

Kindergarten to Career...  
All Kids Can Learn Has to Mean All!

Lillie G. Jessie

... "new science suggests that few of us know our true limits, that the vast majority of us have not even come close to tapping what scientists call our "unactualized potential."  
... Our abilities are not set in genetic stone. They are soft and sculptable, far into adulthood. With humility, with hope, and with extraordinary determination, greatness is something to which any kid- of any age-can aspire."

David Shenk (2010) *The Genius in All of Us*

Kindergarten to College: During the last few years of my principal-ship I established a partnership with Virginia Tech University called "Kindergarten to College." The fifth graders in my school were given the opportunity to be the first elementary school to participate in a very professionally and elementary-centered day of activities, to include conducting experiments in the Physic Lab. The trip was designed to plant the seed of college aka "College Going Identity" in the minds of students who would not normally be exposed to such an opportunity in their daily environment. Virginia Tech is a very long drive so students and their parents had to be at the school no later than 4:30 a.m. The first time I drove around the curve to Vaughan for this venture I found myself close to tears when I saw the headlights of so many parents who not only wanted their children to be exposed to this opportunity but also were also excited and grateful for the opportunity. Students said things like "I couldn't sleep last night!" They immediately fell asleep during the long trip...and then I heard this roar of excitement...they screamed, "Mrs. Jessie look out the window, we are almost there!" I looked out the window to see the enlarged infamous VT logo on a hill.

Kindergarten to Career: I heard the same roar of excitement and jaw-opening stares of disbelief from a group of Vaughan 5<sup>th</sup> graders called the "Gentlemen's Club" when we entered the driveway of Mike Garcia's home. Mike is one of the most talented and gifted custom homebuilders in our area. In fact he built my home. These young men had never had an opportunity to walk into such a stately, and elegantly appointed home. Mike's circular drive was so enormous that the bus could remain in front of his home.

What I have learned is that Mike's heart is as big or bigger than his driveway. He and his wife took us on a tour of their home where his love of family is evident. Most people design a safe to hold financial possessions but the Garcia's family photos are secured in their safe. It is also large enough to secure his family during an emergency. They treated my boys like family also. Later, Mike took the students on another tour. This, however was a tour of his life and his early passion for building and designing homes. He shared architectural drawings. He is self-taught. He did not attend Virginia Tech or college, although his son did. Instead he combined his gift of vision laced with persistence and practice to build one of the most respected business enterprises in the county. He once said apologetically, "Lillie I did not go to college." My thought was "Thank God!"

Vaughan's Walk of All Stars was designed in 1992 for students who received straight 'A's. Their names are engraved in a brick on the sidewalk. The walkway ran out of space and Mike generously helped with the expansion. He did the work himself. During one our conversation he said, "Lillie,

when you look at that field (The soccer field on my campus) you see one thing but I see something else. I can look at the landscape, and know how many homes I can build ,how many I can design with or without basements, etc. I do not see the landscape the way others see it. I have known this since the age of eleven or twelve.” He shared a similar version of this story with my students. One young man who had just enrolled in my school and was living in a shelter, shared that he too saw the world differently, that he had architectural drawings hidden in special places at the shelter. David Shenk says that the research shows that we have hidden gifts and that with intense practice we can become good at almost anything. This is how we get the Mike Garcia’s and Michael Jordan’s of the world.

My last article was about students who learn “differently.” If we want to achieve our goal of “All children learn,” we need to look at the developed genius of people like Mike. I have always promoted a “college-bound,” curriculum. I still do, but watching what happens to students who for whatever reason are not going to college, or have other gifts, it is evident that they are graduating without a skill set to enter a meaningful career. We must allow their potential to be “Actualized” as indicated in the opening quote. We need to develop a dual vision of college and career readiness. Recently I was at fast food drive-thru window and heard a former student (now an adult) yell, “Mrs. Jessie!” We chatted for a while. As I drove away I said to myself, “This was not the future I envisioned for her.” It saddened me not because I think working at a drive thru is not an honest endeavor, but knowing she had potential to own a franchise. I wonder if we failed her in some way.

I have made a couple visits to both campuses of Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). I have had numerous conversations with Dr. Sam Hill, Provost of the Woodbridge Campus. We discussed Dual Enrollment possibilities for students, allowing them to obtain college credits while in high school. I am here to say that the “Community College of the past no longer exists!” The expansion of services and offerings makes one feel that you are in a full-blown university. During our last visit he said something that stuck inside my head. He said, “if you go to a four year college and are unable to complete the four years for some reason, you end up with nothing...but if you get a two year Associate’s Degree you have a certificate that can give you access to the career market.” Establishing apprenticeships and on the job training are paramount. Dr. Hill has such a program.

No child should graduate from our school system without the skill set needed to enter the college or business community. That has to become our mission. Dr. Douglas Wright, PWC Schools, has done a tremendous job of establishing partnerships with businesses. Presently, there is a Welding program at Potomac, a Heating & Air Conditioning (HVAC) program at Freedom, and a Culinary Arts program at Patriot and Potomac. The Standards of Learning of the future will highlight the need for more project-based and authentic learning where student build and design products. Recently, at the invitation of Mrs. Betty Covington, my friend and colleague on the board, I visit the Welding program at Potomac. The class had visited the shipyards in Norfolk, Virginia. They were told the average age of a welder is fifty-eight and that the beginning hourly wage is \$38 to \$40. This is an industry waiting for our young people. That sure beats working at a drive-thru for minimum wage.

Sharon Henry, also with PWC Schools, has established many business partnerships within the community. We need more to include more apprenticeships. Schools in Virginia Beach for example, have goals of career or college readiness for all of their students. The State of Washington has a project called “Sparkling the Future” where courses designed to help students successfully navigate the career/college trail begin in seventh grade. Models like those in New Haven Connecticut where college-career readiness starts in the elementary grades should be reviewed for both curriculum and staffing needs. Finally and most importantly, our schools need more career and college counselors at every level. I know that we need to invest in many things but our mission should be to provide the support needed in the way of curriculum development and trained career counselors to support our students’ ability to plan their futures beyond high school. The best solution to crime prevention is to put our kids in careers that are exciting, fulfilling, productive and lucrative. It’s a lot more cost-effective for us as a society than prison.

Epilogue: Recently I attended an evening program at the Kelly Leadership Center. I ran into a former

parent of one of my students and engaged in a conversation about his child, Antonio, now a young adult. Out of the blue he asked, "Do you remember that trip to Mike Garcia's home...Antonio and I still talk about it...I was one of the parents there... Wasn't that something?"

Thanks Mike for making this article authentic and real for our readers. Thanks even more for being what I call "A Talent Whisperer for Kids."

It's not that I am so smart" Albert Einstein once said. "It's just that I stay with problems longer."

Lillie G. Jessie  
Prince William County School Board  
Occoquan District