

Dr. Carole Willis and Courtney Washington

A Family Legacy To Achieve Equity and Integration Through Education

BY VALENTINA DI DONATO

PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL GRABOWSKY, THROUGH THE LENS STUDIOS

IT MAY SEEM HARD TO IMAGINE a Montclair that is not connected in a vision of a progressive and united educational system full of choices and access to all, but that time existed before 1977, a time in which people's access to public schools was exclusively tied to where they lived. That problem was the catalyst for the start of the creation of the Magnet School System in Montclair.

Dr. Carole Willis, a longtime resident whose family has resided in Montclair for five generations, had recently moved back to Montclair after living overseas in England and after pursuing her Ph.D. in curriculum development. While raising her two daughters, she wanted to help bring an educational evolution to town.

"I was teaching at Kean University, when my daughters, Courtney and Ashley, were in elementary school. The year we came back to Montclair was the year bussing was supposed to begin to start integrating schools. That year though, was when so many parents took their kids out so they would not have to be bussed," explains Willis.

After her time overseas, Dr. Willis' expertise and personal passion for urban schools and the issue of equity made her a gung-ho parent who returned to Montclair and was attending all of the meetings that were trying to tackle the issue of integration and equity in town. "I was back just as a parent, attending the meetings, but I had a background in education. I was very vocal in those meetings, and lo and behold to my surprise, I got a call from the mayor, Grant Gille, who asked if I would like to be a member of the Board of Education. That was in 1977, now the magnet schools were to be put in right after I began on the board."

Willis served nine years as a Montclair Board of Education member and three years as VP of the Montclair Board, she was a delegate for the New Jersey School Boards Association,



BOARD RETIREE — Board of Education member Dr. Carole L. Willis enjoys a moment with Mayor James Ramsey recently. Dr. Willis will retire from the board tomorrow after nine years of service.

Willis Steps Down From Board Post

After nine years of dedicated service, Carole Layne Willis is stepping down from her post as a member of the Board of Education. When her seat is filled at tomorrow's annual reorganization meeting, Dr. Willis will have served three consecutive terms, probably setting a new record, according to Mayor James H. Ramsey. The three-term board official, however, feels it is now time to move on. "It's time to turn my attention to personal concerns and explore other horizons. The schools are in good hands and much of the curriculum revision process is now complete. We started from the primary unit level and worked our way up to the high school. There's a completeness in me. I feel it's a natural time for me to leave," explained Dr. Willis. When Dr. Willis joined the board

in 1977, the major challenge it faced was implementing a new magnet school system.

"I joined the board in the very last days of the Plan of Action and I remember the first board meeting in which we had an absolutely packed room and the concern was that we hadn't ordered enough buses," laughed Dr. Willis.

A long-time advocate of equal educational opportunity and educational improvement through curriculum change, Dr. Willis viewed the magnet school plan as not only a vehicle for desegregation, but also as a chance to improve the quality of education in the public schools.

"The funding for magnet schools has been an opportunity to do some things that were needed in the curriculum."

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chairperson of the NJSBA Urban Boards, on the NJSBA Board of Directors, and VP of President for Policy and Special Projects.

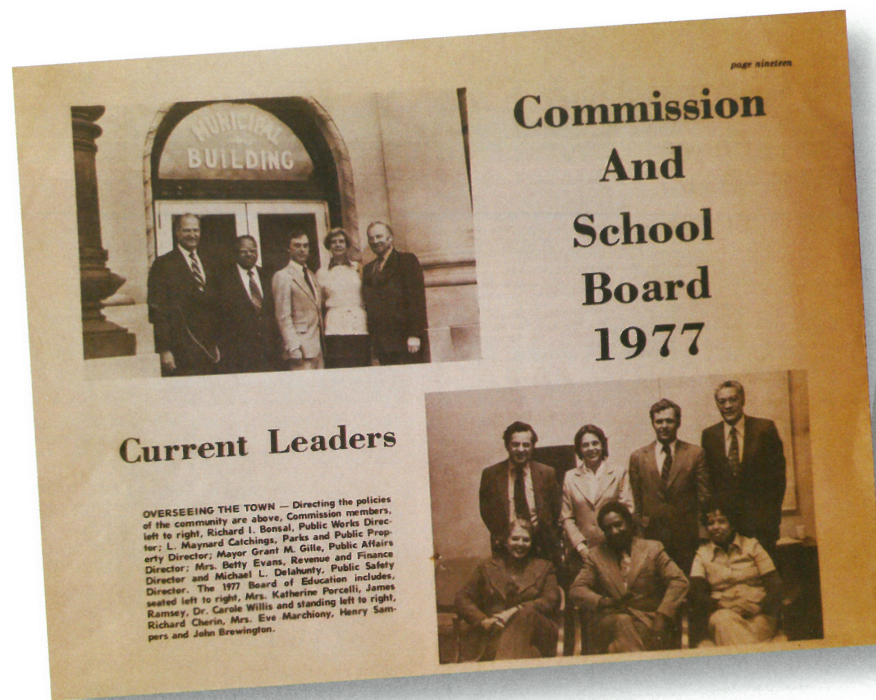
Parent concern at that time was the result of the 1966 suit *Rice vs Montclair Board of Education* court decision, which sparked the idea for the Magnet School System. A group of parents filed a lawsuit that became a prominent part of NJ history ordering Montclair to desegregate schools. "Montclair's public schools were racially segregated, not by law, but by administrative practice of assigning students to 'neighborhood schools.' For several years, the town struggled to create a plan that the community would accept. There were a variety of forced bussing plans, but none were successful," says Willis.

The Montclair Board of Education and the mayor of the time, Grant Gille, whom Willis says, "was a mayor for the moment, he was a unifier," were teeming to find new solutions for the lack of integration and the new mandate to start bussing as a solution to integration. The creation of the Magnet School System was a true community effort, with everyone voicing their opinion on how to make this new system the best it could be. The magnet school system program became a response to the lack of integration within the north end and south end of town in a way that would make parents and their children want to go

the extra mile from home.

"The reason why schools were segregated was that neighborhoods were segregated. Wealthy people live in one part of town and poor people live in another part of town. It's not just segregated by race, but by income and class. That's what neighborhood schools automatically do. So what we did was make the town the neighborhood. That way anyone in town could choose which school they wanted to attend. No one was doing this at the time.





The Montclair Board during 1977 that implemented the Magnet School System. Courtney Washington and Dr. Carole Willis at the start of Washington's career in education (above).

There were physical fights all over the country at the time, because people didn't want the bussing. But, that wasn't the real issue," explains Willis.

The real issue, Willis says, was making the quality of the schools so good, even parents with choices would opt to send their kids across town. "We knew we had to have people want to bus voluntarily but we had to make those schools so good that even parents who had private school choices would bring their kid back to the public school," says Willis. The year bussing began, the Montclair public school system lost about 1500 kids at the time, "Many parents who could afford to, just pulled their kids out of school and sent them to private school. They had choices," says Willis.

Making public schools in town the better option was what Willis and other members of the board wanted to do. "The fact is that for a long, long time in American schools, we had this idea that quality meant everyone gets the same thing. In a good school, there is one curriculum and everyone has to learn that way. But, educators have known for some time that there isn't one best way. You have to match the kid to the kind of school with the environment that is appropriate. I agreed with that, so we took the chance. We wanted to make the schools so good that people would want to come."

To know Montclair is to know its real wealth is its diverse community, and Willis and the board of the time wanted to tap into that. "We have people who are leaders in their field living here and they bring so many skills to the table. The dialogues we had were so important in achieving the magnet school system; it was a very exciting time. It was almost like being on a college campus and the whole town was involved," says Willis.

Once the magnet school system was enacted and promoted, "The busses became too crowded because there were so many people that wanted to go through the magnet program," says Willis.

In speaking with Willis, all things are not promised or set in stone and need constant updating and maintenance. the Magnet School System of Montclair is no different and needs to constantly be reevaluated and questioned to make it better for the students.

A Family Legacy

That same year, Willis who was instrumental in the launch of the program with the other board members also had her daughters

take part in it as students. Courtney Washington, one of her two daughters had such a significant experience the first year the magnet school was in place. It not only inspired her approach to knowledge but her way of teaching. Ms. Washington has been teaching Mathematics in the Montclair Public School District for over 33 years (19 of which were at Glenfield Middle School where she continues to teach.).

"I didn't start in Montclair, I was born in England and then we moved to Wisconsin, so I did have something to compare. Although my previously attended schools were good, Montclair is just so unique. I've been so grateful to the board members who implemented the magnet schools. I remember my mom and her board member colleagues would work until late researching and figuring out new ways to make our schools special," says Washington.

Washington's passion for mathematics initially yielded a career as a computer analyst working with banks in New York City, but she was missing working with the youth, "Teaching was the best thing I ever did." Washington's decision came after her mother's time on the board which ended three years prior.

"Every child has a gift and the importance of nurturing that was so instilled in me. So immediately when I got into the classroom, and as I became a mom later, I always tried to figure out what gifts the kids were naturally showing and tried to nurture them. I created thematic units based on what the kids enjoy doing. One year, I got a group that was really into sports, another year robots, and depending on the group, I would structure the lessons around those interests. "I always think what will hook them into the lesson, then tap into their personal interests," says Washington. She would create a unit around the hope it sparked interest, and it worked.

Washington's students have excelled mathematically, "I know that not every student's household is excited about math - I knew I was very excited about math, so I wanted to make it interesting. Parenting and student interest yielded my interest in robotics and in building rollercoasters, solar-powered cars, and other engineering projects with the students," says Washington. Robots often provide the hook that allows students to connect with and immerse themselves in the world of mathematics by applying

skills, formulas, and programming to a tangible final product. "Students learn by doing."

"Having everyone with different abilities is a great way to teach mathematics. That inclusion really influenced my teaching. Finding the talents of students with different abilities," says Willis. Her middle school students won 5 national math contests and dozens of math, science and engineering contests, where they'd traveled to Princeton University, Ohio, and many other areas in which they were able to successfully compete with their peers

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How a Sport Became the Ultimate Business 101 Crash Course

BY VALENTINA DI DONATO

TODAY IS A COLD, drizzly day, but that doesn't stop the Ultimate team known as the Montclair Geese. "We practice in most weather," says Max Waitz with a laugh, he is Co-coach, President of

the team, and an MHS student. Perhaps that is the kind of zeal needed to be both coach and player of the Ultimate team sport.

The Montclair Geese Ultimate team is a unique player-run player-coached sport composed of and run by Montclair High School students, that has ranked fifth place in New Jersey this past year.

The game was once known as Ultimate Frisbee - but that changed once the Wham-O toy company bought the trademark of the term. Ultimate lore at MHS began back in 2014, initially, as a club sport, but soon members wanted to take it a step forward. "In 2017, we wanted to transform the club into a team that played in tournaments and games, the club was a group of friends that wanted to get more serious about it and compete," explains Waitz.

Ultimate being a noncontact sport makes it a draw for some kids to join. Naturally inclusive because you can be a novice and still play. All you need is a jersey and some cleats and the ability to throw a frisbee to initially join. "We are also co-ed, it's been difficult to recruit girls on our team. We do have two girls on the team, but our goal is definitely to get more girls to play Ultimate," says Waitz.

Even during the initial iteration of Ultimate, back when it was still a club sport at MHS, members were adamant that they never wanted an advisor to be at the meeting. The players have been and continue to be deeply proud that they are an entirely player/coach-run team. "It's unique to us and what I'm proudest of. We have been able to thrive in an adult run game. It gives us accountability, it's a better model for youth in sports," says Waitz.

Besides the comradery and fun though, there is a larger takeaway for the players, and that is the business acumen that has

and even high school seniors.

"Many students discovered that they are very hands-on learners, it's not that they couldn't do it, they just learned differently. I love the fact that every year I get outstanding groups of children to teach, each student is gifted with a unique talent. Once one discovers how one learns, one can excel. Hands-on learning was the perfect way to learn mathematics for some. Through robotics, coding, and through strengthening their math foundation, students realized they were just as capable as anyone else." ■



MONTCLAIR SPORTS

been fostered due to all aspects of the organization being handled by the students. Organizational operations, funding, social media, emails with parents and students are all executed by the student players. "We have about 16 to 17 players that handle operations, running the team, social media, and fundraising. For the last 2 years, it's been like running a company. We have 2 middle school programs, frequent emails with parents, coaches, alumni. It taught me so much about how to run and lead. It's hard work, it's not easy, but it has taught me that if you work hard the players see that," says Waitz.

Although the seniors are nearing their end as Ultimate players as MHS students, the Varsity level students are excited about playing in college where Ultimate is thriving. "The Ultimate scene is the biggest scene [in colleges]. On breaks, Alumni come back and play, but now I want to leave it to the next generation."

With the World Flying Disc Federation (WFDF), the international federation for the sport of flying disc, launching a campaign for inclusion in the Olympic summer program in LA 2028, it's likely that Ultimate will become a more integral part of American sports.

In the meantime, on May 18th at Brookdale Park Main Meadow at 5:30 pm will have their game against Columbia Highschool. Merchandise from the team can be purchased there, proceeds go toward the Ultimate Montclair Geese team. "We hope that we can have people show up and show that Ultimate is a big sport here in Montclair." ■