

STUDENT FINDS SCHOOL A REFUGE TEEN EXCELS ACADEMICALLY DESPITE POVERTY, RIDICULE, UPHEAVAL

ROBIN FARMER Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

Publication Date: February 28, 1994 Page: A-1 Section: General Edition: City

On a warm weekday morning, 18-year-old Tonya Fisher can't make it to the one place she loves most: school.

School is her passport out of a neighborhood where murder records are set and broken, where an 11-year-old once offered to sell her a gun for \$4.

School provides Tonya with the stability she doesn't get at home. Tonya lives with her mother, Janice, who moves from place to place and job to job. Between jobs, the family lives on welfare. Tonya has attended 12 schools in nine years. Still, she manages to hold on to a 4.147 grade-point average. In the classroom, unlike at home, Tonya has always found a measure of control.

But today, when the alarm clock screams at 5 a.m., Tonya stays in bed.

This time, it's not the lack of bus fare keeping the academically gifted senior home.

Weariness, indifference and depression -- frequent pre-dawn visitors-- have stopped by and climbed into the big bed she shares with an oversized teddy bear.

It's one of many absences this year from David Farragut Career Academy, where Tonya is No. 1 in her class. It's a rank she holds despite missing 26 days last year and 20 the year before that.

Tonya has always found school easy and life hard. But, inevitably, one impinges on the other.

Life for Tonya is a constant tug of war between lofty goals and private demons. Some days she is confident about achieving her dream of becoming a psychiatrist. Other days, she walks without her usual bounce and warm smile and with unexplained tears streaming down her cheeks.

Tonya's life is the story of the challenges faced by children of talent struggling to realize their potential in school, despite hostile environments characterized by ridicule, apathy, poverty and family upheaval.

Tonya has developed strategies to cope with the challenges of life. One of them is occasionally throwing in the towel.

That's what she'll do today. She'll make it up. Somehow, she always does. "I used to say nobody could have made as much out of their life as I have," she says wistfully, several days after her absence. Her full figure is folded on the passenger side of a car heading to her home in Englewood.

In a second-floor apartment, in a neighborhood where 65 murders were committed last year, Tonya lives with her mother and two mixed toy poodles, Chip and Dale. The apartment is tidy, the tree-lined block is neat and mostly quiet -- especially since neighborhood pressure forced drug dealers to move their open-air drug market a few blocks away.

But Tonya hates her neighborhood and spends as little time as possible in the phoneless apartment. Englewood represents everything she hopes to escape. She has arranged her life around school, work and a social schedule that limits her interaction with the neighborhood to the two blocks between her home and the El. She knows few neighbors by name. None of her friends lives in the area.

She usually catches the 6:55 El to start her hourlong commute to Farragut, the first school she's attended for more than a year. She boards the last car, so she can sit. She often reads assignments for her honors and advanced placement classes or studies for a test.

"School is the easy part. It's fitting in work and the after-school stuff, that's the hard part," she says with a casual self-assurance.

* * *

Tonya has always been gifted. She's always earned more A's than B's. To date, a C and a D in physical education during her freshman year are her lowest grades.

She has dazzled on national standardized tests, too, with scores placing her grade levels ahead of her peers.

In the sixth grade, for example, her math score was at the 90th percentile. In the fifth grade, her mother says, Tonya tested 196 on her IQ test. Scores above 135 are considered exceptional.

As a youngster, she constantly escaped into the orderly world of printed pages. She was a voracious reader. Between age 11 and 13 she read an entire set of 1967 Britannica Encyclopedias, a gift to the family.

A bright and often bored child, Tonya found it necessary to challenge herself.

It cost her.

Her memories of grammar school are painful recollections of ostracism and rejection. Her peers blamed her for good grades and crisp diction. They found in her the ideal scapegoat. Not only was she smart, and often the new girl at school, she also dressed strangely and cried easily.

She cried whenever they twisted her surname into "fisherman." She cried at earning B's. When she did, her classmates accused her of thinking she was too good. They mocked her command of standard English with accusations that she "talked white."

Though she cried, she never gave in. Though she never fought back physically or verbally, she fought back mentally, Tonya says. She excelled. Tonya paid the price for absorbing knowledge because the cost of failure was steep -- and lifelong.

* * *

Eighth grade was her worst. That was the year of the students' choice award ceremony.

The year-end affair was a time for students to tease and honor one another with awards like "most popular," "smartest" and "class clown." It was a time for recognition and camaraderie.

Tonya arrived with her mother at her side. She was at the top of the class and had worked hard for the honor. Today she would be recognized.

As names were called, mother and daughter smiled and clapped along with everyone else. Soon there were 10 awards left. Then five. Then three.

In silence, they watched as the last awards were given.

There was no award for Tonya, the only pupil without one.

Her mother walked off to complain. Tonya just sat there silently with tears rolling down her cheeks.

But Tonya had the last laugh. She was valedictorian.

* * *

Schoolwork "was the only thing going easy in my life. The hard part about school was avoiding the teachers' questions. Why are you always crying? Are you abused? I'd tell them I wasn't. That I was just sad."

Tonya says she can't explain the reasons for the gloominess that frequently robs the laughter from her dark eyes. But a sketch of her life reveals clues.

She has lived in so many different homes she can't recall the exact number.

Even the routine of the school day, the one constant in her young life, kept changing as she switched schools 11 times in three states from the first to the eighth grade.

Often the family moved to a new neighborhood as bleak as the old one. Money was always an obstacle. Janice Fisher worked odd jobs ranging from bank teller to dancer. Though Tonya remembers her mother scraping together money for cigarettes and coffee, Janice couldn't always come up with bus fare for Tonya to go to school. When Tonya was younger, her mother sometimes disappeared for days without explanation.

Much of Tonya's mothering came from her sister, Measie, who is nearly five years older. Measie was the stabilizer in Tonya's life. It was Measie who combed Tonya's hair, helped her get dressed, kissed away her tears. Measie was Tonya's best friend.

Measie was also Tonya's first teacher. Tonya was 3, but she wanted to do the same homework as her sister, who was in third grade. So Measie showed Tonya how to multiply and divide and add and subtract and read and write.

"She caught on fast," Measie remembered. "You only had to show her how to do something once."

* * *

When Tonya was 13, she began to become withdrawn and depressed.

She won't explain why -- there are gaps in her life she prefers not to fill in. But a clear pattern developed early: depression, weariness and indifference -- and absenteeism.

From fifth grade on, where her school records pick up, Tonya missed at least 20 days a year. Some of her records were lost during the many moves. At least once, Tonya's absences led to a truancy report.

"The feelings are always inside," Tonya says. "It's like AIDS. You don't die from the disease. You die from the diseases associated with AIDS. I was more vulnerable to stay home because I was depressed."

Tonya has always been sensitive and quick to cry, says her mother, sitting in her comfortable living room one weekday night. She is a slender, cashew-colored woman whose voice is gravelly from a steady supply of cigarettes.

Tonya didn't have many friends, her mother remembers -- she just had her studies. "She always thought no one wanted to be around her because she was smart."

Tonya, sitting in a matching chair near her mother, shakes her head. "I always felt less than everybody else in the world. I threw up to lose weight." This is news to her mother. "You never told me that!"

Tonya said she threw up so much as an eighth-grader that her throat became raw, her gums ached and her teeth were discolored. She forced herself to vomit for about six months because she weighed 200 pounds.

* * *

Tonya's bulimia ended the summer after graduation from eighth grade, during a visit to her Aunt Deborah in North Carolina. Deborah, Janice Fisher's younger sister, showed Tonya how to eat three meals a day and still lose weight.

Deborah has influenced Tonya in other ways. Tonya says her stockbroker aunt, who lives in a large home in Charlotte, showed her the rewards of a good education. Measie showed her another side, one that has been painful for Tonya to watch.

A bright student, Measie became pregnant at 19 while still in high school. She graduated from high school and went on to college but dropped out when she became pregnant again during her second year. Welfare helps her support her son and daughter, aged 1 and 3. Her son's father is unemployed. Her daughter's father contributes little.

There is no one Tonya loves more than Measie, and watching her struggle slices Tonya's heart. "When I see her hurt I want to take her pain away," Tonya says.

But Tonya has learned from Measie's example. She plans to avoid pregnancy until she is in her thirties.

* * *

Tonya knows that's the only way she will attain her goals. She envisions a life for herself that resembles Deborah's -- financial independence, a career, a home of her own.

She wants to attend Duke or Hampton University, in part, because they aren't too far from Deborah.

Her teachers and mother do not doubt that she is capable of achieving her goals. Janice Fisher says Tonya takes after her. "I have plenty of mother wit," Fisher says. "If I'd had an education, I'd been dangerous. So I pushed it all on her and told her to go learn the rest."

Fisher, 42, attended high school but dropped out of the 11th grade. She was pretty and popular and plugged into the good times such status can bring. At 22, she married Chauncey Fisher, Tonya's father. But the union ended early. Tonya wouldn't discuss her father. "I don't have any relationship with my father," she says. "He's long gone and I'm still strong."

An employer of Janice Fisher's in Mississippi, a well-connected white woman, arranged for Janice and the children to move to a predominantly white neighborhood where the girls were among a handful of blacks at the local school.

* * *

Tonya thrived at the new school, which Fisher believes was better than the predominantly black schools the children had attended. "Black schools and white schools are as different as night and day . . . and Tonya was sucking it in like a straw," Fisher recalled.

The summer before Tonya entered fourth grade, her mother moved to Chicago for a new start, leaving her daughters with their grandmother. Tonya recalls being happy with her grandmother.

Her troubles began when she came to Chicago, on a cold January day in

1987. She was 11 and the city frightened her. She remembers thinking that "it was a sad, painful city. That everyone is miserable. I felt screams of anguish."

The first of several Chicago schools Tonya attended was Mason Grammar School. It is down the street from Farragut, the school that would turn out to be Tonya's final stop.

Tonya didn't want to go to Farragut, where last year only about 20 percent of the senior class went on to college, where only 9 percent of the freshmen tested read at or above grade level.

She had been accepted to Whitney Young Magnet High School, a rare jewel of academic excellence in a school district experts labeled the worst in the nation. But her mother suggested Farragut, which was closer to where the family lived at the time.

But once at Farragut, Tonya felt connected. There she found the friendships she longed for.

* * *

It started with Toni Tobias, a popular student with a no-nonsense attitude. It was freshman biology. Toni asked Tonya a question. Tonya answered correctly. Toni said, "You're smart!" There was no hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Tonya knew Toni and this school would be different.

Farragut squats in the predominantly Hispanic enclave of South Lawndale, several blocks from a virtually all-black neighborhood. Gangs from the two low-income communities often carry brawls into the school. Arrests at the school last year included 113 for disorderly conduct and 39 for assault and battery -- more than at any other Chicago high school.

Each day, students pass through metal detectors to enter the building. About 80 percent of the school's 1,750 students are Hispanic, the rest are African-American.

* * *

Inside Farragut, Tonya has created her own little world, her own support

network. She has spent most of her four years with the same Hispanic and African-American group of honor students. The 35 seniors share a common bond: they value good grades as if they are designer sneakers.

At Farragut, Tonya gradually learned to come out of her shell. Her friendship with Toni strengthened and the two became inseparable, often hanging out together at the Harold Washington branch of the Chicago Public Library on weekends.

She started trusting her teachers more and sometimes confided in them. She met her first love, an affable, round-faced teen named Patrick.

She gradually gained the confidence to get involved in extra-curricular activities, which kept her at school and away from her neighborhood for longer periods of time.

Tonya broadened her world further when she found a job last spring at the Treasure Island, an upscale grocery store in a Lakeshore Drive condominium that offers her a glimpse of another lifestyle.

The job enables her to pay for her \$78 monthly bus pass. She pours cappuccino, scoops ice cream and sells candy from fat jars 23 hours a week, returning home some school nights around 10 p.m. Sometimes Patrick will meet her at the store and accompany her home to make sure she's safe.

* * *

Tonya vowed to graduate from Farragut. She kept the promise even though the family moved three more times, sometimes farther away. Today, Tonya passes more than a dozen high schools on her way to Farragut.

Nothing could make her transfer.

Not the gang fighting that forced police to arrest 40 students and close the school early during her sophomore year.

Not the gang and race-related skirmishes that continue to erupt in the hallways and lunchrooms, where tables are now bolted to the floor.

Not the racial tension surfacing as segregated lunch room tables and insulting hallway graffiti.

Not the 90 minute one-way commute she tackled by walking sleepy-eyed to the bus stop at 5:30 a.m. during one of the family's moves in her sophomore year.

"I love Farragut and all the people I get to bother," Tonya joked. She is one of the few students who moves easily among Hispanics and African-Americans.

As the school's top student, she has a sense of power that's been addictive. "When you're number one in class, you have control of the whole class," Tonya says. "They're all looking at you wondering what you're putting on your paper."

* * *

She says her college graduation will mark her third time as valedictorian. That's because she has every intention of winning the honor again in June.

To lose out, she would have to finish the year with a B or lower average. That is something her recordsshow has never happened.

But her first marking period report card -- with the two Cs -- was a warning bell.

"I know what I have to do now," she says a week after seeing her grades.

"My grades woke me up." She knows she can do better.

If anything can drive Tonya, it's classroom competition. Toni and classmate Dora Villalpando -- ranked second and third -- earned more A's in the first marking period than Tonya.

Tonya uses her competitive instinct to help her get through the hard times. It is one of her strategies for success.

She has learned to set goals and to shelter her dreams from the harsh realities around her. She has learned to draw comfort and support from her environment. And she has learned how to give up without giving in.

Even on days her demons triumph, Tonya doesn't give up the battle. The next day, she goes back to school.

* * *

She wanted to eat breakfast this bright Saturday before taking the ACT at nearby Kennedy-King College. Instead, she spent 30 minutes trying to figure out where her mother placed her admissions card.

She doesn't know where her mom is. She wasn't home last night and hasn't shown up this morning. Eventually Tonya found the card under a table, full of her mother's scribbles for orders from a home shopping network.

The test goes well.

That night, Tonya and Patrick go to a play. It is the local production of Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew," at the Merle Reskin Theatre downtown. Tonya's mother was supposed to come but canceled at the last minute. At this moment, it doesn't matter. The play was a pleasure.

It is a clear Saturday night. Tonya and Patrick are holding hands as they leave the theater and walk north on Michigan Avenue. The lights of the magnificent mile illuminate the navy sky as Tonya begins singing a song from the '60s:

"Who's trippin' down the streets of the city, Smilin' at everybody she sees?"

"Who's reaching out to capture a moment? Everybody knows it's Windy.

"And Windy has stormy eyes that flash at the sound of lies and Windy has wings to fly up above clouds."

She is glowing with happiness, in a youthful state of bliss. Full of promise. Without a haunting visitor in sight.