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## Education gap

Even in affluent Marin it takes a lot of loving and shoving to get a child through college these days. What happens to poor minority kids who have neither money nor encouragement?

BY JILL KRAMER

A betting man would have laid money against Rondell Gibson making it to college. A black kid from Marin City? More likely, he'd barely scrape through high school, then maybe get a job—or just hang out, doing drugs and not much of anything else. But anybody who knows Gibson wouldn't have bet against him. He's been determined to succeed from the start. He also got a lot of help—the kind of help that most of the kids he grew up with never got.



Marin City is a hard place to grow up. Isolated by poverty and racism, it's tucked away in the corner of one of the most affluent counties in the country. While kids in the rest of Marin County are getting prepped for prestige universities from the time they're in diapers, Marin City students go through school burdened by the assumption that they'll never get to college. Other kids grow up playing with computers and educational toys. They're chauffeured around to after-school activities, they're tutored and well-traveled and exposed to the arts.

About half the population of Marin City is black or mixed race, and 55 percent of the black and mixed race population there live in public housing. The average family income in public housing is \$15,000. Seventy-two percent of the households are headed by women. For many Marin City kids, going to high school may be the first time they've ever set foot outside their tiny community. Suddenly they get a glimpse of how the other 99 percent live.

Educators have known for some time that poverty and low educational achievement go hand-in-hand. The higher the family's income level, the higher the student's SAT scores and the greater likelihood of attaining a college degree. There's also a correlation between race and educational success. Whites and Asians do better than blacks and Latinos. Yet the Heritage Foundation and the Brookings Institution have found that there are schools throughout the nation that have eliminated these disparities. Kim Mazzuca, president of the Marin Education Fund, says Marin has not done nearly enough to close the gap.

In fact, Marin lags behind other areas of California on several counts. Our minority students are dropping out more, not as many are completing college preparatory coursework, and they're performing more poorly on tests than their counterparts in other counties. Mazzuca thinks that because our population is so overwhelmingly white and well-off, the low achievement levels of our minorities get obscured by the high achievement of the majority. "Part of the problem we have in Marin is that we are very affluent and we have probably the highest educational attainment rate overall. The needs of the people here who are not privileged are so well-hidden, the problem is not adequately addressed."

Rondell Gibson, now in his second year at St. Mary's College in Moraga, bucked the odds thanks to a number of factors, aside from his sharp mind and iron will. Perhaps most important, his mother and her grandparents all expected him to succeed in school, and sent that message forcefully enough to screen out any expectations of failure that might have come from the world

outside. "From the time I was young," he says, "my mom was always saying, 'You're going to go to college, you need to do good.' Cs and Ds were not acceptable in my home. If I got low grades, I'd be grounded. My great-grandparents, too, were always saying, 'You've got to go to college.' It was instilled in me."

Gibson meets me at the front gate of the tranquil, leafy campus wearing a white cap, baseball shirt and baggy pants cropped below the knee. He has an open face and a broad smile. His great-grandmother was the biggest influence on him, he tells me. His mother often worked 10-hour days as the manager of a chain of cleaning establishments and he lived with her grandparents for much of his early life. His great-grandfather was a roofer and made a more comfortable living than most of his neighbors. Gibson's great-grandmother widened his world with travel from the time he was little, first taking him on tours around the Bay Area, later as far as the Caribbean.

With her guidance, Gibson learned to ignore patterns of failure within the family. His father and his mother's mother were both in and out of jail most of his life. Gibson never even asked what their crimes were; he knew he wasn't going down that path. "If I ever got in trouble, I'd get grounded or my bike would be taken away or my video games. So I didn't want that to happen."

The Sausalito Marin City School District purportedly serves both Marin City and its overwhelmingly white and affluent neighbors in Sausalito. In reality, few Sausalito students are enrolled there. Whites make up only 5 percent of the student body at Bayside Elementary and 9 percent at Martin Luther King, Jr. Academy (MLK), the middle school. In recent years, black parents, too, have begun pulling their kids out of the district schools, which are plagued by both low achievement and bad behavior. Some enroll their children in the charter school, Willow Creek Academy, which runs a K-8 program, or they get an address in another district and send them there. Parents who can afford it put their children in private schools like St. Hilary's in Tiburon, just across the bay from Marin City but socioeconomic worlds away. And many parents of MLK students discourage them from attending Tamalpais High School with the rest of their middle school classmates. Rondell Gibson went to Redwood High School instead.

Gibson remembers plenty of bad behavior going on around him at MLK, although his own class was fairly respectful of school rules. "I'd pass by other classrooms at MLK like if I was on my way back from the bathroom or something and I'd see just craziness sometimes." The craziness is still going on. At times, an entire class will descend into chaos—all the kids talking, laughing, moving around the room. There's so much rebelliousness it's difficult for the serious students to do their work. It's one of the reasons they aren't prepared when they enter Tamalpais High and find themselves attending classes with kids from the privileged parts of Marin.

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THIS YEAR, THE Tamalpais Union High School District began to address the lack of preparedness by sending two of its teachers to MLK—one for English, one for math. Suddenly, the roles were reversed: now it was the teachers who were on alien turf, and they were unprepared. One of the boys in English class, ignoring the teacher, began rapping with a friend. The teacher told him to shut up. The boy grabbed the teacher and hit him in the face, twice.

It was probably the most extreme incident ever to happen at MLK, and the boy is now in the process of being expelled. But parents say the classes have been teetering at the edge of violence for years. Tiawana Bullock, who has one daughter in eighth grade and two older children who attended MLK, says she's witnessed outrageous behavior in the classroom. "I would try to come to class and volunteer and participate, but it was difficult for me to even be there because it was terrible," she says. "One day they were throwing chairs around the room. The teachers did their best to try to control the situation, but it was just wild. The teachers spent so much time disciplining that there was hardly any time to teach."

Bullock says her two girls are less affected by the misbehavior than her son. Her 13-year-old already has ambitions to be a heart surgeon. Her older daughter is now attending college in Texas, majoring in criminal justice. Her

intention is to return to Marin City with a degree and work with teens in Juvenile Hall. Bullock's 19-year-old son, however, hasn't done as well. "He's back at home," she says. "He went to a tech school in L.A. but he couldn't make it. Academically, he wasn't ready." Bullock says it was already apparent in elementary school that her son wasn't applying himself the way her daughter did. "My daughter is very strong-willed. She got into sports and that kept her away from negative people. My son was easily distracted. The classroom had a lot of behavior problems and he just fell into what everybody else was doing." He didn't last long at Tamalpais High School. He was referred to the alternative school, San Andreas, where the bar was set much lower. "He'd get out at 12," says Bullock. "There was no homework."

Nationally, girls in every ethnic group are doing better academically than boys these days: 135 women graduate college for every 100 men. The disparity is even greater for African-Americans, with women outnumbering men two to one. Three girls from Gibson's class at MLK have entered college. He's the only boy. For both genders, just under 17 percent of blacks in Marin have a college degree by the time they're 25, compared to 56 percent of whites. "Most of the kids I grew up with aren't doing anything with their lives," Gibson says, sitting in a student lounge at St. Mary's. "Some of them are incarcerated, some are on the street not caring. I was always staying busy. I wanted to be a professional ballplayer or own my own business. And I figured staying busy would keep me out of trouble. A lot of kids didn't seem to see it that way, and now they're incarcerated or still struggling. That's why I'm here and they're not."

One of the ways Gibson stayed busy was by participating in the Marin City Children's Program, a philanthropic venture launched in 1991 by David Guggenhime, a white financial analyst from the town of Ross, where multimillion-dollar mansions sprawl amid the redwoods. Guggenhime approached the families of all the children entering kindergarten from Marin City preschools that year with a deal: If your kids attend my after-school support program all through high school, I'll help pay their college tuition. Many of the families—including Gibson's—regarded him warily at first. Eventually all but one agreed. "It was Rondell who talked his great-grandmother into it," recalls Guggenhime.

Guggenhime took the kids to a gym, supplied a place in Marin City for them to come and do their homework and matched them up with volunteers to read with them and tutor them when they needed it. "There were a certain number of required hours, but the higher your GPA, the less time you had to spend in the program," says Gibson. "But I was always there, no matter what my GPA was, because I felt like if I went home before I finished my work, I'd just watch TV or go to sleep. So I always finished it there. I'd go there right after football and baseball practice, do my homework and then go home."

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OUT OF THE 29 kids Guggenhime started with, 16 finished high school and 12 are still "progressing," he says—either in college or vocational training. Of the ones who weren't able to stick with the program, Guggenhime says the problem had more to do with "attitude than aptitude." He theorizes that the students absorb a dismissive—even hostile—attitude toward school from their parents or from the community at large. "Part of the problem is that many of the parents were educated by the same school system and felt it was not worthwhile for them, so they don't think it's worthwhile for their children. There have been times, historically, when there might have been the perception of a Berlin Wall across 101 between Marin City and the building where the school administration is located."

Hodari Davis, the African-American executive director of Making Waves, an educational support program for low-income students, makes a similar observation. "There's a strong adversarial relationship between the community and the school district," says Davis. "Families are very reluctant and ambivalent about becoming engaged in the school. They lack the faith that their engagement and contribution will be valued. So there's a general attitude among the youth that if you're doing well in school you're in some way selling out your community. Many of these youth will fold homework up and put it in their pocket rather than be seen walking around with backpacks and looking studious."

So Marin City kids enter school with a double-whammy legacy: a sense of alienation from academia absorbed from parents and community and an absence of a learning environment at home. "We know that ages 0-5 are the most formative years for future academic success," says Mazzuca. "Children coming from a privileged background have an incredible jump-start on education because they have access to very high-quality preschool programs." Privileged parents also have time to read to their children and the money to ply them with educational toys and mind-expanding experiences. "Their children enter school ready to learn. A child from an impoverished background hasn't had access to those things, so they come in already behind their counterparts."

As they go through school, poor grades and low test scores reinforce their alienation and lead to defiant behavior, which in turn interferes with learning. The more they fall behind academically, the more rebelliously they behave. "It's easier to be perceived as a smart-ass troublemaker than to be perceived as deficient in what you're trying to accomplish," says Guggenhime. "When I was in middle school and high school, I wasn't good in language arts and it was always easier to be a screw-off than to admit that I had shortcomings. So I'm sure that some of the behavior problems we see are because the kids don't really feel up to the task."

The behavior problem in the Sausalito Marin City School District sparked an investigation by the Marin County Civil Grand Jury in 1997. Findings included a lack of leadership at the district level and an uncoordinated, poorly enforced discipline policy. "In the nine years the kids in my program were in the district," says Guggenhime, "there were seven principals and four 'permanent' superintendents." Since the grand jury report, a new board of trustees has been seated. An interim superintendent heads the district for now.

One note of consistency is provided by Ruby Wilson, who's been serving as principal of both the elementary and middle schools for the last five years. Before that, Wilson taught in the district for 28 years. Gibson fondly remembers her as his kindergarten teacher. Wilson bristles at the suggestion that her schools are not up to par. "All of our teachers are well qualified and very dedicated," she says. "They're here because they want to help our children. In the last five years, our test scores have gone up over 200 API points, which is tremendous. I know that the middle school's scores went down last year and that is something we are working on, but they had gone up about 200 points in the previous four years."

Wilson is keenly aware that many Marin City students suffer from a deficit in the educational environment at home, and it's up to the school to try to compensate for it. "When you compare us with other schools in Marin County, there are homes where the child can always have a quiet time when they can read, there are parents who can take their children to events that can promote the learning process, to expose them to things. We have to expose some students to words and vocabulary and experiences that the parents in other districts expose them to. In other districts, if a student needs a tutor, the parent takes care of it. Here, it's the school that provides the money for tutoring and counseling. Sometimes the parents aren't able to help the students with their homework, so we have a homework center where we help them. We have arts, music and all kinds of field trips that the district pays for when the students cannot afford it."

Wilson also knows that students often hear critical comments about the school from their parents, which may contribute to bad attitudes and rowdy behavior. That's why she prefers to stay positive. "In our third grade class last year, every student was proficient or advanced in math except one, and that student was just a couple of points below. I think Ross was the only school that outscored us. For us to reach that in spite of everything that we deal with, it's tremendous! We need to be congratulated for it."

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THAT'S THE GOOD news. The bad news is that after third grade the scores take a deep dive, getting progressively lower in each successive grade. Only 8 percent of seventh graders were proficient. In eighth grade, only one student even bothered to take the test. In the rest of Marin County most of the students have gone on to algebra and geometry, while Marin City kids are still trying to master sixth-grade math. The scores in language arts are equally discouraging. While the school district should be commended for its progress,

it's clear that much more needs to be done.

On the California Standards Test in English Language Arts, for example, Marin's African-American juniors rank 33rd out of the 40 counties that have black students. Our white students, meanwhile, get the top scores in the state, from seventh grade through 11th. While only 2.1 percent of Marin whites drop out in their senior year, the rate is 9 percent for our African-American students. The dropout rate for black kids in many California counties is half that.

The picture may be even gloomier than these statistics indicate. Are kids dropping out of school before 12th grade? We don't know. "The dropout data doesn't measure students entering in the ninth grade and leaving by the 12th," says Mazzuca. "So there are many students that we lose that don't get reported. Educational achievement erodes throughout the pipeline for our students of color. And as achievement erodes, hope erodes and their aspirations dwindle."

When students enter high school performing below grade level, it's very difficult to catch up. If they want to be eligible for a four-year university, they have to complete what's known in academia as the A-G requirements. That includes, for example, four years of college-prep English. If they start high school having to do remedial English, they get a late start on the college-prep classes.

Still, it can be done when kids get help. Rondell Gibson is a prime example. "I was one of the better students in high school in math, but I had to get extra help with my writing," he says. "I got tutoring through David Guggenheimer's program and I also worked with my teacher twice a week during my first semester at Redwood. Before that, I don't remember ever being taught what a thesis is or how to write an introductory paragraph. I was never taught expository writing, so I had to learn that in high school." Gibson's newly acquired essay writing skills not only helped him gain acceptance to St. Mary's College, they also helped him score a scholarship from the Marin Education Fund.

But Gibson's success is a relative rarity, and Mazzuca believes it doesn't have to be that way. "In Marin, one out of every two white and Asian students complete A-G, but only one out of every 10 black or Latino students complete them," says Mazzuca. "All students need to leave the eighth grade able to access the A-G requirements. The fact that here in Marin County we don't have the A-G requirement as the default curriculum for everybody says that we don't hold the same expectations for all students."

While Mazzuca hints that racism lurks behind the low expectations for blacks, Sausalito Marin School District trustee Whitney Hoyt is willing to say it out loud. "We have kids who are not prepared for college, and it looks like they're the poor kids, they're the non-white kids," she says. "Why is there not a big outcry in our community about this? It's all this 'not in Marin.' People don't want to look at racism. This is racism. Or if you want to call it 'classism,' maybe that's more comfortable for people."

Hoyt says it's up to the district to step up to the plate and provide services to give students the boost they need. "If a lack of after-school support and supervision is the reason that kids aren't succeeding in high school and college and beyond, then I think it is our responsibility," she says. "It might mean tutoring, it might mean supervised activities after school so kids have a place to go that isn't just standing around on a street corner, it might mean training for parents so they can support kids, it might mean alternative forms of educational tracks so we're not always trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. If our community can't solve this here in Marin, with all our resources and our foundations and our excellent teachers and caring parents—if we can't solve this, who can?"

Rondell Gibson is living proof that, with encouragement from family and help from the community, the achievement gap can be bridged. He plans to get a business degree, then a real estate license, and eventually open his own business. When his great-grandmother died two years ago he was devastated at first, but he became more determined than ever to succeed. "She wanted me to go to college and I'm doing it, for her and for myself," he says. "I'm

going to create a living for myself. I'm going to show people that I can do something. I'm not going to fail."

To volunteer as a tutor in Marin County schools, call 415/499-5896.

For information on Marin Education Fund, call 415/459-4240 or log on to [www.marineducationfund.org](http://www.marineducationfund.org).

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