

LAURENCE REISMAN | **Opinion** *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Free lunch kid to med school grad: Mother's love sparks plan to help students in need



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When Cortez Brown picks up his diploma Saturday from Florida State University College of Medicine, he'll be thinking about his mother and the sacrifices she made for him.

"Since Day One my mom preached education," said Brown, noting his mother, Octavia Curtis, didn't finish high school after giving birth to his older sister, who died at 2. "(My mother) stopped because family's first."

Brown was thinking about his single, working mom Saturday at the Vero Beach Highlands Clubhouse, where he unveiled plans for Octavian Village, an innovative nonprofit named after her that will provide enhanced educational opportunities for underserved students in Indian River County.

To Brown, it's his commitment to give back to a community that nurtured him as a student, complementing the passion for education his mother instilled in him from at least as far back as kindergarten at Rosewood Magnet School.

"She was studying (for her GED at the time)," Brown said, noting that at the time her income was so low he qualified to get free lunch in school. "She never gave up."

Culture shock led to diamond in rough

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Nor did Brown, who went to traditional Indian River County schools before attending the county's charter high school as a freshman, receiving what he called his first "culture shock."

As a sophomore, he faced a second shock, transferring to St. Edward's School, where he saw a new world with different kinds of classmates and teachers, extracurricular activities and overnight class trips from a campus on the Indian River Lagoon.

Like many public school students who transfer to independent schools, Brown was not initially prepared for the academic rigor, said Mike Mersky, the former head of St. Edward's and a board member of Octavian Village.

"It's based on experience," said Mersky, noting that when he met Brown as a high school sophomore, he was a "diamond in the rough."

"What Cortez wants to do is give (kids like him) significant experiences earlier," said Mersky, noting Brown has an incredible work ethic. "I wouldn't bet against Cortez ever. When he puts his mind to something, he'll get it done."

That ethic led to a great career in high school and an opportunity to go Sewanee: The University of the South in the hills of southeastern Tennessee.

At Sewanee, Brown reflected on his journey, designing a program for youngsters like he was. The initial target: preventing a regression of learning over the summer, known in pedagogy as the "summer slide."

"I was that kid at home drinking chocolate milk and watching 'Sponge Bob' as opposed to going to the library or on some kind of trip," Brown told me in June 2019, when I wrote about the fourth annual ProStudents summer program offered at St. Edward's.

ProStudents creates opportunities

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I spent a few hours that summer, impressed, watching 23 rising fifth- and sixth-graders from Indian River Academy (home to many lower-income students and formerly Highlands Elementary), Brown's home from grades 3 to 5, start a four-week program.

The morning I was there, one group used MacBooks and learned software to produce personally designed key chains on 3D printers. Another used iPads to program and drive robotic vehicles made with Legos and controlled by Bluetooth technology.

In the afternoon, they went swimming and did other recreational activities they might not otherwise have had the opportunity to do.

Diane Fannin, then the principal at Indian River Academy, was initially skeptical, but saw the amazing experience her students received.

“I can’t tell you how many times a parent stopped me and told me how important ProStudents was to their child,” said Fannin, now teaching third grade at North County Charter.

Many parents at Indian River Academy can’t take their children to Riverside Theatre or to play sports. ProStudents bused the children over the bridge to St. Edward's, opening “their eyes to see new things that were out there.

Male role models important

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“It was just really different,” Fannin continued. “(Some of the IRA students) never have enriching experiences.”

Such experiences are critical, Brown said.

“Exposure leads to expansion,” Brown, headed after graduation to an orthopedics surgery residency at the University of Pittsburgh and UPMC Medical Center, told me the other day.

“I was exposed to so much,” he said, noting he grew up on the mainland as a student who qualified for free lunch in school. “We experienced different lives in Vero Beach compared to my peers over at St. Ed’s.

“None of them were superior. It was just lateral movements. I realized how different ... my friends experienced Vero Beach ... Oslo, Fellsmere, Windsor, Castaway ...very different experiences.

“But we still are much more alike than we were different. But our trajectories were different.”

He has seen the same thing in college and medical school.

“Looking to my left and to my right, there are many, many people from K through 12 that could be here or even ahead of me, but they're not here,” he said. “They lacked opportunity. It wasn't because their ability wasn't there.”

Brown said he was blessed by a mother, a pharmacy tech at Walgreens who did what she could to create opportunities.

"I've always had amazing male mentors in my life because of her," he said, citing coaches, neighbors, educators and others — part of his supportive village. "She sought them out."

One was Timothy McGilberry, the accountant-father of a fellow student in Brown's seventh-grade Bible study class. It's where Brown became friends with the man's son, Thomas B. McGilberry, a Vero Beach High School graduate. The two roomed together in Tallahassee and McGilberry, a businessman in Orlando, sits on the Octavian Village board.

Octavian Village has innovative plan

After speaking with representatives of numerous schools and nonprofits serving children in Indian River County, Brown said the virtual Octavian Village would collaborate with as many as possible and offer several services:

Continue and expand the ProStudents summer program, on hiatus this year because of renovations at St. Edward's, he said.

He wants to ensure students "hit the ground running" when they enter middle school. ProStudents will help them via pre-program testing, identifying strengths and weaknesses, with a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Address a shortage of tutors for students by creating a ProStudents tutoring portal on the internet.

The novel idea: Use college students, who often need volunteer hours for Greek or other organizations, to connect digitally with youngsters.

"This is the tech era," Brown said. "If we can land a person on the moon countless times, we can connect our students here to tutors throughout country."

It all goes back to his mother.

"She has been in my corner from the beginning," he said. "We plan to have a program that's in the corner of the students of Indian River County, nurturing them along the way."

This column reflects the opinion of Laurence Reisman. Contact him via email at larry.reisman@tcpalm.com, phone at 772-978-2223, [Facebook.com/larryreisman](https://www.facebook.com/larryreisman) or [Twitter @LaurenceReisman](https://twitter.com/LaurenceReisman)