

## Shannon Rokey, The Grail, and A Lot for A Little at Woodward High School

All of us know Loretta Rokey. Loretta has worked at Grailville, served on multiple committees and as a Council member as well as National Treasurer. Anyone who has ever worked with Loretta knows how gifted and generous she is. Serving as Town Manager for several towns in the Cincinnati area, Loretta is someone we have been able to turn to for real-world expertise. Loretta has a son and a daughter. Daughter, Shannon, graduated from the University of Cincinnati in 2018 with a degree in International Studies. Seeking a service opportunity, Shannon applied to Americorps and was placed at Woodward High School in Cincinnati. This is where this story begins.

More than 99% of the students at Woodward come from households that fall below the poverty line. The school has the highest number of homeless children in the city of Cincinnati. As well, 98% are children of color. Woodward is as a “trauma-informed school,” which means it provides for social and emotional learning as well as academic achievement. Shannon had never before seen up close the realities of the children at Woodward. And while their situations broke her heart, Shannon fell in love. I witnessed Shannon walking through the halls of Woodward, students approaching her with fist bumps and Shannon returning laughter, smiles good-natured teasing and challenges.

On average, only 40% of Woodward High School students graduate. But one factor in particular correlates with a much higher graduation rate—in fact 100%. 100% of the students in the afterschool program at Woodward, STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Math), were ready for graduation in 2018. There was a problem however for 2019. STEAM was in place at Woodward because of grant funding which came to them through the Urban League with United Way funds. Related to a weak United Way campaign in 2018, all Cincinnati programming grants were cut by 20% for 2019 and the summer STEAM program was cut from the list. Without funding, the program could not go forward.

While Shannon would finish her Americorps service just prior to the commencement of the summer program, and she was getting ready to start grad school for ESL (English as a Second Language) in the fall, she really wanted to be a part of summer STEAM. She wanted to make sure it happened. She spoke to her mom, Loretta. Loretta spoke to me. I spoke with Council. And then I spoke with the Director of the Urban League: Civil Rights lawyer, Chara Fischer Jackson JD, the supervisor of the after-school program: Shannon’s mentor, Deborah Brock Blanks, and to Shannon herself. \$8,025 could make the eight-week program happen for the eighteen youth—half girls and half boys—who were interested in attending. In April, the Grail Council made a decision to fund this program. The Council stipulated that the program would submit a financial and program report, and that Shannon, a Grail explorer, would write a reflection paper to publish in Gumbo. And so, it happened.

The eighteen students participated in courses and activities including a Media / Photography Workshop, a Jr. Chef Experience, Environmental Science, Art with Math, Music with Math, Journaling, Yoga, Mindfulness, a Memory Circle, an Acting Workshop, a Youth Summit, a gallery walk, and lunch on the Banks of the Ohio River. Students participated in twice-weekly Teens Against Bullying sessions sponsored by the YWCA, their work culminating in a public

presentation on bullying and the creation of a YouTube video on the subject. Each course was specific in its content and intersected with the other courses. The goals were to consider the whole student, to create opportunities for students to learn, to lead, to think critically, to problem-solve and to connect to 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as math and innovative technologies. Students engaged in kayaking, hiking, music classes, performing, museum visits, tree planting and event-catering. Professionals established and recognized in their individual fields led each curriculum area.

Students wrote reflections and sent us hundreds of photos. One student, commenting on time in nature, wrote, “I learned how to be patient with people and how to calm down when I needed to. I learned how to defuse an argument. I learned how to try and help people to solve problems.” Another wrote about how difficult it was to do yoga but wanting to do better because it teaches perseverance and is helpful for stress management. Another noted that the program really helped her to cope with the death of her mother as students and staff were there for her. It made her feel hopeful and she enrolled in an AP class.

Shannon’s reflection is published in this issue of Gumbo. She speaks of her own learnings about racial and socioeconomic disparity and her struggle to stay positive. Ultimately, Shannon found herself inspired by both students and teachers and connected with new mentors: her supervisor Deborah Brock-Blanks and resource coordinator, Rayna Moore, both of whom have spent their lives in their work with minority youth.

[Link to Summer STEAM Report and Student Testimonies.](#)