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Educator and author Bernard Gassaway makes special two-day visit to Longfellow Middle School

By Deena Parham

This spring, Bernard Gassaway, the former Senior Superintendent for Alternative Schools and Programs at the New York City Department of Education, paid a special two-day visit to Longfellow Middle School. More than 600 students participated in a school-wide reading project of his book, *Reflections of an Urban High School Principal*.

Longfellow's principal, Cleveland Person, invited Gassaway to share his autobiography with the students. Both were classmates at LeMoyne College, and have maintained a lifelong friendship. Person stated, "English language arts is very important. Reading opens you up to a broader knowledge base, and brings world issues into focus. Students have a chance to meet a black male writer, and an educator. This allows them to do an author study."

In his book, Gassaway gives poignant voice to beating the odds of becoming a success, after early academic struggles within the New York City's public schools. Gassaway masterfully recounts growing up in poverty, facing peer pressure, and a brief experience in the juvenile justice system, that eventually led him to strengthen his resolve to go to college.

Gassaway wrote the book in nine months with the hope that, "My story would inspire students, principals, and teachers to work harder. Never give up on a child."

In an unscripted, candid conversation, many Longfellow students eagerly spoke with Gassaway about his life. No subject was off limits, as Gassaway fielded questions about his adolescence, and his professional career.

Gassaway was one of seven children raised by a caring mother whom he describes as "the best mother in the world." One student asked why he was troubled as a youth. Gassaway replied, "I was confused and angry. There were a lot of things we didn't have because I was poor. I never knew my father. I was angry because of that. I remember just one family in my neighborhood that had both a mother and a father."

In the book, Gassaway talks openly about his teenaged years, where he often succumbed to negative influences. One student asked how he was able to turn his life around. Gassaway said, "I believe in divine intervention. God decided that he would use me to help others. After my seventeenth birthday, I knew every day I would use to help others."

One student asked Gassaway what made him decide to become a school principal. Gassaway responded, "I started teaching, because I was an out-of-control student. I became an elementary school teacher, and later a high school teacher. I wanted to make a larger difference."

As an administrator, Gassaway was known for working many long hours. Ultimately, Gassaway became responsible for more than 400

schools and educational facilities located throughout New York City and upstate. His wife Traci wrote a chapter to reflect on how the family did not spend much time together during those years. Today, Gassaway, who is a consultant, and his wife, home school their 12-year-old daughter.

Several students asked Gassaway about his mother, who died 20 years ago at the age of 50. Gassaway urged, "Don't wait to tell your parents that you love them. Do it today. Express it. Don't assume that they know this. Demonstrate it through your behavior."

Gassaway stated the importance of young people setting goals, "The path I was headed on would have led me to jail. Be clear about what you want to do in life. Jail, death and dying are not good."

The very mature, and focused Longfellow students, were engrossed in Gassaway's every word throughout his numerous presentations. Many marveled as he pondered a response to each of their thoughtful, intelligent, and inspired questions. One such moment came when a student asked, "Do you think our generation is heading for success or failure?"

With eyebrows raised, Gassaway sighed, "There are too many children heading towards failure. Yet many are doing the right thing." After a moment, Gassaway continued, "Look in the mirror. Are you doing the best that you can for yourself? Are you reading? Writing? There are times when I see our children doing all the things that they should do, and I feel happiness."

Teachers were equally moved, as they listened intently to the student-led discussion. Seventh-grade teacher, Christal Terry said, "I love to see this. This adds an energy that students don't usually get from textbooks. This gives students an opportunity to really see and touch."

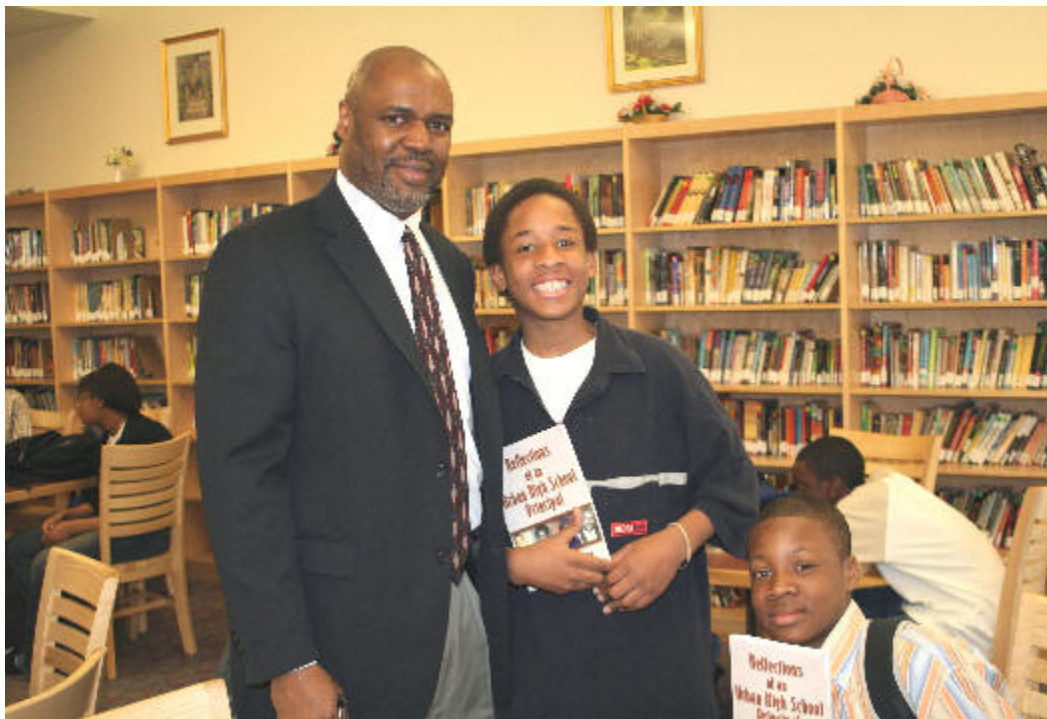
After each session, students gathered around Gassaway to have them sign copies of his book. Gassaway gained many admirers, who appreciated his strength to share his inspiring story.

For more information about Bernard Gassaway visit:

www.bernardgassaway.com



(l to r) Bernard Gassaway joins students and Cleveland Person



Bernard Gassaway with Longfellow students



Students gather before discussion with Bernard Gassaway



Students with copies of Reflections of an Urban High School Principal



Students gather after the discussion