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The Originals

By Elizabeth Gehrman



They call themselves “the Originals” — the remaining members of the first Urban Superintendents Program cohort — and to this day, almost two decades later, they call each other brother and sister.

It all started with a hug.

“One day at the beginning of the semester the stress was really getting to me,” recalls Douglass Ann Kinkade, Ed.M.’91, Ed.D.’96, now the chief of professional development for the Indianapolis public school system. “We were in a writing class, and none of us were close at that point. I stood up in class and said, ‘If I don’t get a hug right now, I’m going home. I need a hug.’ And everybody came around and started hugging each other. For me that really sealed it.”

Today, 8 of the 10 students enrolled in the cohort in 1990 — one, Richelle Green, Ed.M.’93, passed away in 1997, and another dropped out — have not only remained in touch but have developed a bond they say is unlike any other in their lives. They have attended one another’s weddings and graduations, stood by sick beds, offered up extra rooms in their homes for months on end, and seen each other’s children grow and grandchildren enter the world. “Oh my gosh,” says Jean Murray, Ed.M.’91, Ed.D.’99, assistant superintendent for instruction in Henrico County, Va. “I can’t imagine not having these people in my life or [remember] what it was like before I had them in my life.”

Simply being the first class played a large part in the endurance of their collective relationship.

“You think, ‘Wow, we’re really out here by ourselves,’”



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says Kinkade. "Now the students can call people who've been through the program; there was nobody we could call. This program was just being set up, and they got 10 people with a lot of experience." Two of the Originals were in their late 30s when they started, two were in their 50s, and the rest in their 40s. "At some level we understood what we really needed and what was needed out there in the professional world, so they tweaked some of the courses and allowed us to give our input."

Still, it was often rough going. "It was a difficult path to come back to school and be in an environment where they pushed you beyond your limit," says E. Wayne Harris, Ed.M.'91, Ed.D.'95, former superintendent of the Roanoke City (Va.) Public Schools. "If we were going to make it, we knew we were going to have to support one another."

And support one another they did. At different times during those first few years, each of them reached a point, either in their coursework or while doing their dissertations, when they were ready to give up. "We all went through, 'I'm going home and I don't want to do this anymore,'" says Murray. "We all had our breakdowns at different times, and we all supported each other and pushed each other to keep going."

The academic trial by fire wasn't the only one, though. "Superintendency and higher positions can be really lonely," says Virginia Mayo Hardy, Ed.M.'91, Ed.D.'95, former deputy superintendent in the New York City Board of Education. "There aren't many people you can tell things to — either they don't have the experience or it gets out into the community, and then you're out of a contract. You need a sounding board you can trust."

That sense of trust and their common interest in the work they were doing led, inevitably, to deeper bonds that have transcended race, gender, and geography.

"People build lifelong relationships with the kids they go to high school and college with," says Murray. "We came into one another's lives as adults. We were put into very stressful and sometimes crisis situations, and came out incredibly close."

Close enough that several of the Originals, after pondering what it was that kept them together all these years, summed up their relationship in the same simple — and, to them, obvious — way: "They're my family."

— *Elizabeth Gehrman is a freelance writer whose work appears regularly in Ed.*

About the Article

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illustration by Jeff Hopkins

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