

1-1-2010

As Metlife Fellow, Parker has voice in education dialogue

Piper Gray

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Recommended Citation

Gray, Piper (2010) "As Metlife Fellow, Parker has voice in education dialogue," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 4 , Article 29.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol52/iss4/29>

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Paige Harden of Austin, Texas, has completed her Ph.D. in clinical psychology at the University of Virginia and her clinical internship at Harvard Medical School/McLean Hospital. She is an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Texas.

MARRIAGES: **Ryan Gooch** and Katie Holmes, November 11, 2008. They live in Brentwood, Tenn.

Kenneth Hamner and Michelle Sawyer, October 24. They live in Atlanta where she works as a fundraiser for Emory University and he manages on-line advertising campaigns for 360i.

Erik Huffman and Jaime Dugan, April 4. Erik and Jaime met as contestants on the 15th season of the CBS reality show "Survivor." They live in Nashville, Tenn.

Stephanie Anne Morris and Brian Kelly, August 2, 2008. Stephanie is a technology integrationist at Delay Middle School in Lewisville, Texas.

BIRTHS: **Mike '02** and **Ashley Callahan Baisley**, a son, Benjamin Michael, July 14.

They live in Knoxville, Tenn., where Mike recently joined the law firm of Hodges, Doughty & Carson, PLLC.

Steven and **Nikki Kuhne Bell**, a son, Hayden, October 1. They live in Junction City, Kan.

AS METLIFE FELLOW, PARKER HAS VOICE IN EDUCATION DIALOGUE

Two days after she graduated from Furman in 2007, Jeneca Parker began a master's program in childhood education at Pace University in Manhattan as a New York City Teaching Fellow. The program helps educators learn to work on narrowing the achievement gap among students in inner city schools.

It wasn't long before Parker, a fifth-grade teacher at Coy L. Cox School in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn, became alarmed by what she considered a lack of quality education afforded to children with special needs. She decided to complete her master's with a concentration on children with disabilities.

Today, through her work with special needs students, she has a chance not just to influence individual lives, but national education policy as well.

Parker was recently named a MetLife Fellow by the Teachers Network Learning Institute (TNLI), a select group of educators nationwide who are committed to bringing teachers' voices to bear on the national conversation about education. MetLife Fellows document their classroom work in papers and publications, share their work locally and nationally, and suggest ways to improve classroom practices. Their "action research studies" address the direct link between policymaking and its effects on student achievement.

One area of particular interest to Parker is reducing students' anxiety levels when taking standardized tests. Because of their disabilities, she says, her students tend to feel defeated before they ever begin the test.

She is also examining how to build students' confidence, especially in reading. "I was so tired of hearing this mantra: 'I can't read.' It's really frustrating as a teacher because they can read," she says. "But they don't see themselves as readers because they know they're struggling in comparison to other kids their age."

A native of Orlando, Fla., Parker initially planned to major in Asian Studies at Furman. She even traveled to China her sophomore year. But eventually, she says,

"I realized what I was passionate about was far bigger than a region of the world. I wanted to get folks out of poverty."

Through Furman's Individualized Curriculum Program, she designed a major called "International Development Studies" — and wound up traveling to Latin America and Africa. With each stamp on her passport, education inched up on her post-graduate agenda.

"I saw that the building block to development was working with these kids to give them better resources and better opportunities, so they could have a better quality of life," Parker says.

She's seen results. One student, Melanie, was reading at a second grade level, and Parker learned that the girl's foster parents ridiculed her because she was unable to read the newspaper. "That was a big problem because she is a smart young lady, and I wanted her to believe in herself," Parker says.

Initially, Melanie refused to see herself as a reader. But slowly, with Parker's encouragement, she made progress.

At the end of the year at Cox School, each student gives a brief speech. When her turn came, Melanie stepped up and said, "Thank you, Ms. Parker. I am a reader. You taught me how to read."

From Parker's perspective, Melanie was always fully capable. "But now she has confidence in herself," Parker says. "I know she's going to go so far."

As she completes her third year of teaching, Parker relishes the accomplishments of the children with whom she works each day. "I am far from perfect, but every day I'm learning," she says. "I can tell that I'm improving because I can see it in my students' attitudes and their small milestones of success."

— PIPER GRAY

The author, a 2008 graduate, is a freelance writer in New York City. Visit her blog, <http://litshardoutthereforatemp.blogspot.com>. Photo courtesy Jeneca Parker.



Jeneca Parker hopes to reduce students' anxiety about taking standardized tests.