

NEW HOPE INDEED

by Megan Hyatt, 13 June 2008

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. . . . I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama . . . little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. . . . This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.— Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I have seen with my own eyes the incarnation of Martin Luther King's vision of brotherhood. As I watch 220 children file into the light-filled common room at New Hope Academy for devotions, I feel as though I am witnessing an icon of the Kingdom. Every color, every culture, every economic bracket is represented. All equal; all, for once, offered the same opportunity to be all they are intended to be. Something remarkable and uncommon is taking place here. A dream, not long ago thought impossible, is being realized.

New Hope Academy started as a dream in 1996. It was the vision of Paige Overton-Pitts, a petite, redheaded woman, who had a heart for the poor in Franklin, TN. Only twenty-four years old at the time, she began to walk the streets of Franklin's most underserved neighborhoods in pursuit of racial healing and real relationships. The residents there were predominately African-American and largely forgotten by the surrounding affluent community. The ones who remembered often wished they would go away.

But not Paige. Unlike many in her community, she believed the gospel presents a radically different perspective of the poor; one that condemns elitism, prejudice, and segregation. Her faith required her to live in active, engaged community with those around her—including the poor and those whose skin color was different from her own. So, with the help of Franklin Community Ministries (a ministry of Christ Community Church), she began tutoring children in the afternoons and dreaming of a school.

That dream has been a reality for twelve years now. New Hope Academy offers Pre-K through 6th grade, with plans for a middle school somewhere in the future. Each grade has two classes with an unbelievable 14:1 student/teacher ratio.

Paige's vision was to transform the community, even culture itself, from the ground up. She believed that all children, from all races, cultures, and economic situations, should have the opportunity to learn side by side with and from one another. They would be taught from a Christian worldview, by teachers who were deeply committed to seeing them be all they were made to be. As a result, children and their families would be freed from racial prejudice, economic limitations, and spiritual poverty. They would be launched into the world to transform culture as agents of change and hope.

Situated in the twelfth-wealthiest county in the US, it would be easy to assume that New Hope Academy exists only to serve the underserved. That would be only half the story. In a revolutionary paradigm shift, New Hope Academy asserts that we are all underprivileged. Wealthy or poor, we are all limited by what we know, by what makes us feel comfortable and safe. These things serve to hold us back and keep us in bondage. New Hope believes that all people play an irreplaceable role in the story that God is weaving. As Dr. King said, each person's destiny is tied up with everyone else's.

Transforming culture doesn't end with teaching children. Rather, that is where it begins. As students' lives are changed, so are their peers, their parents, and their community. The vision of transformation grows exponentially, starting with the child and spreading to the whole world. New Hope Academy builds relational bridges with the hope of the gospel, in places historically impassable and out of places once thought inescapable.

Applied in an academic setting, the character of the children is molded and shaped by the truth of the gospel. This happens through New Hope Academy's three-pronged approach to the educational experience—excellent Christian education, intentionally diversity, and community development.

Drawing from the traditions of classical education and the work of Charlotte Mason, a unique educational philosophy emerged. Academic excellence and a process-oriented approach are implemented, as students are led through the Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric stages of education. These stages are developed in a holistic and integrated way that sees "Education as an atmosphere, a discipline, a life" (Charlotte Mason).

New Hope Academy reserves 40-50% of its seats for low-income families. Those families receive full tuition, a value of \$9,250 per year, raised through donations. Approximately one-third of New Hope's students live in single-parent households. The rest of the student body is comprised of partial-pay or full-pay students. Ten countries are represented, and a number of first-generation Americans sit in its classrooms. It is a rainbow of color and a tapestry of culture, woven together in a celebration of the beauty and equality of God's creation.

That celebration builds the foundation for authentic relationships that cross cultural, economic, and racial boundaries. Students see friends where they once saw status and color. Parents learn to depend on one another for practical needs, creating a self-supporting community that is poised and ready to respond to emotional, physical, and spiritual needs as they arise. Consequently, lines disappear and true friendship takes their place.

Breaking the cycle of generational poverty, racial reconciliation, eradicating class segregation, inspiring change, winning hearts for the Christ—all unheard of and audacious goals for an elementary school, to be sure. But, New Hope Academy's light shines high from the mountain top, as a beacon of hope to the world. It reminds us that the day has come to spread this vision throughout our culture, transforming it, one child at a time.