



# SUCCESS STORY

UNITED FOR SUCCESS ACADEMY

SPRING 2011

## They Will Be Change Makers

### 8th-grade UFSA leadership team spends unforgettable week in New Orleans

For the ten 7th- and 8th-grade students on United for Success Academy's Leadership Team, spring break was more like spring breakthrough. "When we had our first circle in New Orleans," recalls 8th-grader Ameerah, "I told everybody I wanted people to look at Oakland and be amazed. I didn't want them just to think 'Oh, Oakland, here comes trouble.' I said, 'We're bringing Oakland with us to New Orleans, and how we act as young ladies and men is how we present Oakland. We're bringing our home wherever we go.'"

They also brought many months of preparation, having studied social justice and other issues here in Oakland that they knew were also affecting the youth (and other residents) of New Orleans. They arranged to meet with like-minded student leadership groups like Rethinkers, and perform community service like cleaning up around the Lower 9th Ward, as well as helping fix up a damaged library. "We represented well for Oakland," says Katherine, "because we reacted really passionately about what they told us, and we really wanted to learn to help them make things better."

They went there to help, something everyone there picked up on quickly. "[All the groups we met] received us with open arms," says Vanessa, "and with Rethinkers, we created a really good friendship. I felt great about that."

Rethinkers was just one of the community activist groups the Leadership Team connected with during the trip. They also met with American Civil Liberties Union leaders, and with Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana, who shared the story of a school repealing a requirement that students wear clear backpacks. "They educated us about our rights and how



UFSA Student Leadership Team in New Orleans

we need to speak up and know what's going on," says Katherine.

### "That's world-changing right there"

The Leadership Team also witnessed, first-hand, the destruction left behind by Hurricane Katrina. "It's amazing – not in a good way – but amazing to see how something could just turn over in a couple hours," says Ameerah. "And now they live in that – that's their home now. We really wanted to know, after Katrina, how did they make it?" says Ameerah.

"We would drive down the street and actually see all the houses torn apart," says Esmerelda. "But people like Mack, who lost everything, they keep on going strong." Perhaps no one made a deeper impression or captured New Orleans' post-Katrina resilience more than Ward "Mack" McClendon, a resident who lost his home in storm but has turned an abandoned warehouse into a community center complete with library, teen center, community garden, and more.

"I mean, this man is a revolutionary in

my opinion," says Ameerah. "For you to be helping everybody else without having a home of your own to sleep in, that's world-changing right there."

The students also absorbed a great deal of "Nola" culture along the way, browsing voodoo stores, strolling down Bourbon Street, and eating gumbo, jambalaya, fried chicken, po' boys,

"It was such a privilege to witness my students sharing their thoughts, feelings, and laughter, asking amazing questions about the work organizations are doing, volunteering with Mack at the Lower Ninth Ward, and at Grow Dat Farm, and learning about how to build a real community. They made beautiful connections between Nola and Oakland and embraced everything with an open heart and mind. I believe I got to see all ten of these students at their best."

– Candice Fukumoto, 8th-grade teacher and trip chaperone

and beignets. “We also went to the Bayou,” says Esmerelda, “where we saw alligators, lizards, and snakes.” And no trip to New Orleans would be complete without catching some live jazz. “The music was amazing,” says Katherine. “We saw a jazz band in this really little room.”

“In the jazz club,” Vanessa recalls, “it felt like we were in the past. The musicians were all dressed up in suits and tuxes.” The show offered a moment of signature New Orleans spontaneity as well. “At one point, the security guard suddenly took off his jacket and started playing with the band! He played awesome.”

### “That’s all a part of me now”

Back in Oakland, it is clear that the experience has deepened the leaders’ community-minded spirit. “The trip was really important to me because, knowing what we’re going through out here in Oakland, I think something needs to change,” says Ameerah. “Rethinkers, they’ve really done a lot for their community, and I feel like we can better our community too. I went on this trip not just to change our city but to change our globe.”

“New Orleans was important to me because it was a change in my life,” reflects Mammalooa. “It was an opportunity to help the people of New Orleans and help restore their schools and community and environment.”

“Some schools in Nola barely have books,” adds Ameerah. “That made me appreciate our school even more. Now, when I see people tearing up



UFSA student leaders and teachers at New Orleans’ Grow Dat Youth Farm

books or writing in them, I tell them to respect what we have. My dad and I were saying we should do a book drive, and then ship the books out to different communities that need them.”

“Since we got back, we’ve been emailing with the kids in Rethinkers, and they’re even talking about coming here to see Oakland,” says Mammalooa.

“When we came back to Oakland, we really just wanted to create a group that could help out our community with [some of the same issues],” says Vanessa. Last month, the student leaders did that, founding a group called Change Makers.

“Everything we saw – their schools, the storm’s effects, the food which I loved – it all affected me so much that I feel like no matter where I live, that’s all a part of me now too,” says Ameerah. “When I saw the gardens around New Orleans,

I thought, ‘Wow, it’s just like what Mack said: Everything starts as a seed and you have to grow.’” She expands on this thought in her blog entry: *New Orleans is not a state or a place. It’s a seed. And that seed, by the minute is is growing and it is going to get bigger ad better. It is the best over here. It is similar to Oakland. Like I said, New Orleans is a seed and I can’t wait to see its full growth.*

*[Oakland and New Orleans] were very similar before Katrina. After Katrina, people had to get together to fix the community. We don’t want to wait for a Katrina. We want to be the Change Makers now! – An entry from Davon and Vanessa’s blog. To read more from the kid quoted in this article – and from the other student leaders who were on the trip (Davon, Daisy, Hulices, Jenifer, and Vy) – please visit their blogs at [http://ufsa.wordpress.com/!](http://ufsa.wordpress.com/)*



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## SUPPORT UFSA!

Unfortunately, the cost of a formative trip like this – \$800 per student – is ever-more difficult to cover in this era of severe budget cuts. We nearly reached our fundraising goal of \$8,000, but came up \$1,134 short. **We are still looking to make up that gap, and you can help!** Your contributions will not only help us fully fund this year’s trip, but put us on the road to funding our 2nd annual New Orleans excursion – something our students are talking about already!

Consider a tax-deductible donation online at [www.oaklandschoolsfoundation.org](http://www.oaklandschoolsfoundation.org) (designating “UFSA”) or by check to “OSF/UFSA New Orleans.” **Thank you for your support!**



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