

the Stand

south side news

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Syracuse, NY
February 2012 issue 16 FREE

LEAPING INTO ACTION

High school student
Brianna Vassar's essay
wins her a scholarship

Spirits Rise in New Zone
Adult literacy center motivates residents

sweet tooth

Treat yourselves
to local owner's buffet
of popcorn and cakes

Bennie McDonald's plow business
benefits himself and Central New York

Driving to Success

BROWNSKIN BAND HAS FUNK



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(315) 882-1054
ASHLEY@MYSOUTHSIDESTAND.COMTHE STAND IS BASED OUT OF THE
SOUTH SIDE COMMUNICATION CENTER
2331 SOUTH SALINA STREET
SYRACUSE, NY 13205**FEATURES** | Celebrate with Fowler High School senior Brianna Vassar, who won the 2011 Charles Dozier III Memorial Scholarship, in honor of her commitment to the community.**COMMUNITY** | Learn how the new South Literacy Zone is inspiring South Side residents to further their education, advance their careers, and better their lives.**SCHOOL AND YOUTH** | Adam Felleman and Theresa Ladd are two teachers using art and music to teach students about African-Americans, especially during Black History Month.**ENTERTAINMENT** | Check out how a local music group, Brownskin Band, is bringing its funky sound and Christian message from the church to local venues.**BUSINESS** | Read about how Bennie McDonald is enhancing his plowing and lawn maintenance business to keep Central New York looking good.**RELIGION** | Learn how a South Side resident risked everything to follow his heart by converting to the Moorish-American Moslem faith and embracing his true beliefs.**BUSINESS** | Sink your teeth into how local entrepreneur Charlene Echols-Barnes is satisfying the South Side's sweet tooth with her signature dessert confections.

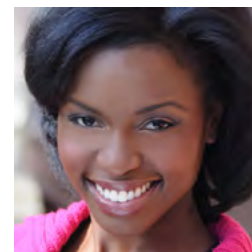
■ Cover photography of Brianna Vassar by Glorianna Picini

CALENDAR | FEBRUARY / MARCH

What: Youth Valentine's Christian Ball**When:** 7 to 10 p.m. Friday, Feb. 10**Where:** Payton Memorial Temple COGIC, 1816 Midland Ave.**Cost:** For youth ages 13 and up, a \$10 donation is requested. Guests ages 12 and under are asked to give a \$5 donation.**More Details:** Syracuse youth are invited to come out for a night of fun, food and continuous Christian music by DJ Wiz from Houston, Texas. Dress is semi-formal to formal, and attendees are encouraged to bring a friend.**More Info.:** To learn more, call (315) 935-6820 or (607) 761-8808.**What:** March Workshop: "Haiku Poetry Workshop," presented by the Syracuse Poster Project**When:** 10 a.m. to noon Saturday, March 3**Where:** South Side Communication Center, 2331 S. Salina St.**Cost:** Free. The event is open to the public. No RSVP required.**Contact:** ashley@mysouthsidestand.com, or call (315) 882-1054**More Info.:** The Poster Project generates community and sense of place through poster art. Organizers are leading a poetry workshop on the South Side to help this area be better represented in future poster displays. Attendees who complete the workshop will receive a certificate from the Syracuse Poster Project and can submit their poem for consideration for future poster displays.

MEET THE STAND'S NEWEST STAFF REPORTER

Candace J. Dunkley is a graduate student at Syracuse University and is working toward a master's degree in Broadcast Digital Journalism. She loves writing and entertainment, which has allowed her to intern at places like 9WSYR's morning show Bridge Street and WVOX Radio in her hometown, New Rochelle, NY. Dunkley loves writing for numerous news mediums such as broadcast, print and online. She also enjoys reading and writing poetry. Dunkley is proud to join The Stand in order to tell the stories of people from the South Side of Syracuse.

**DISCLAIMER**

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THE STAND ARE NOT NECESSARILY THOSE OF THE ENTIRE STAFF. THE STAND WELCOMES SUBMISSIONS FROM ALL MEMBERS OF SYRACUSE'S SOUTH SIDE BUT RETAINS THE RIGHT TO PUBLISH ONLY MATERIAL THE STAND DEEMS ACCEPTABLE TO THE PUBLICATION'S EDITORIAL PURPOSE AND IN KEEPING WITH COMMUNITY STANDARDS.

Well, it's official: The Stand's director, Ashley Kang, brought sweet baby Yoon-Mo Desmond Kang into the world Jan. 8, 2012. He is healthy and beautiful and sleeping enough to give mom and dad a rest here and there. Ashley is doing well, and she and her husband, Hee-Rak, are enjoying time at home with their new baby.



I am excited to step in as interim director in Ashley's absence and take a more active role in planning and coordinating The Stand. As a staff reporter, I became familiar with the South Side community and its passionate residents through the stories I wrote and events I covered. I look forward to continuing to build relationships in this new role.

On March 3, the Syracuse Poster Project will join The Stand to lead the next writing workshop on haiku poetry. The Syracuse Poster Project aims to create a sense of place through a series of illustrated poetry posters displayed throughout downtown Syracuse. Each summer, the project solicits the three-line form of poetry that best represents Syracuse.

Project organizers sought to teach a workshop with The Stand as a way to connect with a part of the community that has an increasingly vibrant presence in the arts, and we are looking forward to the collaboration. The annual poster series will come out in April and will be on display for a full year. You can learn more about the project at www.posterproject.org.

For now, dive into our February issue and read about the people who own and operate Echols Gourmet Desserts and BMD Snow Removal & Grass Cutting, Inc. Both of these businesses serve South Side clients and customers. Meet this month's special achiever, Brianna Vassar, a high school honoree who wants to become a homicide detective. Check out another local musical talent, the Brownskin Band, in the monthly "A Friendly Five" column. And more.

Please don't hesitate to contact me by email at Ashley@mysouthsidestand.com or by phone at (315) 882-1054.

Tara Donaldson



> Yoon-Mo Desmond Kang | Debby Hanry

Yoon-Mo Desmond Kang
Born Sunday, Jan. 8, 2012
6:56 p.m.
7 pounds 7.5 ounces
20 inches long

Meaning of Yoon-Mo:

- Self motivation and improving foundation
- Great spirit and leadership for future
- Active, self confidence, strong self image
- Fearless leader
- A new horizon
- Calm temperament, deep thinker, lucky, beautiful heart

SEND A PHOTO OF YOUR NEWBORN

We'd like to start featuring photos of South Side newborns in The Stand.

Interested?

All you need to do is send us a digital photo and fill out a short form.

To request a form and receive more details about this new feature, send an email to The Stand's interim director, Tara Donaldson, at Ashley@mysouthsidestand.com.

Put **BABY PHOTO** in the subject line of your email.

We look forward to hearing from you!

inside

CELEBRATE BLACK HISTORY WITH STUDENT ART AND MUSIC

Two teachers are taking an artistic approach as they introduce their students to famous figures and important moments in African-American history. Read about these standout teachers and their students on Pages 8, 9 and 10 of this issue.



> Music teacher Theresa Ladd directs third-grade choir members. | Sistina Giordano, Staff Photo



> Art teacher Adam Felleman gives drawing tips to Michael Morris. | Sistina Giordano, Staff Photo

LOCAL ACHIEVERS

The South Side Achiever is a feature in The Stand that highlights an accomplished person in the community.

ESSAY EXCERPT

"I know I can have a major impact on my community and other communities. I plan to have a wonderful future as I help get criminals off the streets. I have grown to learn that education is one of the most important things in my life. Without education, I wouldn't be where I am today and I won't be who I will be in my future. I am proud to say I will be a somebody and not just a statistic."

— Brianna Vassar



Read Brianna Vassar's entire essay, which won her the Charles Dozier III Memorial Scholarship. Find her essay online at mysouthsidestand.com

NOMINATE SOMEONE

Do you know a South Side Achiever? Nominate that person by contacting Ashley@mysouthsidestand.com or (315) 882-1054



Brianna Vassar

Scholarship winner,
committed student

By | Sistina Giordano
Staff reporter

Inspired by Olivia on 'Law & Order,'
Fowler senior plans to become a detective

Brianna Vassar sat in the front row during the 14th annual South Side Christmas Tree Lighting held Monday, Dec. 5, 2011, in anticipation. The Fowler High School senior waited for her name to be called, and then she graced the stage at the Beauchamp Branch Library as the 2011 Charles Dozier III Memorial Scholarship recipient.

"I'm very, very proud of Brianna," her mother, Debbie Ryan, said after the ceremony. "I read her essay and thought it was really good and am just so proud that she was chosen out of all the high schools."

The \$500 scholarship, which recognizes a Syracuse city high school student, was created in honor of Charles Dozier III, a South Side businessman who believed in community outreach, especially during the holiday season.

The application required two letters of recommendation, consistent passing grades and a three-page essay asking applicants how they would use their education to give back to the community.

Vassar said the answer was easy.

"I want to go to college and become a homicide detective because I want to stop crime from happening in our community," the teen said. "I started watching 'Law & Order,' and Olivia Benson (played by Mariska Hargitay) became my inspiration."

Vassar has seen what violence can do.

"Someone really close to me was shot and killed, and there was no justice for them, and I want to change that," she said.

Vassar will attend Herkimer County Community College in the fall to study criminal justice and is excited about her future prospects. But she acknowledges that the path to her future was not always so bright.

"I wanted to give up," she said. "In 10th and 11th grades, I really wasn't into school. But thanks to Ms. (Susan) Henry and Ms. (Jamie) Gartner, they helped me with my college applications and got me back on track."

Today Vassar is a thriving senior who is active within her community. For the past three years, she has been a member of the Community Wide Dialogue to End



> Brianna Vassar, a senior at Fowler High School, will attend college in the fall and wants to use her education to give back to the community. | Glorianna Picini, Staff Photo

Racism, which meets five to six times a year to discuss the stereotypes that exist and how to end racial inequality. She also plays basketball, volleyball and softball.

Adam Lutwin, a Fowler High School English teacher, has taught Vassar for the past two years and is proud of her accomplishments.

"She's only 17 and has already dealt with some difficult issues, but she's also changing her own direction and pushing towards the next level," he said. Lutwin described Vassar as a passionate, mature and heavily involved individual who is highly capable.

"She's very popular in school but is also a very good student and can balance both worlds quite well," he added.

Vassar hopes she can be a good example for youth in her community and that someday she can give back through her love of criminal justice.

"I think it's important to never give up and to fight for what you want in life," she said. "I feel strongly about getting justice for victims, and I want to help my community."

Want to be healthier?

It doesn't take a major lifestyle overhaul to be healthier. February is American Heart Month, and **SU's Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion** has these **tips**:

Fitness can be free

You don't need a gym membership to get in shape! Walk. Play tag with the kids. Take the stairs, not the elevator.

Make it real

Unprocessed foods like fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains increase energy and help you maintain a healthy weight.

Drink to your health

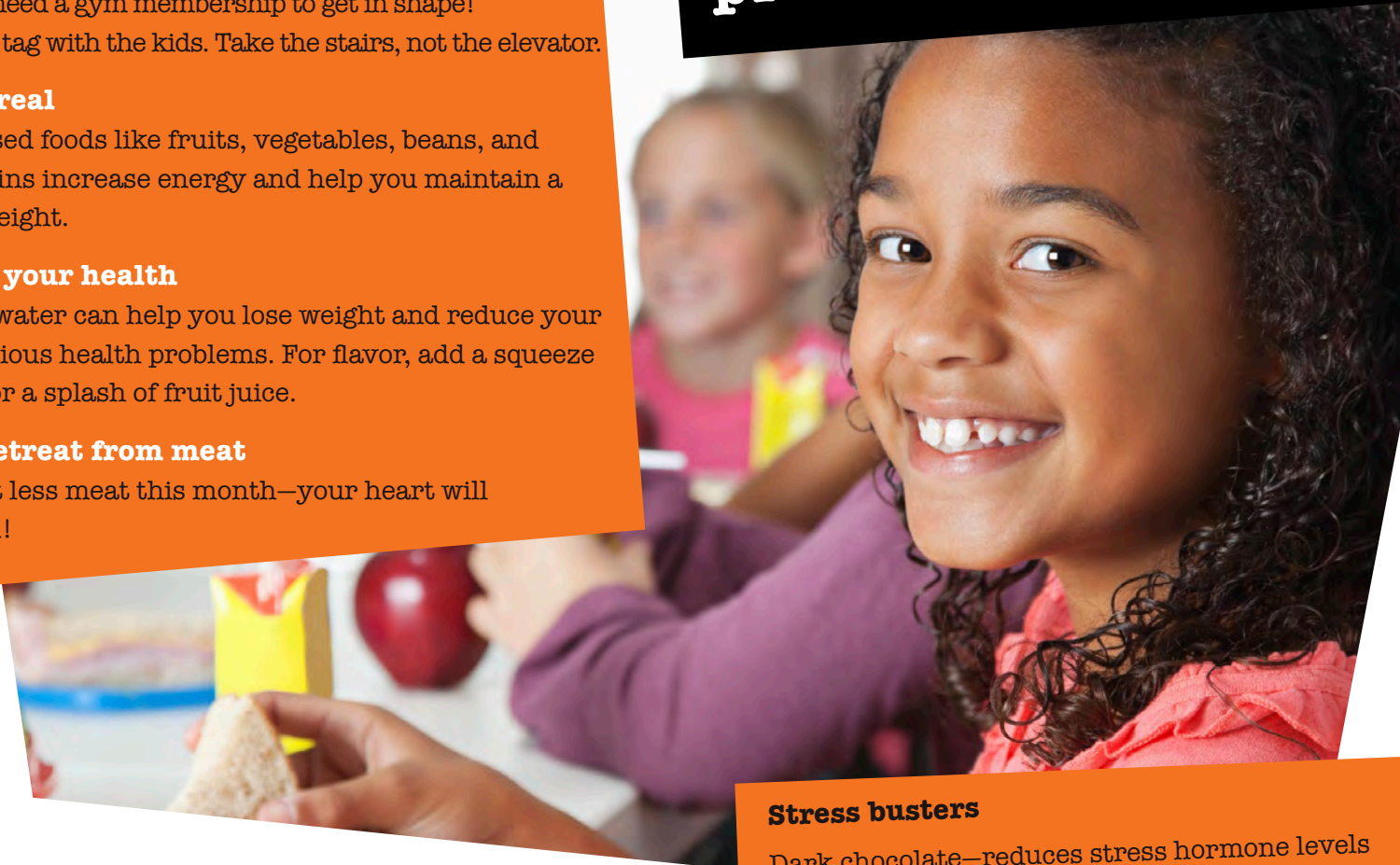
Drinking water can help you lose weight and reduce your risk of serious health problems. For flavor, add a squeeze of lemon or a splash of fruit juice.

Take a retreat from meat

Aim to eat less meat this month—your heart will thank you!

Little changes

produce **big results!**



Stress busters

Dark chocolate—reduces stress hormone levels

Tea—decaffeinated black, green, or oolong tea improves mental focus

Peppermint—reduces cravings for people who eat when stressed

Whole grains—stimulate the release of feel-good hormones

These tips—and so much more—are part of the Healthy Monday program of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion. Based at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, the Lerner Center creates public health programs that help you make healthier choices. For more information, visit healthymonday.syr.edu. Find us on Facebook at **Healthy Monday Syracuse**, or follow us on Twitter **@HealthyCuse**.

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY: Scholarship in Action



SOUTH LIT ZONE

THE SOUTH LITERACY ZONE FAMILY WELCOME CENTER

Located in the Adult Education wing of Dr. King Elementary School, 416 E. Raynor Ave., Room D-111

- Hours: 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday
- No appointment necessary
- Phone: (315) 435-6000 ext. 5559

CLASS LOCATIONS

BEAUCHAMP BRANCH LIBRARY

2111 S. Salina St.

Classes:
9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.
Tuesday-Thursday
Instructor: David Dorfer

DR. KING ELEMENTARY

416 E. Raynor Ave.
Room D-124

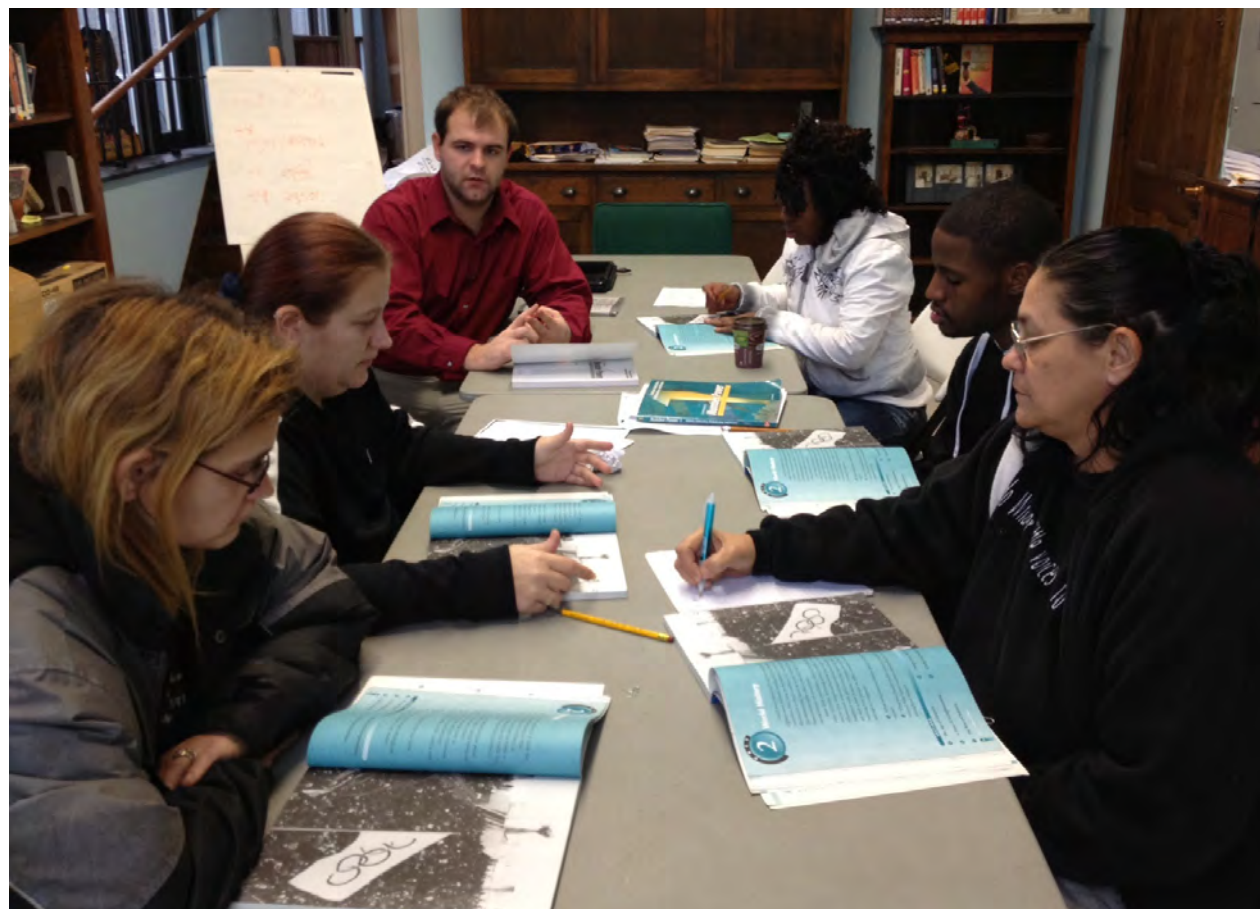
Classes:
1 to 3:30 p.m.
Monday-Thursday
Instructor: Katia Dickso

Phone: (315) 435-6000
ext. 5559

— Source: Brittany Johnson,
transition counselor for
South Literacy Zone

STROLLING *the* SOUTH SIDE

Newly opened South Literacy Zone assists in adult education and GEDs



> South Literacy Zone teacher David Dorfer gives a math lesson to GED students at Beauchamp Branch Library. Student Arlene Brodbeck, at right, says she loves to learn. | Tara Donaldson, Staff Photo

By | Tara Donaldson
Staff reporter

Program also helps residents with social service needs such as housing, citizenship and more

It has been more than 30 years since Arlene Brodbeck sat in a classroom. But at age 52, Brodbeck decided it was time to get her GED diploma — for her own education and so she could help her 25 grandchildren with homework.

It was the South Literacy Zone that brought Brodbeck back to school. With a fresh literacy initiative grant from the New York State Department of Education, the Literacy Zone — which opened in September 2011 — was able to focus on an adult education program specific to the South Side.

“I am very passionate about what we are doing here,” said Valerie Dorfer, the facilitator for all three

Syracuse Literacy Zones. There are also zones on the North and West sides. “We’ve put a face to adult education in this community,” Dorfer added.

The Literacy Zone does its best to prevent barriers like unemployment and teenage pregnancies from getting in the way of education. To do this, the Literacy Zone provides GED, English language and adult basic education classes to adults ages 16 and older. It offers assistance with Department of Social Services (DSS) needs, help in finding day care and housing, as well as citizenship classes for immigrants and refugees. All services are free. Case managers also reach out to students.

For Brodbeck, these services are a big part of what allowed her to continue her education. “It makes it much easier that it’s free,” she said. “I’m on a fixed income with Social Security and disability, and with all of the other bills I have, it just makes it easier.”

Blossom Horton has worked with Syracuse Literacy

SUGGEST A LOCATION

To submit an idea for Strolling the South Side, contact Ashley @mysouthsidestand.com or call (315) 882-1054

Zones since 2009, and now she focuses on the South Literacy Zone. Horton works in a dual role as assistant facilitator and case manager — a move she has enjoyed because she feels very close to this specific zone, she said.

“This program is very unique, and I really enjoy being over here,” Horton said. “It gives me joy to be able to reach out to the African-American community,” she added.

One of the South Literacy Zone’s most stellar students had been in trouble on the streets before beginning classes there, but when he was able to see men like himself doing good things, it opened his eyes, Horton said.

“In the African-American community, it is very important that we see some positive role models,” Horton said.

Brodbeck said she couldn’t be happier with her class and the grade level improvements she has made in just two months.

“I love it because I’m learning,” she said. “And I just think people who need the class should take it.”

- The Beauchamp Branch Library is home to the first GED preparation classes
- Dr. King Elementary School is home to the second GED preparation classes

BY THE NUMBERS

38
Current enrollment at Beauchamp Branch Library

12
Current enrollment at Dr. King

— Source:
Blossom Horton, assistant facilitator for South Literacy Zone

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— Minneapolis + St. Paul Magazine

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DIRECTED BY MARCELA LORCA
MUSICAL DIRECTION BY CHRISTOPHER DROBNY

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The Art of History



> Enzo Groat, 13, sketches a picture of Rosa Parks in his art class, where Adam Felleman teaches about the great figures in black history. | Sistina Giordano, Staff Photo

By | Sistina Giordano
Staff reporter

Students at two South Side schools channel their artistic talents for Black History Month

Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and first lady Michelle Obama are among the many prominent figures whose images line the walls and desktops in Adam Felleman's classroom at Clary Magnet Middle School.

Felleman, an art teacher, is one of two standout teachers working with students on Syracuse's South Side in celebration of Black History Month.

He has taken an artistic approach in teaching his

sixth- through eighth-grade students about some of America's most influential African-Americans. A few years ago, he started a drawing project.

"This year we're trying to do political leaders of note and some entertainers," he said. "But I'm really trying to highlight some of the classic people whose talent and influence has endured over the years."

Students draw primarily using pencil and some background color. A short, written piece about each person complements the artwork.

Each year, Felleman introduces new people into his classroom project, even if the reactions are mixed.

"Sometimes my students want to draw who they know," he said. "But I'm trying to teach them about new

people like some from the '50s and '60s — people of note and great influence in their history that they may not know.”

For Felleman, the project is more than just an opportunity to educate. “Our school is about 70 percent African-American,” he said, “and my biggest hope is that they take pride in themselves and in their history by doing this.”

Tyriek Mayo, an eighth-grade student working hard on his sketch of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., said King sent a powerful message to the world and to African Americans.

“I think it’s a good project because we’re celebrating important people from our history,” he said, “and because you get to draw and learn at the same time.”

Michael Morris, also an eighth-grader, felt that the project helped him learn from other people and their struggles. “I like that we can celebrate the people who have made our lives better,” he said. “And I think that by doing something like this we are also sending out a message of peace.”

Felleman said he couldn’t be prouder of the work that his students produced. “I think they have a lot of talent, and anytime I get a chance to highlight my stu-

dents’ work, I try to do that,” he said.

BUILDING HARMONY

Theresa Ladd, a music teacher at McKinley-Brighton Elementary School, is another standout teacher making a difference for her students. Ladd said her students have always been very interested in black history.

“Every single time we have a class on the subject, students’ hands go up and you have at least ten kids who still want to talk even after the bell rings,” she said. “They just want to keep it going and sometimes we won’t even get to the song because they have so many questions.”

Ladd began educating students about black history when she became a teacher 13 years ago.

“Being an African-American myself, I share the history with them when I’m talking to them about it,” she said.

Ladd teaches kindergarten through fifth grade, and she devotes a lot of time to the issue through music.

“I like to make sure that our students know that our history didn’t just start with slavery,” she said. “There was Africa before that.”

Continued on Page 10



> A student drawing from an art class in Clary Magnet Middle School depicts Stevie Wonder. | Sistina Giordano, Staff Photo

BLACK HISTORY ART SHOW

Artwork by students in Adam Felleman’s class will be featured during all of February at the following South Side cultural shop in celebration of Black History Month:

Rivers Of Shashamani
1409 N. Salina St.

BEAUCHAMP LIBRARY EVENTS

Black History Month at
Beauchamp Branch
Library

All events are free and will be held at the library, at 2111 S. Salina St.

More Info.:
Call (315) 435-3395
or visit www.onlib.org

THURSDAY FEB. 9

Tribute to African American
Firefighters in Syracuse

Time: 5:30-7:15 p.m.

To honor Firefighters of Color United in Syracuse and past African-American firefighters who served in the Syracuse Fire Department.

ON THE SIDE

MORE EVENTS AT LIBRARY

SATURDAY FEB. 11

African American Read-in
10 a.m.-noon
Community members will read aloud books by and about African-Americans and African-American history.

SATURDAY FEB. 11

Two Black Nations In America: Movie and Discussion
3-4:30 p.m.
Explore the existing dichotomy between black America's middle-class and lower-class populations

THURSDAY FEB. 16

African Beading and Necklaces
5-7 p.m.
Open to school-age children
Call for registration:
(315) 435-3395

TUESDAY FEB. 21

Picture Show and Discussion:
Our Friend Martin
3-5 p.m.
Follow Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during his childhood

WEDNESDAY FEB. 22

Black History Jeopardy
2 p.m.
Topics will include history, places, famous people and much more. Prizes will be given to the winners!

Continued from Page 9

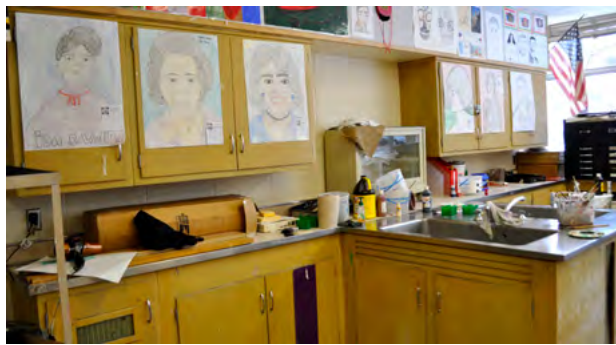
The students sing songs that slaves sang, as well as those sung during the civil rights movement. Ladd also educates some of her older students by showing them clips of the actual footage of the civil rights march.

"They love to see the photos and video," she said.

When Ladd was a student, the footage had a huge impact on her. "It did something that made me want to get my education, achieve, reach out and help people in need," she said. "So I feel like when you teach black history, it instills an appreciation for education and for the opportunities we have today."

Ladd's students will be able to share their lessons with the rest of the school and their families. In February, the elementary school will hold an African-American history month performance. The event features poetry, songs, and African dance. The performance takes place on National African American Parent Involvement Day, and is a good opportunity for the students to celebrate black history.

"If you're African-American, you're talking about your ancestors and this is what they went through," she said. "And when you understand that, it just adds something special to what you do and why you do it."



> Portraits of figures, like Oprah Winfrey, line the cabinets in honor of Black History Month. | Sistina Giordano, Staff Photo



> Tyriek Mayo, an eighth-grader, starts a Beyonce sketch after drawing Martin Luther King Jr. | Sistina Giordano, Staff Photo



> Music teacher Theresa Ladd prepares students to sing in a Black History Month celebration. | Sistina Giordano, Staff Photo

DEEPLY ROOTED

Gospel background helps band establish style, gain loyal following



> Brownskin Band has attracted a strong following in the area. | Photo provided by Brownskin Band

By | Reggie Seigler
A Friendly Five columnist

Brownskin Band has become a musical fixture in the community's rhythm-and-blues scene

For five years now, the Brownskin Band has founded the local circuit while establishing itself as a household name.

The band's music is a blend of funky soul with a twist, according to Nate Brown (drummer) and Joe Cummings (keyboardist). Members perform at bars, clubs, festivals and private functions such as parties and weddings. The band has a loyal following of young and old fans.

Many of the fans are active members of local churches. They all share a love of Brownskin's music. In 2010, Brownskin released a self-produced CD titled "My Love To You." They have been nominated twice for the SAMMY Award and have won the Upper New York State Award for best rhythm-and-blues band.

Nate Brown, 42, also known as "Peanut," is the band's founder and leader. He was raised playing in the church during an era when many in the "black church" were told that musicians and singers could not do both "the Lord's work and the Devil's work." That meant if you played in the church it was frowned upon if you worked on the secular circuit.

Peanut is the son and a nephew of some of the most renowned local gospel singers and a much-respected preacher. I wondered if it had been a conscious decision for him to choose to perform outside of the church, so I asked him about it.

"It's about making people feel good about themselves," Peanut said. "We always pray before we perform, and we always ask that we will be able to reach someone and touch them in the way that pleases God. People have

actually come up to us after our performances to tell us that they were touched by something that we played. That's how I know it's OK."

The band's other members have musical and church roots as well. Gary Carter, the group's male lead vocalist, is Peanut's cousin and shares part of the same legacy. Rounding out the band are Ekwon Brooks (keyboard), Jonathan Dale (bass) and Danielle Mitchell. Danielle is the group's female lead singer and Joe's sister. All of them have a connection to church, and some of them still play there regularly.

Joe, or "Lawd Dweez," as he is sometimes called, shared some insightful things in our conversation. He said that he believes the Syracuse area has "some of the best talent on the East Coast" but that it lacks a record label capable of marketing the sound on a national level.

Peanut follows the philosophy that music should be for the people. "When we are asked to perform, I always consider it an honor and a privilege, and I accept it with humility," he said. "After our performances, I always try to show my appreciation by sending an email to say thank you or by giving them a phone call."

That formula must be working for them. The band performs at numerous functions. Brownskin has a gig booked for nearly every weekend.

"Their music is good, culturally relevant and uplifting," said the Rev. Brian Hill, pastor of the King's Healing Room, where some members of Brownskin perform. "At the King's Healing Room, our ministry deals with many individuals and families who are struggling financially, emotionally and spiritually. There is a need to reach out to them. Through God's grace, Brownskin has been able to help us to do that."

Have a Friendly Five suggestion? Contact Reggie at reggie@softspokenband.com or (315) 479-9620.

LISTEN ONLINE

the **STAND** Listen online to Brownskin Band by clicking on their song, "On My Way," on mysouthsidestand.com

SEE THEM PLAY

When: Saturday, Feb. 11, 9 p.m. to 1 a.m.

What: Delta Sigma Theta's 40th Annual Scholarship Dance

Where: The Double Tree Hotel, 6302 Carrier Circle Parkway

BOOK THEM

Call: (315) 876-4907

Visit: www.brownskinband.com

GOSPEL GROUP

Gary Carter, Brownskin Band's male lead vocalist, also sings with a gospel group called Foundation.

Three band members, Jonathan Dale (bass), Nate "Peanut" Brown (drummer) and Joe Cummings (keyboard), play for the praise team and worship service at the King's Healing Room.

When: Sunday mornings at 11:30 a.m.

Where: Rescue Mission chapel at 120 Gifford St.

ON THE SIDE

DREAMERS WANTED

The South Side Innovation Center's Entrepreneurial Assistance Program is a project of the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University.

The program, with offices at 2610 S. Salina St., supports established and new businesses with a 17-session curriculum, covering topics such as planning and research, marketing, financial basics, money management, and green opportunities, the center's website says.

The program charges a one-time fee, based on income, with a maximum charge of \$589. Installment payments and scholarships are available.

The current session will meet until Feb. 28. For more information, contact:

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STARTUP SUCCESS

Business incubator helps aspiring entrepreneurs put ideas to action



> Bennie McDonald of Syracuse loads equipment into a trailer. McDonald founded a snow removal and grass cutting business three years ago with the help of a business incubator and program through Syracuse University. | Brandon Weight, Staff Photo

By | Christina Levin
Urban Affairs reporter

Bennie McDonald says he runs his company the way he was trained to act in the military — with structure and discipline.

“The difference between myself and Bill Gates is that he makes more money than me, but I have to have the same structure set up,” said McDonald, president of BMD Snow Removal & Grass Cutting, Inc., who incorporated his lawn maintenance business in February 2009 with the help of the Entrepreneurial Assistance Program.

Joanne Lenweaver, director of the Women's Business Center at the South Side Innovation Center, said the Entrepreneurial Assistance Program is “the next step for entrepreneurs as far as making them legitimate in the marketplace, knowing where they might advance in the next level of growth. That's the level, the barrier, that a lot of young entrepreneurs get stuck at.”

McDonald said the entrepreneurial program “helped me go forward with my business.” He credited the program with enabling him to receive certifications such as one for the state Minority- or Women-owned

Business Enterprise and one for federal Disadvantaged Business Enterprise. These help him to find resources and bid for contracts. “That makes me feel like my business is legitimate,” he said.

Although he landed several residential contracts before he discovered the South Side Innovation Center through an acquaintance, he realized his business needed a professional boost to remain competitive in the long run.

So McDonald, who graduated from Utica high school in 1977, enrolled in the program's classes. He studied employee handbook writing, accounting, public speaking, and accounting software QuickBooks, he said. McDonald spent 60 hours learning how to manage his finances, secure financing, and market his business.

A cost analysis through QuickBooks revealed that commercial contracts were more profitable than residential ones, so McDonald deals “more on the commercial side” now, he said, adding that outside of Syracuse, he has contracts in Albany, Binghamton and Rochester.

McDonald invested \$110,000 of his own savings to buy two trucks, lawn mowers, computers, a navigational system and other equipment needed to cut grass and

remove snow, the Empire State Development website says. He said debt often compels a business to take on jobs it otherwise wouldn't, and he did not want that for his company.

"I purchased all of my own equipment, so I wouldn't have to owe anyone anything," McDonald said.

Bob Herz, director of the South Side Innovation Center to whom McDonald submits financial reports, said McDonald has made smart business moves, focusing on banking, corporate and governmental clients, where the travel time expenses are lower and potential yields are greater.

"His major barrier to growth right now is finding qualified associates whom he can assign jobs," Herz said. "He is a very organized man, and will undoubtedly find the right people."

The lawn maintenance business employs four people during the winter and two to three during the summer, McDonald said.

As president of the company, McDonald said he has some control over his schedule. In the end, his leadership will affect his business, so it's in his own interest to keep it afloat, he said.

"If I feel like I don't feel like going to work a particular day, I won't go. I'm in charge of the actual company itself," McDonald said. But, he added, "I still have to abide by certain rules and regulations to be in business."

Herz said the Entrepreneurial Assistance Program refined McDonald's goals, provided extensive training in business concepts, and helped develop his business plan. McDonald earned second place in the program's Business Plan Awards, the Empire State Development website says.

Besides an office, parking and storage space at the South Side Innovation Center, the Entrepreneurial Assistance Program offers McDonald a hospitable atmosphere where he can share ideas with other startup company associates. McDonald can also discuss business ideas and "let off some steam" with professionals at the South Side Innovation Center, Herz said, citing himself as one.

"Remember, for an entrepreneur, every day they are doing something they have never done before," said Herz, who described McDonald as willing to learn what he does not know. "Being open to their needs is as impor-

tant as rigorous training and counseling."

Modest success often closes a mind, but in McDonald's case, it opened one and kept it receptive to new ideas, said Herz, who characterized McDonald's leadership style as demanding and knowledgeable.

"What I think of when I think of Bennie is of someone optimistic, with an organized mind and determined ambition," Herz said.

One day, McDonald would like to mentor someone who would take over the running of his business, but he said he would like to remain involved, perhaps as a board member.

In Herz's opinion, McDonald "sees what the future can be and understands how to get there — sometimes in detail, sometimes generally — but always with a determination."



> Bennie McDonald learned to use software such as QuickBooks to maximize his profits. | Brandon Weight, Staff Photo

LIFELONG LESSONS

Tom Lumpkin, chair of entrepreneurship at the Whitman School of Management, said the Entrepreneurial Assistance Program helped Bennie McDonald in multiple ways:

- Building his confidence
- Showing what was possible as a business owner
- Understanding what it takes to be competitive
- Introducing him to financial resources
- Expanding his network of business contacts that "he could call on to develop his business"



Find these words in this story

Barrier

Something standing in the way of a goal

Optimistic

Viewing things in a cheerful light, expecting the best



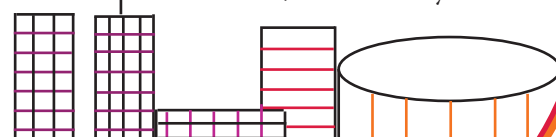
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ON THE SIDE

MOOR SCIENCE

Prophet Noble Drew Ali founded the sect of Islam in 1913 to give nationality and birthright to African-Americans and for “the purpose of uplifting fallen humanity.”

Teachings emphasize productive and positive citizenship. Followers are guided by these principles:

- Love
- Truth
- Peace
- Freedom
- Justice

Moor Science is identified as a sect of Islam. The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America is used to follow holy instructions from the prophet.

Sources:
 Moor Science Temple of America Inc.
www.moorishsciencetempleofamericainc.com

The Moorish Science Temple of America / Moorish Divine and National Movement
www.themoorishsciencetempleofamerica.org

A MOORISH FAITH

Anthony Harris El focuses on national pride, a sense of peace

By | Camille Bautista
 Staff reporter

He says being a Moorish-American Moslem means ‘having a purpose, a realistic goal in life’

Anthony Harris El raises his hands at the lectern, his eyes tightly shut in concentration as he leads his study group in prayer.

The Moorish flag billows over the airway, side by side with the flags of Islam and the United States. A hushed silence hovers over the group as the meeting ends and Harris El closes his readings.

Nearly 15 years ago, he never envisioned himself as sheik of the Moorish Science study group at the South Side Communication Center. At the time, he felt hopeless, he said, dropping out of high school before graduation and unhappy with his lack of success.

He continued on the same path until he found promise in the Moorish Science Temple of America, something that brought so much hope to him that he was willing to sacrifice his family for faith. Early on, Harris El faced threats of divorce from his first wife and exclusion from his family because of his religion. He was raised a Baptist, and his family members were devout Christians.

His father finally asked him, “Are you willing to give up your family for this?” Harris El answered “yes” without hesitation.

Harris El is one of nearly 500 Moorish-American Moslems in Syracuse, according to Charles Pierce-El, a follower of 10 years.

Harris El sees its benefits as twofold: having an identity and becoming a better citizen through the tenets of Islam. He focuses on the teachings that emphasize national pride and the idea of peace.

For Harris El, he has found answers he didn’t find in other religions. His questions about his purpose in life, as well as issues with relationships and family, were satisfied. He found common ground with his second wife, Shante, who is also Moorish-American, and they agreed to raise their three children to follow the faith.

Male followers of the faith often wear a fez and women don a turban. The fez symbolizes 360 degrees of knowledge, Pierce-El said.

“I’m one of the few Moors that walk around with a fez every day to show people that you don’t have to be afraid of me,” Pierce-El said. “When people hear Islam, they think of terrorist. I hope people understand that we’re no different than they are.”

Moorish-Americans often add “Bey” or “El” to their names, said Pierce-El, to give distinct recognition, a way of taking back their identity from names that may have



> Anthony and Shante Harris El pose with two of their children: Kaleb Harris and Owen Fulmer (front). | Photo provided

been given to oppress their forefathers.

Harris El describes what it means to him. “It links me not only to the future but to the rich history of my people,” Harris El said. “I don’t just stop at slavery.”

Sharif Bey, a former South Side resident who now lives in Camillus, says the idea of national pride brings responsibility and accountability to the people. Bey has been involved with Moorish Science since 1988.

An important idea, he says, is uniting African-Americans who otherwise do not have a “cohesive unifying factor” aside from their skin color. He says he believes as a group they must live their beliefs of peace to show others their message, emphasizing positive activity in their community.

“Without cultural identity you’re just an open wound,” Bey said. “We’re not radicals running around with fezzes and turbans. We’re productive and industrious, we’re upright, independent people, and we care for our loved ones.”

Harris El said he hopes to promote knowledge of Moorish-Americans to the Syracuse community by building the communication center’s study group and establishing stable supporters.

“The community in Syracuse is in need for conditions to be changed,” Harris El said. “We have a place for assembly, to branch out to do things for society and enrich the world.”

more info
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BUSINESS WITH POP

A community test kitchen helped Echols Gourmet Desserts get started



> Charlene Echols-Barnes founded Echols Gourmet Desserts more than a decade ago. | Jeremiah Howell, Staff Photo

By | Christina Levin
Urban Affairs reporter

Founder offers tasty treats made possible through a local program for food entrepreneurs

In the fast-paced era of frozen meals, Echols Gourmet Desserts offers a taste of the good old days, when most food was made from scratch.

Charlene Echols-Barnes founded the wholesale dessert company 15 years ago in Syracuse. She decided to pursue a family dream of opening up a bakery after getting caught up in corporate downsizing at Niagara Mohawk — now National Grid — where she worked for about 17 years.

“We originally wanted it to be a family thing,” said Echols-Barnes, the owner, who grew up in Pioneer Homes and moved to the Valley area of the South Side when she was in high school. “I am the only one to step forward and get it in motion, and now I’m the only one in the business.”

The company’s main product, caramel corn, has a glaze made from scratch, not powder, and there are two varieties: one mixed with cashews and pecans, and one without. Both are sold in 4-ounce bags.

“Right now, gourmet caramel corn is the biggest thing,” said Echols-Barnes, who earned a bachelor’s degree in business.

The dessert company was developed through the Syracuse Community Test Kitchen — located in the South Side Innovation Center — which is a joint program of the Whitman School of Management and Nelson Farms. The Test Kitchen supports new and existing entrepreneurs with training and guidance to commercialize home recipes, according to Whitman’s website. Participants are trained in business planning, market research, recipe development, sensory analysis and FDA requirements.

“They’re always offering classes,” Echols-Barnes said. “I’m always trying to take advantage of the classes

Continued on Page 16

POUND CAKES

Besides its signature popcorn, Echols Gourmet Desserts offers pound cakes in a variety of flavors:

- Butter
- Lemon
- Sweet Potato
- Strawberry
- Pistachio
- Coconut
- Banana
- Butter Rum
- Pineapple



Find these words in this story

Wholesale

Selling to stores or other businesses rather than directly to the public

Entrepreneurs

People who start and assume the risk for a business

Reap

To make money or other gains after putting in time and effort

How would you use these words in a sentence?

ON THE SIDE

LOOKING AHEAD

Charlene Echols-Barnes, founder of **Echols Gourmet Desserts**, which offers popcorn and pound cakes, shares her vision for the future:

“I think I have a marketable product.

I'd like to see my business get bigger.

Five years from now, I don't know. Maybe I'll sell it and reap some of the benefits from it.”

Continued from Page 15

they offer. They taught me to understand a lot about the business world, the legalities of that, how to establish myself as a businessperson, bookkeeping.”

Many of the company's customers can be found cheering at sporting events in the Carrier Dome at Syracuse University. Echols Gourmet Desserts are also offered at Green Hills Farms supermarket, 5933 S. Salina St., and at the Special Events & Food Court at Turning Stone Resort Casino in Verona. Since the company is a wholesale business, the price of the desserts depends on where they are sold, Echols-Barnes said.

Rachel LeQuire, who attended the Albany-Syracuse basketball game Nov. 15 and bought a bag of Echols popcorn, could not recall what she paid — but she did remember the taste. “It was delicious,” LeQuire said. “That's what I remember.”

Brian Zilles, manager of concessions operations at the Carrier Dome, said items from Echols Gourmet Desserts are currently sold at 25 locations in the building, at \$4 a bag. With regard to Echols-Barnes as a business owner, Zilles said, “The service I receive from her is exceptional.”

Echols-Barnes said she wished she had the financial resources to establish her own manufacturing company, with “all the fancy equipment” already set up to produce and package her desserts. Right now, the company uses Nelson Farms, Morrisville State College's small-scale



> Echols caramel corn comes plain or mixed with cashews and pecans. | Jeremiah Howell, Staff Photo

food processing center. It serves small business owners and entrepreneurs in producing, packaging and marketing products.

Finances are limited nowadays, said Echols-Barnes. “My family members and friends help out from time to time when I'm in a pinch,” she said. “I'm using my own finances. I haven't taken out a loan, trying to keep my costs down. I have to pace myself for expansion.”

Sales have been higher this year than last year, Echols-Barnes said. Most of the profit is made during football and basketball games at the Carrier Dome, and business booms during the holiday season. Suppliers such as Green Hills Farms have done very well with the caramel corn, she said.

Ryan Gertz, a Green Hills Farms shopper, is a fan. “I love a bowl of popcorn when I watch TV,” he said. “If you like sweet stuff, this is definitely a good choice.”

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