

Class Action

In Camden, a lesson in excellence

Success stories abound at Medical Arts High

by Marc Meitzer

Daily News Staff Writer

In some ways, the students who attend Camden's Dr. Charles E. Brimm Medical Arts High School are no different from those at other schools in this struggling city.

"We still have typical teenage concerns—mood swings, hormone swings still take place," principal Stephanie A. Branch said.

But such feelings rarely get the upper hand.

"Between 8 and 3, there's not much time to think of foolishness. We're highly structured," she said.

The experience with the Medical Arts school is refreshing for a district that is trying to avoid a state takeover effort launched by the mayor. And it is grappling with high dropout rates—about 50 percent—at Camden's two other public high schools, Woodrow Wilson and Camden High.

It's been an experience the district wants to duplicate with a planned school for the performing arts. And it's no wonder that Camden is so enamored of the idea.

Indeed, since each one of the

Medical Arts school's first graduating class has been accepted to college and offered financial aid (either a scholarship or grant money), the success is something Camden cannot ignore.

One student got a Navy ROTC scholarship for \$80,000.

"These kids have earned every dollar the colleges are willing to offer," Branch said of the 51 seniors who graduate June 17. "We've got extremely high standards."

The Medical Arts school opened in the fall of 1994 on the fourth floor of Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center. Two years ago, it moved into a former Bible factory on Copewood Street, about two blocks from the hospital in the city's Whitman Park neighborhood.

Student Gajarah Jackson said that, because of its small size, the senior class developed a "family relationship." But Jackson and her mother, Margarita, also remember the struggles.

"I remember when they had to fight to keep it open after the first year," Margarita said. "There were people in the city who didn't think it was needed. That it was setting up



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Science instructor James Gibbs works with students Spring Harris (left) and Carmen Veiazquez

some kind of elitist high school."

The students fought for Brimm. When the seniors were 10th-graders, the city held a bond referendum on whether to spend \$3 million to renovate the former Nelson Bible Publishing Co.

"We made fliers at school. Passed out the fliers, encouraged people to go out to vote," Gajarah Jackson recalled. "We had to work to get this building, to prove to the city of Camden why we needed Medical Arts High School."

The school was the brainchild of former Mayor Arnold W. Webster, who noted that the health industry was Camden's primary employer with five medical facilities.

Once a week, the Medical Arts students get what the school calls "exposure." Someone either comes to Brimm to share his or her exper-

ience with the students or the students visit one of the area's medical facilities to "shadow" health-care professionals.

"Basically, if you have young people's interest here, they'll want to come to school," Branch said, adding that in four years, student attendance has not dropped from 90 percent.

It's Joye Rozier's job as site coordinator to provide students with the exposure to the health-care field. This could include sessions with professionals involved in health-care policy, surgery, laboratory technology or psychiatry.

It's also Rozier's job to provide summer internships for every student who wants one. The participation rate for the paid positions is 97 percent. And students have worked as operating-room technicians, vet-

erinary assistants and researchers.

Rozier said a key to the success of the program is convincing students "to come back to the community and work as health-care professionals. That's why the school started in the first place, because there weren't enough minorities in the professional positions.

"They need to be in those slots... They owe us—the community, the school—they have to come back and give back what they are given.

The students wear lab coats on visits to hospitals. "It gives them a feeling of belongingness and a look of professionalism," Rozier said. "... When they walk through doors of a facility, people give them respect because of the way they act and look."

Daily News wire services contributed to this report.

Driven to make a difference

Jamal Miles, a 17-year-old senior at Dr. Charles E. Brimm Medical Arts High School, wants to be a pediatrician.

"I came to that decision through the school, and the exposure they'd given me," he said.

Summer internships, like the ones he has had at Cooper Hospital-University Medical Center for three years have helped him to make his decision. He was particularly influenced by his stint at the child-life room at Cooper.

The room is designed to make a child's stay at the hospital as pleasant as possible, Miles noted. The room has activities, games and books for children.

"I don't like to see kids hurt, sick or ill," he said. He made the decision to become a pediatrician that summer.

"Seeing the kids and their illnesses played a big part on my conscience and after doing little

things that could make them smile—it helped me to realize that I could do more than that, to make them feel even better."

He got a number of college scholarship offers, but plans to go to Howard University. He was also accepted at Penn State, Richard Stockton College, Seton Hall, Morgan State, Rutgers and Delaware State, among others.

"I have a full intention of coming back to Camden, to my home and make difference, a positive change."

He said the Medical Arts school has "provided me with the necessary, skills to have a successful college career."

Senior Tyiesha Rogers, 17, wants to work in dentistry.

"I want to do something that helps other people," she said. She said having animals when she was younger, dogs, cats, fish, helped her learn how to love and appreciate life.

"At the Penn dental clinic, I saw a lot of things that interested me... I wanted to learn more about it."

Seton Hall, in South Orange, N.J., has offered her a full scholarship in pre-dentistry.

Wherever she gets her college education, Rogers pledged that she, too, will come back to Camden.

"This is where I come from. I want to help the city as much as possible."

She hopes that some day, way down the road, Brimm graduates can get together and form a clinic for Camden residents.

She said the medical arts school has "brought her to a whole new level. When I first started, I was quiet, meek, shy. The staff, students, faculty helped bring me to a new level. I'm more outgoing." She's now president of her class. ■

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Students Edward Davis (left) and Jamal Miles check airway of CPR dummy in senior health class at Medical Arts school