

Helping kids at The Boggs School step into their best selves

By ZAK ROSEN AND ANDREA CLAIRE MAIO • JAN 15, 2014

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A student, at the James and Grace Lee Boggs School, in her class t-shirt.

CREDIT ANDREA CLAIRE MAIO / SERIES: BACK TO YOUR SENSES



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7:04

Every Morning, Every Night

Christopher Gaston is usually the first kid to arrive at school every morning. And he's almost always the last one to leave at night.

In fact, "It's tough to get Christopher to leave the building everyday," says Marisol Teachworth, the Boggs School's program director and co-founder.

Christopher has volunteered for every possible after school opportunity, including, but not limited to African drumming, creative writing club and Scrabble Club.

Christopher lives in a white duplex, on a quiet street on the near east side of Detroit. The Eastern Market is just about a mile and half Southwest of here. [Gratiot](#) is the closest main road, just a few blocks away.

Christopher's grandma, who's name is also Chris, says the neighborhood is okay "because you still have a lot of older people that take care of their houses. Then you got those---I call them 'thug-meisters.' They don't really understand that, we all struggling."

Christopher stays upstairs with his grandma, little sister Ah'janay, and his Uncle Roger. His brothers, mother and stepfather live downstairs.

Every morning Christopher wakes up on his own. He makes his bed. Brushes his teeth and gets dressed. He's ready to go by 8 am. He heads down the

stairs, out the door, and through the duplex's open, metal gate. He walks through the empty lot next to his house. Then he crosses McDougall Street and steps onto his best friend Ariel Johnson's front porch. From there, the two of them walk to school together. It's just about 5-minutes away.



Christopher Gaston (right) with his siblings, mother and grandmother.

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Old (young) Friends

Gaston and Johnson bicker like an old married couple. They also confide in each other like an old married couple. Christopher's father was recently sentenced to 20 years in prison. Though he doesn't talk to many people about his dad, he does open up to Johnson.

"He can only talk to me about his dad because we have like a bonding, like keeping each other's secrets so no one else will know since we're best friends."

Boggs School Principal Julia Putnam says Chris is one of the "most joyful kids in the school. Most happy to be here. Most happy to please. And eager to learn."

Late last-year, when Putnam was leading a writing exercise in Gaston's classroom, she encouraged the students to write anything that came to their minds as a way to get started.

"And as a prompt I said, 'When you're free writing you don't have to worry about it. You can just write, "I don't know what to write, I don't know what to write,"' until a thought comes to you and then go from there."

"And I saw Chris put his head down and I went over to him and saw that what he had written was, 'Blah blah blah blah, I miss my dad and aunt.' "

Christopher had just found out his dad would be spending the next 20 years in prison. And soon after that, he learned that his aunt, who was only 26, had passed away.

"I was asking him about it and he clearly was getting teary and I said, 'Do you

need to go somewhere and cry about it?' And he nodded and he went into that back room and I gave him a hug and he just started crying," Putnam recalls.

This is the delicate balance Principal Putnam and her staff are trying to strike. To be part of this neighborhood, but also a refuge from it. To respect the community that's here, but also work to transform it.

Projecting a Future

Recently, I asked Christopher what changes he'd like to see in his neighborhood.

He's "hoping that the city should not have as much as robberies as they do. And I want to see more people working together and not arguing and fighting about stuff that's not worth fighting for."

The students at the Boggs School spend a lot of time dreaming about what their ideal neighborhood would be like. But they're also thinking about ways to make that dream possible. That's why the back of their class t-shirts has the word "solutionary" printed on them. At the Boggs School, students aren't just students. They're problem solvers, they're change agents, they're citizens of Detroit.

This story is part of an ongoing series about The James and Grace Lee Boggs School in Detroit. For more about Chris & Ariel, check out this video. Andrea Claire Maio directed and edited the video, which she co-produced with Zak Rosen.