

A mix of moguls and hope for education boost

BY ANTHONY KADARRELL THIGPEN Post-Tribune correspondent May 5, 2014 3:24PM



Starbucks district manager Brian Spiller and store manager Sarah Malone visit with Pathways scholars Desiree Williams and Brandee Dyndum. The Southlake Mall Starbucks in Merrillville welcomed six students to promote Oprah Winfrey's new chai tea and raise community awareness about Pathways to College.

GARY — Business moguls Oprah Winfrey and Earvin "Magic" Johnson are brewing programs aimed at impacting education for youth in Gary.

Last week, Johnson was in town for a fundraiser for Gary Community School Corp., just a day before Starbucks and Teavana stores launched sales of Oprah Chai Tea, of which a portion of sales will go to a program in which Thea Bowman Leadership Academy is a participant.

The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy Foundation will funnel proceeds to six organizations to support youth education, one of which is Pathways to College, a national program administered locally at Thea Bowman Leadership Academy in Gary.

Tea sales were launched April 29, and at the Merrillville Southlake Starbucks, Starbucks district manager Brian Spiller and store manager Sarah Malone welcomed six students to promote the new tea and raise community awareness about Pathways to College.

"Everyone needs to have some skin in the game," Pathways to College president and founder Judith Griffin said. "Oprah's gift will enable us to provide incentives for other schools to buy into the program, even when funding is limited."

Pathways lead teacher Tracey Johnson said the after-school enrichment program provides college tours at no expense to students, and there's an intense writing curriculum.

The program costs \$120,000 per school, but Thea Bowman Leadership Academy negotiated with Pathways to accommodate its limited budget.

Gary Community School Corp. Supt. Cheryl Pruitt joined Thea Bowman charter school students, staff and founder Anne Thompson at the Merrillville Southlake Starbucks to celebrate the launch of the tea brand. The store will have a buy-one-get-one-free special on the tea for Mother's Day on Sunday.

"I'm excited about the opportunity that may exist for our schools," Pruitt said. "Our objective is for all students to have a clear and identified pathway to college."

"Oprah's act of charity shows that people care about our careers," said Desiree Williams, 17. "I needed a higher ACT score, and Pathways to College helped me get into my school of choice."

Christopher Reed and Brandon Boatner agreed that Gary suffers from a lack of jobs that might prevent them from returning home after college. But Pathways scholar Marcus Johnson has a different opinion about the "Steel City."

"I'm willing to give Gary a chance," he said. "This is my hometown."

Although he has received an acceptance letter from Fisk University in Nashville, Tenn., Johnson plans to attend Indiana University Northwest or Ivy Tech Community College, both in Gary.

Meanwhile, Magic Johnson, the basketball legend and Hall of Famer, provided some excitement during his visit to the Gary Community School Corp.'s "A Promise to Gary" fundraiser at the Gary Genesis Center. He said he plans to partner with Gary Mayor Karen Freeman-Wilson, educators and business owners to strengthen economic development.

Making a personal donation and auctioning off NBA tickets and jerseys, Johnson raised \$120,000 in 20 minutes.

The money is earmarked for scholarships and enrichment programs for students enrolled in Gary public schools.

Johnson challenged youth to find a mentor and encouraged an audience of about 700 guests to keep dreaming.

"I grew up poor, but I did not have poor dreams," he said.