

## AMERICA'S UNSUNG HEROES:

Contributed by Tobie Baker  
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### Young College Grads Help Break Poverty's Cycle in Mississippi's Mist-Shrouded Delta

OXFORD, Miss. - A few years ago, Chimaobi Amutah was navigating the violent, gang- and drug-infested inner city streets of Trenton, N.J., with 19 friends. Only three of them graduated from high school. Only Amutah and one other didn't end up incarcerated.

Today Amutah, a 22-year-old Harvard University graduate, is among a group of young college graduates from around the country who are fueling the hopes and dreams of thousands of schoolchildren in Mississippi's poverty-stricken Delta.

"I want to take steps to help children change their environment, because it's difficult to buck the norm without having someone who cares," he says.

After earning a degree in African-American studies from Harvard, Amutah joined the Mississippi Teacher Corps based at the University of Mississippi. Since its creation in 1989, MTC has placed nearly 500 educators in the state's most impoverished schools. Most of them are peppered across the flat, fertile plains of the Delta, where half of all black children are born into poverty, and generations have grown up facing economic hardships and despair.

"Their safety nets are either weak or nonexistent, and an education helps them break through," says Joe Sweeney, a 2006 MTC graduate from Traverse City, Mich. "We're helping move these children in the right direction."

MTC worked for Crystal Stewart, 23, who grew up in Greenwood and was taught by an MTC graduate. In Greenwood, most students in the struggling public schools are black.

Crystal Stewart (top), a Mississippi Teacher Corps-trained teacher in the Holly Springs schools, helps rising sophomore Alleshia Payne during a summer school session. Nearly 50 MTC teachers are teaching summer school this year for students in the Holly Springs and Marshall County school districts. UM photo by Tobie Baker.

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"We all went to public schools, while all of the white students went to Pillow Academy," she says. "The only time I interacted with white students growing up was outside of school in various extracurricular activities."

Stewart herself joined the MTC last year and teaches in the Holly Springs school district. She has high hopes for her students.

"America needs to recognize that these students have the potential to compete in the global economy," she says. "I want to introduce my students to different cultures and different ways of life. If given the proper resources, opportunity and motivation, they can be pushed to be the best that they can be."

MTC co-director Andy Mullins, who also serves as executive assistant to UM Chancellor Robert Khayat, agrees.

"The children in the Mississippi Delta have been neglected for well over 200 years when it comes to public education," Mullins says. "Their suffering is due to the devastating effects that poverty has on children, and studies show that children from high-poverty environments tend to start the learning process well behind their peers from middle-class backgrounds. This has been the case in several areas of Mississippi, but it's especially pronounced in the Delta."

MTC carries on its work year-round to help break that cycle. This summer, 47 of its members - including Amutah, Sweeney and Stewart - are teaching much needed summer school courses to 84 children in the Holly Springs and Marshall County school districts. Although these schools are located in the rolling hills of north-central Mississippi, miles from the Delta, poverty is evident, as 90 percent of the schoolchildren receive free or reduced-cost lunches. (In comparison, less than 40 percent of children in neighboring Lafayette and DeSoto county schools qualify for such assistance.)

"Students here have so few resources in their lives," says Sweeney, principal of the MTC summer school program. "I want to work in public schools and help children. It's important to educate them, so they can have a chance to make something of themselves."

It's the same sentiment expressed by Amutah, who during the regular school year is a history teacher in Humphreys County, in the middle of the Mississippi Delta. Growing up, he faced social problems similar to those of his students in Mississippi.

"There was never a dull moment," he says. "It was the inner city. Gangs, drugs and violence were common. I tell my students that I am not the best teacher. The best lessons in life come from experiences, and I try to help them understand the lessons I've learned so they can keep their heads above water."

The caring attitudes of Amutah and the other MTC teachers at Holly Springs this summer are lighting up the faces and fueling the dreams of 84 students in grades 7-12 from throughout Marshall County.

With her hair pulled back in a ponytail, 15-year-old Allechia Payne, a rising sophomore, eagerly says, "I want to be a doctor one day."

Rising senior Arana Taylor, 18, smiling with braces gleaming, also hopes for a brighter future. "Since I was a little girl, I've dreamed of being a lawyer," she says.

Courses offered this summer include math, algebra, English, history, biology and science. At a cost of less than \$7.50 each per day, students receive round-trip transportation, two meals and coursework throughout the six-week program.

"This is an affordable outlet for both enrichment purposes and to help students who fell short during the regular school year," says Jerry Moore, Marshall County Schools director of instructional services. "It's a tremendous dropout prevention tool that offers hope to these children. It's a light at the end of the tunnel for many of them."

If not for the cooperation between UM, the MTC and county and city school districts, the summer school program would be impossible to operate, Moore says. "Ole Miss and the Teacher Corps have been very good to us," he says. "They've provided us with some great teachers."

The MTC is one of the nation's most competitive two-year, alternate route teaching programs. Designed for noneducation majors, the program recruits college graduates to teach in the Delta and other critical-needs areas. In return, participants receive teacher training and certification, a full scholarship for a master's degree in education, job placement that includes full pay and benefits, and, most importantly, an opportunity to help strengthen education in one of the nation's poorest regions.

Strengthening the country's educational system is one of the tasks Americans expect the next president to address. The two major candidates for the job will be at UM Sept. 26 for the first presidential debate. Its focus is domestic issues, and education is sure to be among them.

For students like Payne and Taylor to succeed in critical-needs public schools, it's important for them to encounter teachers who care and love them, Mullins says.

"Many of our children don't have any hope until they meet one of our Mississippi Teacher Corps teachers," he says. "Slowly, and surely in some cases, we are making a difference in the lives of children who have fallen victim to this vicious cycle."

With dedicated teachers like Amutah, Sweeney and Stewart, hope springs eternal for these children.

"The students have to understand that you are in the classroom for the right reasons in order to build their trust," Amutah says. "You must gain their respect. Education is based on lighting a fire in your students, and not simply filling a void. I push my students very hard. It's tough love, and I love them all."

For more information on the Mississippi Teacher Corps, go to <http://www.mtcorps.net>. For more information about the presidential debate at Ole Miss, visit <http://debate.olemiss.edu>.