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A dream called Southland is real

By JOHN W. FOUNTAIN May 17, 2014 12:12AM

Blondean Davis | Sun-Timed Media library

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There once was a dream called Southland.

It was as invisible as a wisp of air beneath a Ping-Pong ball inside a glass machine as the fate of children and parents hoping to be part of the first south suburban charter high school rested on an evening lottery four years ago.

There once was a dream called Southland. Once, it was barely a whisper. Only a hope.

A seed, it took root in a community. And the winds of opposition and the rains of criticism rose like a violent and relentless storm.

And yet, the dream that was once Southland College Preparatory Charter High School in Richton Park grew and stood firm.

Today, uniformed students pour through its doors, across polished floors. A banner of college-bound seniors, proclaiming “The Class of 2014 Is All In,” hangs in the atrium above the Southland emblem.

In their burgundy, white and beige, they gather each morning for “family meeting.” These days, the smiling faces of seniors and their college acceptances — and the amount of scholarships (totaling over \$6 million with all 71 graduates admitted to college) — flash across flat screen monitors. Next Saturday, Southland’s first graduating class — among them my daughter — will walk across the stage.

It is evidence enough that dreams — planted, fertilized, watered, nurtured and protected — can become a reality. Proof that a good public education is not the impossible dream.

I remember when Southland was but a fragile hope — born from the desire of parents for an alternative and also from the heart of Dr. Blondean Y. Davis, Southland's CEO. She had the audacity to believe that given the opportunity, the right learning environment — and by raising the bar — all children, regardless of race or socio-economic class, could succeed.

Davis, superintendent of Matteson School District 162, sought to give her elementary school children an alternative to the trio of high schools in Rich Township High School District 227 that in their heyday were among the best.

In more recent years, they have been marred by poor test scores and myriad other issues. Among them in-fighting by a school board whose egos and excuses seemed too often to take precedence over what was best for the children.

I'm not sure how much has changed over the last four years. But that's a story for another day. This story is about hope.

I was there from the beginning, often with camera in tow. My wife and I cheered with other parents at a school Christmas program in 2009, as Davis announced the possibility of starting a charter high school.

Supporters were there when Davis took her case to the State Board of Education. We were there at hearings as Davis and administrators went to court again and again — and again — to defend Southland's right to exist.

There on the first day of classes at O. W. Huth Middle School. There on the first day to christen its new home. There every step of the way.

Why? Because we believe in Southland. And we believe in Dr. Blondean Davis. For it was always clear that she always had one agenda. One. Only one: To educate our children.

And I am convinced that is what is most lacking in school systems that perpetually fail America's children. It shouldn't be about politics, position or prestige or even egos, but about the children. What about the children?

There once was a dream called Southland. Today that dream lives. And it shines,
like hope, so bright.

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