

MONDAY, MAY 12, 2008



ROOKIE TEACHER PLANTS CRANE WITH THE SEEDS OF FLOWER POWER

CODY THOMPSON | Ohio native starts Science Olympiad club; takes on KRS-One

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Despite a school year marred by death, the earth around Crane Technical Prep is bursting with new life.

And rookie teacher Cody Thompson and the garden club he started can't wait to survey it.

At the farthest reaches of Crane's campus, the group examines the strongest survivors of 1,500 red and white tulip bulbs

they planted last fall.

"These are the best ones because there's nobody here to bother them," says club member Tyeisha Underwood, 16.

As the students stare, fascinated, it's clear these kids have been transported to another world, far from the gunfire 2 1/2 blocks away that killed a classmate March 7 and drew attention to the violence that has claimed the lives of 24 Chicago Public Schools students this school year.

Thompson, a slightly built first-year

chemistry teacher from Ohio, has led them to this quiet spot where they can relax, think and soak up the wonders of nature -- in peace.

After eight months, kids say, Thompson has made a difference. The year's tragedies and triumphs have only reinforced his belief that he was meant to teach -- even that he was meant to teach at Crane.

"I've heard a lot of teachers say their first year in teaching made them rethink their career choice," said Thompson, 27, who looks like a 1960s folk singer with his shag haircut and goatee.

"My first year in teaching has only solidified my belief that I am absolutely doing what I'm supposed to be doing."

One victory for Thompson was starting an after-school garden club in this hardscrabble area, where many students' primary concern at dismissal time is making it home through various gang turfs. Thompson persuaded about 25 Near West Side kids to shovel dirt, hoe soil, scatter blood meal and plant bulbs in an effort to expand the clubs at Crane, an almost all-black, high-poverty school where just 7 percent of juniors passed state tests last year.

'It's hard work'

"Most people were saying the garden club was for soft people, but I wanted to



Crane High School student and garden club member Montrell Hallon (left) works with chemistry teacher Cody Thompson on some plants that the group has grown. Thompson has gained a reputation as a "cool" teacher at the West Side school.

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Garden club members Tyeisha Underwood (from left), Tabias McKethan, Montrell Hallom and Dominique Stevenson check out some of the tulips they planted last fall with science teacher and club founder Cody Thompson (kneeling) outside Crane High School.

see for myself," said freshman Montrell Hallom, 16.

"It's hard work. The soil was hard like a brick. We had to dig it up and break it down," he said.

Other kids got even more out of it.

"One of the greatest moments was when a kid walked away and said, 'I feel good. I feel like I just worked out for an hour,'" Thompson said.

Thompson also recruited 10 kids to enter the Science Olympiad during CPS' first attempt to field entrants for one of the country's premier science competitions. In preparation, students worked after school for weeks, building trial electric cars and constructing boomilevers -- structures that support weight.

At the city meet, Crane walked off with a best-sportsmanship award, and every Crane student carried home at least one medal.

"I was proud of myself," said Tabias McKethan, 16, who took home two medals. Winning a medal, Tabias said, shows "an African-American student can do more than dribble a basketball."

Thompson lights up when he remembers the Olympiad, a competition he entered as a young boy in Ohio. "When those kids got those medals at the Science

Olympiad, I was high the whole day," said Thompson, who has a master's in science education from Ohio State University.

Despite his brief time at Crane, Thompson has been able to recruit kids to clubs they'd never heard of by quickly garnering a reputation as a "cool teacher."

Kids say he makes up rhymes to help them remember chemistry words, challenges them with frequent experiments, and keeps his door open during his free period for tutoring or just "hanging out."

Thompson's classroom is lined with soaring windows filled with plants. There, he taught one regular visitor how to play chess. One day, another student came in, forlorn, and burst into tears. She didn't want to talk, Thompson said, "but I think my room just provided her a space to be safe. ... She found comfort, somehow, some way, in my room."

Even Jean Mason, who observes Thompson weekly as a Loyola University chemistry coach, says he has great rapport with kids. And overall, she said, in eight years of observing teachers, "he's in the top 10 percent" of rookies she has ever seen.

'The Cody Thompson show'

The buzz about Thompson grew even stronger in April, after hip-hopper

KRS-One visited Crane with an inspirational rap session and invited audience members to free-style rap. In response, Thompson, a former Ohio hip-hop group member, launched into a free-style that triggered screams of approval from the crowd and even wowed KRS-One.

"It was the Cody Thompson show, not the KRS One show," said Crane Principal Richard Smith.

Smith still can't figure out where Thompson got his "phenomenal" ability to connect with kids. He's just glad he hired him.

"How could this kid come from a rural community ... and be that effective with these kids?" asked Smith. "Don't ask me how. If it ain't broke, I'm not going to fix it."

Thompson, a vegetarian, lives with his fiancée in Chicago's hip Andersonville neighborhood. But he grew up on the edge of corn and soybean fields in Bellefontaine, Ohio. His great grandmother was a Cherokee from Appalachian West Virginia. He calls himself a man "in tune with nature."



Crane student and garden club member Tyeisha Underwood picks up loose garbage, sticks and weeds from around a row of tulips planted by the group last fall.

His roots are far from the West Side, but his connection to the kids here has blossomed, just like the tulips he planted last fall.

"I believe I'm in the right place," Thompson says as he heads out the door at the end of the school day. "It's what feels natural. It's what feels right."