want them to know how far they can fly.”*

# G. Asenath Andrews: Proving Daily That Teachers Can Change the World

By Alan Abrams  
Sojourner's Truth Reporter

Talk about contradictions: while Detroit's public schools took hit after hit in the local and even national media during 2004, one alternative school in the district that offers both middle school and high school courses became one of only eight schools nationally to be named a Breakthrough High School by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

How did that happen? The success of the Catherine Ferguson Academy (like *The Sojourner's Truth*, named after a famous former slave) is closely linked to the determination and drive for success of its principal, G. Asenath Andrews.

Most, but not all, of the students at the Academy are pregnant or are single mothers. It is that factor that convinced The Links, Inc. to bring Andrews to Toledo on Thursday, Sept. 27 to be the annual speaker at their Polly Fox Academy luncheon at Gladioux Meadows on Heatherdowns.

The Catherine Ferguson Academy is one of only four accredited schools in the US schools by next summer and consistently is cutting jobs. Yet despite the school



for pregnant and parenting teens and their children. The Academy has a 90 percent graduation rate and 100 percent college acceptance rate (at two and four-year colleges) for students who earn their diplomas—most are accepted with financial aid packages. Facts like these make the Academy stand out in the struggling Detroit public school system that has announced the closure of 53

system's deficit, each year the Academy obtains about double the funding per student of the average Detroit public school.

What does it take to become a Breakthrough School? Andrews explains that a school must have more than 50 percent students of color and the same percentage who qualify for free and reduced meal prices, and have a 90 percent or better rate of gradu-

ation and college acceptance. We've already established that the Academy had no problem with the graduation and college acceptance rates. As far as the other requirements, when the Academy won the honor, its enrollment was 94 percent African-American and five percent Latina. And more than 90 percent were eligible for free or reduced lunches.

The Academy accommodates as many as 400 students and 200 babies. But at least 15 percent of the students are neither pregnant nor mothers. Andrews explained that girls without babies must write a letter stating why they want to attend the school and then behave once they are accepted.

Enrollment is first come, first served. There is no academic requirement; most of the girls are in the process of dropping out when they enter. As many as 20 percent drop out each year. The 90 percent graduation rate is based upon students who make it to their senior year.

The school is also Detroit's only site for the Early Head Start program, which focuses upon children

under the age of four. One of the programs concentrates on making sure that the babies are talked and read to so that they have high word-recognition skills. After the babies reach the age of four, they go to a nearby nursery to be with children of their own age.

Did we mention the Academy's small farm? Yes, right in the heart of Detroit's inner city and in one of its poorest neighborhoods is a red barn built by the students. It flanks a farm that is home to several goats, a huge sheep, rabbits, a pony, two horses, a beehive, ducks and at least a dozen hens and roosters.

The result is a working goat milk, egg and honey farm as well as a fruit and vegetable garden with one plot for each student in the program. The farm and orchard teach the teen moms and their children about the cycle of life, taking care of animals and growing their own food.

Remember what we said earlier about Catherine Ferguson having much in common with Sojourner Truth? The school started in the basement of a Salvation Army building with a couple

of desks and a playpen. Andrews says that when it moved to its present site on Detroit's Selden Avenue, "We had an election to determine the name of the school. Each homeroom nominated a candidate, so we had a 12-person election campaign as if all the candidates were living. Sojourner Truth was my candidate, but lost the election. That's too bad, because I really liked the sound of Truth High School," says Andrews.

As founding principal of the Academy, Andrews is familiar with all of the disturbing statistics on teen pregnancies. The Washington, D.C.-based National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy estimates that only a third of teenage mothers eventually complete high school and 1.5 percent will receive a college degree by her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. The group also says that nearly 80 percent of teenage mothers eventually receive government-subsidized child support within five years of giving birth.

Andrews is out to change the status quo and one way is

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## Free the Jena Six: A Journey into the Heart of a New Civil Rights Movement

By Annette Wright  
Special to The Sojourner's Truth

It's 9:36 p.m. on the evening of September 18 and Raven and I are packed two hours early for our midnight departure from Detroit to Toledo and then onto Jena, Louisiana.

Jena Louisiana...never even heard of the place prior to several months ago, when Reverend Al Sharpton, whose syndicated radio program, "Keeping it Real" received a call from a listener who turned out to be the mother of Mychal Bell. It was a plea for help. Immediately drawn into the conversation, my heart sank as I listened to this mother describe the unbelievable situation involving her then 16-year-old son and some friends at their school in Jena, Louisiana. Well, by now, most people know about the "Jena Six."

What stuck out most in my mind were the words "white tree," "nooses," and

cannot understand or simply refuse to understand why black people, even in 2007, are deeply hurt by these types of hateful words.

This isn't the first time that I've allowed my daughter, Raven, who is now 17 and a senior in high school, to participate in non-violent rallies or protests. We marched on the steps of the United States Supreme Court a few years ago in support of affirmative action and she thoroughly enjoyed the experience. But, that was Washington, DC. Not Jena, Louisiana.

Like a lot of blacks, our family made the exodus from the South (Demopolis, Alabama) to Ohio and some onto Michigan and Canada back in the 30's, 40's and 50's. They were seeking a better shot at the "American Dream." I, like my seven siblings, was born in Toledo. As a young girl, I knew about Dr. Martin L. King, and Rosa Parks. At Washington Elementary school we had a good number of black teach-

cocted the grand notion that my two younger sisters and I would benefit from spending a summer in Demopolis, Alabama. The year was 1968.

We stayed in Demopolis with my great-grandmother, affectionately called Ma'Dea, and my great-uncle Reuben. Talk about night and day! Ma'Dea's house consisted of three rooms. There was an outhouse, a well from which we had to draw water, hogs to slop and a horse that was so old that he could have benefited from having a horse to ride himself. A vegetable and fruit truck would come once a week, as well as a dairy truck.

The nearest neighbor to Ma'Dea's little shot-gun house was a lady named Ms. Lizzie, Uncle Reuben's sweetheart. During one of Ms. Lizzie's visits she asked that she be able to take us to the store. My first thought was; "there's a store around here?" A real store? But of course, I didn't dare say that aloud. (Some of you know what I'm talking about). The store was about two miles or so away. After going to the store with Ms. Lizzie on several occasions, I memorized the route and convinced my Uncle Reuben of that fact, pleading with him to allow me and my sisters to go to the store on our own.

So off we went, me and my two sisters, Mary and Cynthia, 8, 7, and 6 years of age respectively. The trek to the store and back took a little less than an hour. We left that morning about 10 a.m. or so. And with our little pennies and nickels in hand, we took off running for the little country store, candy calling our names.

We arrived in record time and purchased the candy and chewing tobacco for Uncle

Reuben. We devoured the candy and now loaded with sugar, we ran and played on the way back to Ma'Dea's. It was a particularly beautiful day, I'll never forget how the bright blue sky and red dirt contrasted so brilliantly.

We were a little less than a mile from home, when seemingly out of nowhere, a pickup truck appeared. It was traveling at a high rate of speed straight for me and my sisters. We were terrified. My

the same size, however, with me being the eldest I knew it was my responsibility to try and protect them.

The truck, driven by a white man with a young boy on the passenger side, continued to speed toward us so many times that I just knew he was going to hit us. My sisters were having a fit, nearly scared to death. I, too, while terribly frightened, refused to scream or cry. I was trying to see their faces. I

laughter and the "nigga's" until the truck was out of sight. I am not pacified by the reality that it could have been worse. What happened to us that day was totally inhumane and represents the height of ignorance and fear. We prepared to die in our 6, 7 and 8 year old minds - because we thought we were dead.

That was 1967 in Demopolis, Alabama. This is 2007. Forty years have past and sure enough, here I am, with my daughter in tow, headed to Mississippi and Louisiana basically because some idiots decided to hang nooses from a "white tree" at a public school in Jena, Louisiana.

It was a long, tough uncomfortable journey to say the least. Although I'm not very big or tall, I simply could not get comfortable enough to rest on the bus. So many times, I was tempted to lie down in the aisle but decided not to, since people were constantly getting up to go to the restroom. (Never sit by the restroom on a bus!) Like any mom would do I did all



first thought was perhaps this was the vegetable or dairy truck man. I soon realized that it was not. I grabbed my sisters and we stooped down in a huddle and I tried to put my arms around them, drawing them as close to me as possible. We were pretty much

guess that's why the man suddenly began to drive in circles around us. So fast and furiously that all of that pretty red dirt covered us from head to toe. Dirt was in our hair and in our eyes. We were coughing and choking. It was horrible. Of course we heard the



"colored." Like most blacks in America, I have a particular sensitivity to words such as these. I find it profoundly saddening that some people

ers and they taught us about our history as a people. However, my mother obviously did not think that to be enough as she somehow con-

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through the high caliber of the teachers on her staff. "We have an exceptional staff consisting of two nurses, actually 1.4 social workers; a fulltime psychologist, a counselor, 11 regular education teachers and two special ed teachers. Right now, we have 310 girls and 140 babies," says Andrews, who herself teaches art.

"Our teacher-to-student ratio of 18 to one compares with a 35 to one ratio in the school system. The difference results in our providing personal attention to each student," explains Andrews.

"This is not a short-term program," she adds. "We work hard to build their self-

esteem. These kids have amazing brains, something they don't know. I will tell them, 'Did you know you were smart? Did you know you were amazing? I want to tell you how amazing you are.' Sometimes what I hear back is 'Oh, you mean me?' I want them to know how far they can fly."

Andrews enjoys her work.

"I have a great job and this is a great place to work. I get lots of notes and cards from my former students. There is nothing like being a teacher. I don't do it for the money, and I don't do it for the recognition. Teachers change the world," she says.

Born in Detroit, she is the

oldest daughter of Magdalene and John Andrews. She has four brothers and two sisters, all living in Detroit. Andrews remains very close to her family. "We all still have dinner together," she says.

Andrews earned her undergraduate degree from Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan and her master's from Detroit's Wayne State University. A Fulbright Scholar, she studied for her doctorate at the University of Michigan. Before coming to the Catherine Ferguson Academy in 1985, Andrews taught in the Detroit public schools.

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