



# The Graduates

They've lived education reform, and now they want a different way forward.

BY MICHAEL CORBIN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY J.M. GIORDANO

**T**he model determines the question, the question determines the answer, and the answer determines what the policy is going to be ... right?"

Dayvon Love, 24, is given to punctuating his answers to interviewers with that question. After listening a while, you understand that his "right?" is not pedantic or mere verbal flourish. Rather, like the beat he takes before answering a question—when you can almost see him holding

up the inquiry and his interlocutor at once, turning them over, sizing them up—he merely wants to make sure you follow his argument. He wants to make sure you understand his major and minor premises. He wants to clarify your framing of the question as part of his answer.

In 2008, Love and Deven Cooper, his teammate at Towson University, became the first African Americans ever to win the prestigious National Cross Examination Debate Association tournament. Now, Love and five other young men and women—all of whom were educated in and around the city—have created an organization called Leaders of a

🔊 *On the Air:*  
*Catch the Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle on The Marc Steiner Show on WEA 88.9 FM on September 19.*

Beautiful Struggle (LBS). (The name traces back to a speech by Martin Luther King, but Love says they took it from an album by hip-hop artist Talib Kweli.) They call their group a “traveling think tank,” offering workshops and presentations on public policy. They have produced an eleven-point “manifesto” for the “complete social, economic, and political independence of the citizens of Baltimore.” They have written policy papers and hosted public “freedom forums” on everything from education to health care to the criminal justice system. And with a confidence and ambition matching their outsized intellectual and rhetorical skills, they offer to debate any public official, anywhere, any time, on any topic. This fall, Love, who is the group’s president, is running for City Council in Baltimore’s 8th district.

Love’s compatriots are Lawrence Grandpre, Candace Handy, Adam Jackson, Deverick Murray, and Shawna Murray. They are all between the ages of 20 and 25. While their ideologies are eclectic, they share an abiding desire to give Baltimore’s poor and working-class African Americans more democratic and economic control of their lives. They present themselves as a post-civil-rights, hip-hop generation combination of pragmatism and idealism, a postmodern mixtape of political traditions that abides no pieties of the status quo. “Most citizens in Baltimore are not educated in their own self-interest, nor is policy made in their interest,” says Love. “We are out to change that.”

One of the Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle’s first missions has been to reframe the debate over education reform. Their goal is to shift the focus away from the narrow categories of quantitative “achievement” and ask more fundamental questions about the purpose of public education. The success of schools is not in their measure of “adequate yearly progress,” says Love, referring to the standardized test measurement of schools mandated by federal No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top legislation. Rather, schools are successful if they “improve the quality of life within communities.”

To that end, the group has crafted an education proposal that attempts to speak directly to the intrinsic needs of the kids in Baltimore. They call for a reinvigoration of vocational education programs to give students an alternative to the generic college prep model. They call for a curriculum explicitly focused on community building, local entrepreneurship, and the “cooperative economics” that keep capital and human resources in the communities that need them the most. They want public education to be explicitly about creating a more just society. Lastly, they want

a curriculum that is centered on the cultural resources and experiences of communities that are educated in the city’s public schools.

Earlier this year, the LBS leaders created a forty-six-page outline of their proposed reforms, distilling them into six “core tenets.” They sent their plan off to Baltimore City Schools CEO Andres Alonso, and, in the brassy prose of those who feel they have yet to be heard, the LBS leaders let Alonso know that they had experienced education reform firsthand and found it wanting.

Alonso responded with a letter to LBS saying he was both appreciative of and impressed with their work. Yet he felt the young think tank members weren’t seeing the big picture. “Having worked for many years now

I lived at Barclay and 23rd, off Greenmount Avenue, and from my beginning until the fifth grade I didn’t know that anyone lived differently than I did,” says Candace Handy, her intensity only slightly tempered by the smile on her still-baby-faced features. “I loved school. It was the one thing I could control,” Handy says of her early years. After attending Dallas F. Nicholas Sr. Elementary, she obtained a scholarship to Roland Park Country School and was introduced to the educational chasm between Baltimore’s public and private schools. “At Roland Park Country I got the ‘if you’re black, then you must be on scholarship’ treatment, and then I’m catching the bus back to Greenmount Avenue every day and I am seeing this



SHAWNA MURRAY



LAWRENCE GRANDPRE



ADAM JACKSON

“... then I took a class on black culture in the United States, and it challenged everything I thought. I was like, why didn’t I learn any of this shit in high school?”

—Shawna Murray

in systemic school reform in Baltimore and New York City, I would suggest to you that it isn’t necessary to declare the school system a failure in order to work for change,” he admonished. “Dramatic reform is already in progress. I think you need to familiarize yourself with the many ways that City Schools is already moving forward, in order to best position your organization to be of service.”

In rebuttal, LBS wrote back to Alonso that his paradigm of reform misses the larger issue. “Currently, the indicators of success of public education in Baltimore do not translate into students developing knowledge of themselves and their communities,” Love wrote to Alonso in April. What Alonso and his brand of reform misses, LBS members say, is the lived experience of American social inequity. Their personal experience, they say, illustrates how public school reformers speak passionately about abstractions and miss the struggles of real lives.

difference that is so immense,” she says.

Adam Jackson saw that difference when he went from West Baltimore’s Walbrook High School to the new-at-the-time Digital Harbor High School. Both were public schools, but Digital Harbor, with funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, had become the city’s poster child for one era of reform. “I was like, wow, what is so different about the kids at Walbrook that they don’t get this?” Jackson says. It wasn’t until his time at Towson University that he started to make sense of his experience. “I started to see this inequality was not random. Reform meant calling some schools failures. What they were really doing is calling kids who lived there failures.”

Shawna Murray’s consciousness about education began to change during her time at the University of Maryland, College Park, which she attended on full scholarship after graduating from Woodlawn High School

in Baltimore County. “My mother has been struggling with addiction since forever, but I always wanted to be with her. If mom was on North Calhoun, or over in Cherry Hill, or on Pennsylvania Avenue, then that is where I was,” she says. “Freshman year, I’m living on campus but I’m back in Baltimore every weekend to be with my mom. Sometimes it’s like, mom’s nodding out and the next day I got a biology exam ...

“When I visited colleges [during my senior year in high school], my white counterparts on campus are like, ‘Oh you just got here because of affirmative action’ ... and I’m trying to survive and make sense of all this. Then I took a class on black culture in the United States, and it challenged everything I thought.



DEVERICK MURRAY



CANDACE HANDY



DAYVON LOVE

“I could see how the politics and economics were stacked against me in [the drug] game, but I could also see how school provided no direction for that decision.”

—Deverick Murray

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“I could see the guys on the corner. I was on the corner,” says Deverick Murray, who now coaches young kids in debate at Lakeland Elementary/Middle School. “I could see how the politics and economics were stacked against me in that game, but I could also see how school provided no direction for that decision.”

“The real problem of the failure of [school] integration after the *Brown [v. Board of Education]* decision is that it promulgated the myth of equality of opportunity,” Lawrence Grandpre observes in his un-self-conscious academese. An International Baccalaureate graduate of City College high school, Grandpre is a senior at Whitman College in Washington State but is finishing his undergraduate work here in Baltimore. “Through the blind spots of that integrationist discourse, people just get deleted because the dominant

education worldview fails them so greatly. My experience got deleted.”

**T**he critique that education reform fails to address the day-to-day realities of inner city youth is one increasingly being made nationally.

Paul Reville, Massachusetts Secretary of Education and a lecturer at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education, was once a teacher himself and a supporter of reforms like those in Baltimore. “I am forced to admit that we have not attained our goal,” he wrote in an article in *Education Week* this summer. “We have not eliminated the association between poverty and educational outcomes. Consequently, we, as policymakers, need to

America and places like Baltimore is a kind of goal displacement, a co-optation of the language of reform,” says Diane Ravitch, former Assistant United States Secretary of Education, now a professor at New York University and one of the most prominent critics of No Child Left Behind, a policy she once supported. “What is not considered in current reform efforts are the intrinsic motivations for learning and teaching.”

The Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle’s critique of education reform in Baltimore is part of a larger project of reframing questions about how to understand American democracy, says Daryl Burch, a former debate coach at the University of Louisville who now teaches debate in Maryland and has mentored members of LBS. “This group of young people have taken what began as a movement within the debate community and taken it into their community,” Burch says. “This is what makes them unique.”

Beth Skinner, who coached Love’s debate team at Towson University when she sat on the faculty there, says we need to listen to LBS members because they personify what we should want from American public education: “Dayvon [Love] would make a world-class scholar, but I think he feels the urgency to put himself in the everyday struggles that people face rather than cloistering himself in the ivory tower of the academy.” Of Adam Jackson, she says, “Every movement needs someone who is willing to put themselves on the line to say what others are afraid to say.” And of Grandpre: “He has one of the best critical minds I’ve ever encountered ... I sometimes think he would be happier if he was less critical—especially of himself—but I don’t think it’s happiness he is aiming at for right now. He is aiming at making the world around him a better, more just place.”

Love, who graduated from Forest Park High School in West Baltimore, reflects on his own experience in the Baltimore schools. “I went to a middle school that was half black and half white. There, through the assignments, the testing, and how I was being treated and what I was being told, I remember deeply that I started to think of myself as stupid,” he says. “Part of me knew that either I really was stupid or something was fundamentally wrong with the structure around me.”

Deverick Murray gets impatient with all the theoretical talk and is given to weaving rhyme into his analysis of city schools to tie off conversations that have gone too long. “Wait, wait, listen,” he says. “How do you manage/Collateral damage/Community standards/Development practice/If da devil done planned it/Ya levels unbalanced ...”

At the end, Murray smiles and says, “It’s about public, right? And education. You feel what I’m saying?” ■

—Michael Corbin is an Urbanite contributing writer.

look at the evidence and revise our strategy, in the same way that we ask teachers to do when they examine data on student performance.”

In an article in the *New York Times Magazine* this July, Paul Tough, a longtime education reporter and author of *Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada’s Quest to Change Harlem and America*, called on education reformers to think beyond the boundaries of the classroom, working with disadvantaged families to improve home environments for young children and providing low-income students with not only academic support, but also “a robust system of emotional and psychological support.”

“School reformers often portray these efforts as a distraction from their agenda—something for someone else to take care of while they do the real work of wrestling with the teachers’ unions,” Tough wrote. “But in fact, these strategies are essential to the success of the school-reform movement.”

“What you get in education reform in