



TEACHFORAMERICA

In the fall of her senior year at Hampton University, Erica Harrison was looking at a future in law. She had taken the LSAT, researched all the top programs, and sent out applications to eleven different schools. When the acceptances started coming in, Erica had a number of excellent choices - yet something was holding her back from committing to a school.

Through her service work in Golden Key and other campus organizations, Erica had learned about the immense disparities that existed in the American public education system: nine-year-olds growing up in low-income communities were three grade levels behind their peers in high-income communities. Half of these low-income students wouldn't graduate from high school, and those who did would, on average, read and do math at the level of eighth graders in high-income communities.

Erica decided that law school could wait; she wanted to continue her service work in education and joined Teach For America instead.

Since 1990, Teach For America has been working to solve the problem of educational inequity by enlisting our nation's future leaders in the effort. Teach For America's corps members make an immediate impact by teaching for two years in low-income urban and rural areas, and in the long-term, go on to be committed and informed leaders, who work to effect necessary systemic changes.

This fall, more than 3,700 new Teach For America corps members will address the issue of educational inequity as they begin their first-year of teaching in classrooms across the nation. Among them will be more than 500 members of the Golden Key International Honor Society.

In 2004, Golden Key and Teach For America formed a partnership based on their shared commitment to service and their equally high standards of excellence. Since that point, hundreds of Golden Key members have joined the corps, and in 2008, Teach For America was the largest employer of graduating Golden Key members.

As part of their dedication to service, Golden Key and Teach For America have worked together to discuss key issues facing communities around the country. This summer at the 2008 Golden Key International Conference, Teach For America-Greater New Orleans' Executive Director Kira Orange Jones addressed the 500 member audience about the immediate and long-term impact they could have in New Orleans as teachers. Currently, Teach For America has over 350 corps members in the region.

"Golden Key members bring an incredible commitment to service and record of success to their work in the corps," said Sara Peters, Manager of Non-Profit Outreach at Teach For America. "We're looking forward to seeing the impact this year's group can have."

Erica is one example. As a corps member she taught 1st grade for two years in Atlanta, Georgia to a group of predominantly low-income students. At the beginning of both her first and second year, her students were performing behind grade level, with significant gaps in their basic reading and writing skills. In her second year, one student struggled to identify the basic letters in the alphabet.

Despite these obstacles, Erica was determined to get her students up to grade level and ready to excel in the second grade. She started by setting high benchmarks for her entire class and individual students, and then grouping them based on their skill levels and needs. She stayed after school to tutor the students who needed the most help and engaged every parent frequently to make sure each student was continuing to learn at home.

At the end of both her first year, her students had made 1.6 years of growth, meaning that as a class they entered the second grade ahead of the state standards for that grade. Some of her students tested as high as the third grade level. Erica saw similar growth in her second year, and the student who had struggled with the alphabet had become the star of the class, advancing two full grade levels.

The success of Erica's students is not an anomaly. On a national scale, a growing body of research on Teach For America has demonstrated the effectiveness of corps members in the classroom. In March 2008, the Urban Institute and The Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER) released a new study that looked at the impact of Teach For America corps members on high school students. These researchers found that, when compared with non-Teach For America teachers, including those who are fully certified in their subject areas, Teach For America teachers have a positive effect on high school students' achievement.

Erica finished her two year commitment to Teach For America last spring, but her experiences in Teach For America continue to influence her career path. Instead of heading to law school, Erica will begin graduate work this fall at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, where she'll study labor and education public policy.

Both Teach For America and Golden Key are deeply committed to fostering the leadership of individuals who have a record of past achievement and a dedication to service. By continuing to strengthen their partnership, Teach For America will be able to draw more of the talented leaders in Golden Key into the mission to eliminate educational inequity.

To learn more about Teach For America, go to: www.teachforamerica.org.