

First Day Final

August 26, 2005

For the first time in almost four years I'm early. I can usually walk right up to the metal detectors, but today is the first day of school. At 8:05 the line is longer than the line at the welfare office.

Rodneka, a fellow senior, bounces my way, her 5-inch dreads waving along with her smile. "Girl, you must be excited for school. You usually duck into 1st period two seconds after the tardy bell, and that's early for you."

She's right; I'm busted. If I lived just for me, I'd be strolling in around lunchtime, well rested from a long night of listening to music and writing poems and stories. But this year is different, really different. This year my lil bro and lil sis are Freshmen at Douglass High School. And I had to work hard to get them in our neighborhood school.

That sounds funny to me. I mean, there's no test to get into Douglass. No parent contract. No grade point requirement. That's how it is at all the "good" schools in New Orleans. The schools where most of the kids in my neighborhood go if they've done at all well in middle school. Douglass takes on the students no one else really wants to educate.

Working hard to get Johnny and Sonia into Douglass meant convincing my mom and my aunts and uncles that Douglass, this school that the state labels "academically unacceptable," is really a good place to learn.

On this steaming August day, surrounded by the buzz of excited conversation, sweaty foreheads and eager faces, I'm glad to be bringing my siblings to our neighborhood school rather than running away from it. And for their sake and the sake of all the other 9th graders, it's important for me to be on time.

One reason I'm on time and at Douglass is because of the history I'm studying. In New Orleans, many enslaved Africans escaped plantations but stayed in the area. These maroons knew, like Frederick Douglass knew, that none of us can be free unless all of our people are free. My education isn't just for me it is also for my fellow students.

My reasons for being at Douglass and being on time hit me hard in my fourth period. There I'm learning what it is to be a senior and a mentor in the Students at the Center, or SAC, program. This writing for the community class has 14 Freshmen and Sophomores. Another SAC veteran and I are the 15th and 16th class members. Don't get me wrong; we

didn't fail the writing class before. It's just our turn to help younger students learn how to write and to talk about writing and to develop into leaders.

Ashley Jones, an SAC graduate, now works with SAC. She told me on the 2nd day of school, "Maria, your day has come. Everyone at Douglass is looking up to you." I just didn't expect that day to come so soon, but you know what, I'm ready—and on time.

By Maria Hernandez,
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