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You Can Go Home Again: Joseph Whitfield helps students at his middle-school alma mater find success

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ALUMNI



YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

Joseph Whitfield helps students at his middle-school alma mater find success

By Eric Butterman

Joseph Whitfield '15 was Mr. KIPP Delta his senior year at the charter school in Helena, Ark. Now he's Mr. Whitfield to his students.

Returning to the middle school of his youth as a sixth-grade literacy teacher, Whitfield is in his second year teaching at KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Delta College Preparatory School. The middle school and affiliated KIPP Delta Collegiate High prepared him well for Colby, where he was class president all four years and majored in English and minored in anthropology and African-American studies. In the end it was his mother's influence that cemented Whitfield's decision to give back to the community where he grew up, he said.

Pretty good outcome for a student who at one time didn't want to attend the charter school at all. "All I thought back then was, 'I don't want to do this. ... I don't want to be in school until five o'clock.'"

Whitfield came around and his young charges have, too. In this version of working for social justice, he focuses on energizing works of literature, despite the challenge of having students at different reading levels. Students unite, Whitfield said, in books with themes they identify with. *The Odyssey*, he said, is one of their favorites. "It's the classic tales and woes that come out of that story..." Whitfield said. "The characters learn life lessons, values, and have adventure."

The students are being introduced to *Odysseus* against the backdrop of Helena-West Helena, a town of about 6,000 where about 40 percent of residents live below the poverty line. More than 90 percent of the 310 students at KIPP Delta College Prep qualify for federally mandated free or reduced lunch.

The town has seen the beginnings of revitalization, but Whitfield said there still is a divide in the community. "Students will bring up questions like, 'Why is it that most of the school is African American?'" he said. "They have important questions to discuss, even when there aren't always easy answers."

For Whitfield, going to college in Waterville, Maine, was admittedly a bit of an odyssey of its own, divergent from the paths of most of his peers. But it was Colby that gave him confidence about how he would start

his life in Helena after graduation. "Colby definitely prepared me in a lot of ways to experience the real world," said Whitfield, who in addition to his sixth-grade teaching also leads an eighth-grade group focused on improving character and leadership while also working on personal goals and action planning. "One of the things that [Colby] helped me explore is [education] in a socio-emotional way, trying to understand the whole student and not just see a student as a body in a seat."

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I visited my school the Christmas of my sophomore year and I began to feel a desire to help."

—Joseph Whitfield '15



Whitfield said he always intended to return to Helena, but it wasn't until his junior year that he decided to return to KIPP Delta to teach. "I visited my school the Christmas of my sophomore year and I began to feel a desire to help," he said.

He also may be helping to create a local Whitfield educational tradition; his older brother Nathan is a teacher at the high school Joseph attended. In

fact, the younger Whitfield was one of his brother's students. "I thought I would have a free pass," he said with a laugh. "But he treated me the same as everyone else."

Whitfield says middle school classes now end earlier, at 4 p.m.—a move he believes is good. But make no mistake, he says, rigorous education is still evident. The school "prides itself on more time," he said. "It has that reputation of, 'Work hard to be rewarded later.' It did that for me."

Joseph Whitfield '15 listens to his sixth-grade students and leads a discussion at KIPP Delta College Preparatory School in Helena, Ark. Whitfield attended the school and returned to teach there after graduating from Colby.