

Golden Apple
Success Stories
Michele Washington
Golden Apple Scholar 1989



"If it wasn't for Golden Apple, I would be dead. That I know for sure," Michele Washington said about the organization that helped her through college and gave her the tools she needed to be a teacher.

Washington joined the first class of Golden Apple Scholars, in 1989. She nearly missed out on the opportunity after half-heartedly completing the applications and showing up more than two hours late for her face-to-face interview. No one knew at the time, but Washington had been living on and off the streets since she was 15. She was involved in gang activity, and while part of her wanted out of that environment, the bigger part felt drawn to the excitement and familiarity.

Raised by a single mother who worked two and three jobs to support Washington and her two younger siblings, she longed for a place to belong. "Home" at the time was a troubled south side Roseland neighborhood with a strong gang culture, where Washington had spent most of her childhood. The loving pleas, and tough love, not-under-my-roof approach, her mother took to try to straighten her daughter out only infuriated the rebellious Michele and as a result she became more attracted to the dangers of the street.

"I was into bad stuff. I sat in crack houses. I saw people get shot at. Anything you can think of? I probably saw it or experienced it," Washington recalled. "I liked school, but only because it was an escape from the realities I had to face at home and in my neighborhood. When I learned about Golden Apple, I didn't know about becoming a teacher. I just wanted to work at the mall. But my high school English teacher, Miss Lorenz, told me I could do it. And having her believe in me made a big difference."

Washington started at DePaul University in the late summer of 1989 missing part of her first Golden Apple Summer Institute. Just weeks earlier, her then boyfriend went into hiding after he had shot someone and a rival gang was looking for her to exact revenge. College was literally a way to escape that life, but she didn't completely extract herself from it, continuing to let the distractions get the better of her.

It wasn't until her sophomore year, when she was put on academic probation, that Washington really committed to her education.

"I was this close to being put out of school, and I realized 'If I can't stay here, I have nowhere else to go,'" Washington said.

An even bigger turning point took place when Washington began her classroom experiences and found herself face-to-face with eighth graders who couldn't read and were themselves affiliated with gangs.

"They were coming from the same place I was, and they were looking to me for help," she said. "I thought to myself 'This can't be it for them.' I knew I was there for a reason."

Washington pulled herself together and graduated with a 3.5 GPA in her major from DePaul. After a brief stint in adult education, she took over a 6th grade science class at Oscar Mayer School in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood.

"I always wanted to be a high school English teacher like Miss Lorenz, so this was not what I expected. They made me work for the money that first year," she noted. "I tried to apply what I had learned through Golden Apple and the summer institutes...I reflected on my experiences and tried to be true to myself. I started listening to my students, thinking of them as 'little people' not just kids, and recognizing they have feelings, too."

She saw more and more kids come into her classes that couldn't read, and even though she was teaching science, she made reading an important part of how she taught. Her students grew an average of a year-and-a-half in reading level every year, with one memorable student advancing four years in reading level in a single school year. Michele took workshops offered by the university and the Golden Apple on how to teach science and worked hands-on-inquiry based experiments into her lessons to make learning science fun. She also took Spanish so she could better communicate with her students and their parents about the progress of their children and began tutoring after school and coaching extracurricular activities to find more touch points with the students and their families outside of the traditional classroom.

Wanting to help more kids and realizing the positive impact that she could have on youth, the desire to lead and become a principal began to surface. Washington went back to school to get her masters degree in a program designed for people who wanted to be principals at Hispanic schools, and she traveled overseas for her clinicals and briefly moved to the east coast to teach in a technologically advanced school in Connecticut.

Upon returning to Chicago, Washington helped start a charter school and served as its assistant principal and principal before settling into her current position as assistant principal at a predominantly Hispanic school in Cicero.

"Like some other urban areas, we have gangs at our school. Some days are hard but I show them that I'm not scared and they know I'm not afraid. Sometimes, if it's a serious problem, I will even show up at their houses and talk to the parents, especially if the parents can't get to our school. I know I was spared for a reason. I know I'm supposed to help kids who think they don't have any other options. I was one of them" Washington said.

She actively works with parents and community organizations for gang prevention and is current pursuing her doctorate degree with a thesis about the impact of mentoring on females who are at risk of gang affiliation. This woman who herself was once involved in gangs has come full circle and would like nothing better than to see gangs erased altogether. This is her calling, as much as she tried to run away from it, and she has embraced it.

"I know there is something bigger I need to do. I accept that, and I'm ready for it," she said. "Golden Apple was my lifeline. I owe them so much. And thanks to what they gave me, I now know what my purpose is."