A GIANT Honor for Principal

By Tim Hargis
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(KENTWOOD, MI) Principal Lorenzo Bradshaw walks through the office at his school on his way out the door to a meeting. Before he exits, though, he makes a couple of impromptu stops along the way—one to check in with a student in the health room who is not feeling well...the other to connect with a parent who is wrapping up a meeting with a staff member. He is not required to make these stops to check in on the student and the parent, but for Bradshaw, there is no other way.

“It’s really the little things that make a big difference in the lives of our students and families,” Bradshaw explains. “It’s just to show that you care.”

For nearly a quarter of a century, Bradshaw has been doing these little things, as well as large things, to make big differences in the lives of students and families as an educator, first as a teacher in the Grand Rapids Public Schools, and now entering his 14th year as the principal at Brookwood Elementary in the Kentwood Public Schools. His work has impacted countless lives, and people have noticed.
On October 1, Bradshaw will receive the Hattie Beverly Education Award as part of the 39th Annual GIANT Awards ceremony held at the J.W. Marriott in downtown Grand Rapids. The GIANT Awards are presented in conjunction with Grand Rapids Community College and recognize “members of the African American community for their exceptional contributions in shaping the history, culture, and quality of life of the Grand Rapids community.” There are several awards given out at the ceremony, each named after a local “giant” as a way to memorialize their meaningful service and leadership to the greater Grand Rapids community. Hattie Beverly, the person whose name is on the award Bradshaw will receive, was the first African American teacher in the Grand Rapids Public Schools, beginning her teaching career at Congress Elementary in 1899.

Bradshaw was surprised when he heard he was receiving the award. His initial thoughts centered on wondering why he was getting an award for simply doing the job that he is supposed to do. For those who know Bradshaw well, though, they were not surprised one bit that he is receiving this prestigious honor.

Omar Bakri and Damon Johnson are two of those people. Bakri, principal at East Kentwood High School, and Johnson, Assistant Principal at Crestwood Middle School, have known Bradshaw for nearly 30 years, since the three met as students at Grand Rapids Community College (GRCC) in the early 1990’s. A lifelong, loyal friendship quickly developed between them, a friendship that would take them on a journey together from GRCC, to students at Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, North Carolina, to getting their first teaching jobs together in the Grand Rapids Public Schools, to eventually all becoming valued leaders today in the Kentwood Public Schools. They have had a front row seat in experiencing Bradshaw’s commitment to students and their families for the past three decades.

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Omar Bakri
East Kentwood Principal
“At the end of the day, he will walk through fire for the kids,” Bakri says of Bradshaw. “And also for his staff,” Bakri adds. “If you’re about kids, he’s going to do anything and everything for you.”

Johnson agrees. “He’s going to let you know that we need to do what’s best for kids at all times,” he says. “He’s going to speak out no matter what it is, no matter whether it’s the popular choice or not. If it’s about kids and it’s about the right thing to do, he’s going to speak up, and he’s going to express that.”

Bradshaw’s commitment to his students, his families, and his profession is rooted in understanding the impact adults can have in the lives of children. For him, one such adult was his mother, who raised five boys as a single mom.

“She grounded us to be grateful for what you have, to appreciate the little things, and everything else is really a bonus,” Bradshaw said of his mother, who will be in attendance when he accepts the GIANT award on October 1st.

For Bradshaw, one thing he is grateful for is the opportunity to serve students and families. “Most days I literally wake up and say, ‘I can’t believe that they actually pay me to do this.’ I get to serve children. I get to work with families. I get to work with colleagues that have the same ambitions for children as I do.”

Another colleague who has had a front row seat to Bradshaw’s service to students is Explorer Elementary Principal Carrie Tellerico. Tellerico and Bradshaw met in the first years of their teaching careers in the late 1990’s when they taught at the same school in Grand Rapids. Tellerico is not surprised at all that Bradshaw is receiving this honor.

“He’s the most selfless person I think I’ve ever encountered,” she says. “He has the gift to engage in connecting so many different age levels. It’s truly a gift.”

Tellerico adds, “He’s a support to so many people. No matter when you call, no matter what you need, he will figure out how to do it in some way to support you but also leading you along the way so that he can give independence to the person he is supporting.”

Bradshaw has always had this gift for supporting others. Back in the GRCC days, he had made the decision to go to an Historically Black College or University (HBCU). Johnson C. Smith University was his eventual choice. He encouraged Damon Johnson to go with him. Bradshaw was accepted to the university as he and Johnson traveled to North Carolina for their first semester there. Johnson was not in yet. Upon arriving, Johnson was able to get
into the school, but being able to pay for it, at the time, was an issue. The funds just were not there. When he told his friend that he could not stay, Bradshaw decided he was not staying either.

“Lorenzo actually left and went back home with me,” Johnson explains. “He said, ‘If you’re not starting, I’m not starting.’ He said, ‘We can just start next semester.’” So the two traveled back to Grand Rapids and started working, multiple jobs. Johnson said they saved and saved and saved and were then able to return to Johnson C. Smith University together the following semester. They even encouraged their friend Omar Bakri to leave the university he was attending in Michigan to join them on this journey.

"He's the most selfless person I think I've ever encountered."

Carrie Tellerico
Explorer Elementary Principal

Bradshaw says his time at Johnson C. Smith University was pivotal in his development because the school was small and intimate which enabled him to form relationships and have experiences that allowed him to thrive. “What was most important about the institution that helped me be successful,” Bradshaw explains, “was that the conditions were in place and the supports and scaffolds were in place to help teach me to study, to teach me to become a better reader, to teach me to become a better writer and then, also, to navigate systems and a world that sometimes created barriers for people who look like me.”

After graduating from Johnson C. Smith University, Bradshaw, along with Bakri and Johnson, returned to Michigan and began teaching in Grand Rapids. It is there where they met another new teacher, Gary Harmon, who today is an assistant principal at East Kentwood High School. Harmon became close friends with the trio and has also seen Bradshaw’s commitment to students firsthand.

“He is probably the most dynamic person I’ve ever been around in my life,” Harmon says of Bradshaw. “I can’t think of a person who deserves to win this GIANT award more than Bradshaw.”

All of these friends and colleagues Bradshaw has grown to know over the years cannot say enough about his support of children.

“What he is often doing is figuring out how to fill the cracks in kids’ lives so that they can have a strong shot at being successful and happy,” says Bakri.
Tellerico says, “Lorenzo is going to try to do everything in his power to make sure that we’re removing barriers for, not only parents, but most importantly for students.”

“He’s so invested in our community,” says Johnson. “He’s so invested in kids.”

Bradshaw acknowledges that being an administrator in the field of education can be challenging. “It can sometimes be a very lonely position,” he says. “You are pulled in a million directions.”

“‘You have to continue to revisit the why,’ Bradshaw explains. ‘Why do I do what I do? Why was I created to do what I do, and how can I make the world a better place for everyone I serve—all stakeholders, all kids, all students.’

He continues. “And when you look at it from a position of stewardship and service, you can’t help but to circle back to, man, I get to do this. I’m honored to serve. And that does put you in a position where, even on those tough days, it’s still a blessing to serve other people.”