Juliette Whittaker

‘If You Shoot For The Moon, You’re Bound To Hit A Star’

By Steve Strahler


When she discovered Richard Pryor — or helped him discover himself — and yet she has not sought to trade on that relationship. She may have moved to Hollywood, but she is content to have remained in Peoria.

- She avoided becoming a classroom educator, out of fear of being compared unfavorably to her mother, an English teacher. As it turned out, Juliette ended up founding and heading an entire school.
- She has always preferred children to adults, believing each child to be an original work of art, a gift to the world awaiting discovery and development. But she deplores society’s pre-occupation with youth over the elderly. “Those who are repositories of wisdom, we should revere them.”

I like having my Neiman-Marcus credit card. I’ve always had it, and I would never be without it.

We throw all our emphasis on youth. You don’t know nothing.

- She thinks that “parties are for people who have something to celebrate. Just to have a party, what’s the point of it?” On Saturday evenings, though, you might find her in front of the television set watching Bugs Bunny, the Pink Panther or Fat Albert. “There’s a part of me that wants to be a child.”
- Her secondary school, called Learning Tree — because to me, the young child is like a tree: these children have to learn to withstand a great deal — was founded in 1975 as a kindergarten/day-care adjunct to the Community Action Agency. It added a grade a year from the bottom up, and moved last summer to the Mt. Zion Baptist Church when Juliette felt that, at long last, it was “time to get out on my own.”

At Learning Tree, where enrollment is 32 with a waiting list, you get the old-time religion — phonics, daily report cards, a teacher in control. You also get something else — Chinese

the educational system. She argues, “Only the maria don’t show. You use a compromise who does not. It is a child, who is teaching. They are the victims, in a sense all education could be very violent unless a compromise if I didn’t have something else to do.”

Though it’s an alternative to the public curriculum, Learning Tree isn’t necessarily an enemy camp. “It’s not a matter of competing in any way,” she says. More to the point, she says, “public schools themselves, ‘people are disenfranchised with what they see schools have to do.’” She maintains, “Their hands are tied. For example, they can’t teach ethics in the classroom.”

Nor may they take field trips to Illinois State University. Learning Tree did recently, to view a one-of-a-kind exhibit of the life of African-American women since the Civil War.

“We have a public school, of course, and trips are strapped with a lot of legislation that prevents them from delving into various areas,” agrees Bill McCollum, a consultant on special schools for the Illinois Board of Education.

I report to no one. I share.

Better to be No. 1 in Peoria than even No. 2 in New York.

But, as Whittaker well knows, the real limits are those you set for yourself. Learning Tree has an “Ambition Board” (there are pursuits encouraged to shoot for the moon). You will never know what you’re capable of if you don’t try. “You have to try,” she says. “I don’t want to be one of those who’ve never been.”

“We don’t know how far we would have gotten as a nation had we not stopped slavery, how many minds were lost.”

We don’t know anything.

- She has always had a talent for poetry, say, plus astronomy and individual learning tracks where each student is on his own pace.
- Pronunciation is the second golden rule.
- We will try anything that works.
- She’s taught English in the past.
- This is the learning process supposed to be a joy (another radical departure). Our kindergarten is learning to read now. It’s that kind of joy. They’ve had phonics. If you give a child something, he will give something back. Here our expectations are high, and children want to live up to your expectations.

One expectation is that pupils will come away not only with right answers but right ideas, as well. “It’s so good to have a person who has a very good mind who uses it negatively,” Whittaker says. “We like to ask ourselves, ‘What’s the right way? What’s the fair way?’”

‘Babies… I become interested in them when they reach age three.’

Francis Scott Key Whittaker and his wife, Marian, were graduates of Y.U. University in Nash- ville TN.

from a young man I know you know what the diff. cost. I say.

Juliette Whittaker was staging plays on the front porch, her sister recalls, and starting to write. Not on paper, but by speaking to the sister of her sister of what the Whittaker girls would be when they grew up. “Go on, Juliette, tell me what else,” Martha remembers urging her sister on.

As they grew, the Whittaker girls encountered a curious environment — a home life where nothing but the best would be accepted, alongside a city life where even the average soda fountain was off limits. Dad was a lawyer for the NAACP and had organized a society for Negroes, later Texas State College, for 1928. But Juliette couldn’t get a Coke.

Babies… I become interested in them when they reach age three.

Dr. Thalita was staying plays on the front porch, her sister recalls, and starting to write. Not on paper, but by speaking to the sister of her sister of what the Whittaker girls would be when they grew up. “Go on, Juliette, tell me what else,” Martha remembers urging her sister on.

As they grew, the Whittaker girls encountered a curious environment — a home life where nothing but the best would be accepted, alongside a city life where even the average soda fountain was off limits. Dad was a lawyer for the NAACP and had organized a society for Negroes, later Texas State College, in 1928. But Juliette couldn’t get a Coke.

Babies… I become interested in them when they reach age three.

Dr. Thalita was staying plays on the front porch, her sister recalls, and starting to write. Not on paper, but by speaking to the sister of her sister of what the Whittaker girls would be when they grew up. “Go on, Juliette, tell me what else,” Martha remembers urging her sister on.

As they grew, the Whittaker girls encountered a curious environment — a home life where nothing but the best would be accepted, alongside a city life where even the average soda fountain was off limits. Dad was a lawyer for the NAACP and had organized a society for Negroes, later Texas State College, in 1928. But Juliette couldn’t get a Coke.
Better to be 10.1 in Peoria than even No. 2 in New York.

But, as Whitaker was, the real limits are the ones you set for yourself, so learning to control your limitations is an "Ambition Rule." Where you're encouraged to think for the good of the group. You are allowed to think for your group.

"We don't know how far we would have gotten in a nation we had not had slavery, how many minds were lost."
We throw all our emphasis on youth. Youth don’t know nothing.

- She thinks that “parties are for people who have something to celebrate. But to have a party, what’s the purpose of it?” On Saturday mornings, though, you might find her in front of the television set watching Bugs Bunny, the Pink Panther or Fat Albert. “There’s a part of me that will never grow up, that’s what my grandmother always used to say,” she explains. “I will never be a mature adult, whatever that is. You see, it’s possible to be childlike and not be childish. There’s a distinction there.”

- She’s never been interested in fame, fortune or status. Nonetheless, “I like having my Neiman-Marcus credit card. I’ve always had it, and I would never be without it.”

- She talks about the “cosmos of the mind,” about the compatibility of science and religion, two wings of the same bird. But she affixes certain limits. “People that spend their time communicating with apes amuse me. They should spend their time communicating with their fellows.”

- Reared a Congregationalist, the message was: “You give; you give; you give.” Now she preaches the virtues of selfishness. “All of us are given a life, and why should I decide to value another’s life over my own? When I get up in the morning, I have to start with myself. Nothing flows from an empty cup.”

Next to your parents, a good teacher is the most important thing in your life.

Juliette Whitaker was taught early to think big, and to get the preliminaries out of the way quickly. A high school graduate at 16, she finished college at 18 and faced a three-month wait to hear back on her medical-school application.

And why not three months to wait? Why not a graduate program in theater during the interim? She and her father decided. Of course, nothing less than Radcliffe, Harvard University’s sister institution, would do. But Radcliffe had discontinued its theater program.

Yale? Her father, a Harvard Law School graduate, wouldn’t hear of it. So it was off to the University of Iowa, a state school that, unlike those of her native Texas, would accept blacks. Lawyer Whitaker then forwarded his daughter’s poetry, say, plus astronomy and individual learning tracks where each student sets his own pace.

Pragmatism is the second golden rule.

“We will try anything that works,” says principal Whitaker. “Here the learning process is supposed to be a joy (another radical departure). Our kindergarten is learning to read now. That’s no miracle. They’ve had phonics. If you give a child something, he will give something back. Here our expectations are high, and children want to live up to your expectations.”

One expectation is that pupils will come away not only with right answers but right ideas, as well. “It’s good to have a person who has a very good mind who uses it positively,” Whitaker says. “We like to ask ourselves, ‘What’s the right way? What’s the fair way? Next to your parents, a good teacher is the most important thing in your life.”

The kindergarten pupils even “have to take maps,” she adds. “They don’t know that other children are in kindergarten only two hours a day. I had a fourth grader, the other day she ask me, ‘When do we start typing?’ I encourage my pupils to think in terms of space. We’re going to need all kinds of people in space.”

Above all, what Whitaker tries to avoid is what she terms “compracholos of the mind” — mental dwarfs stunted by a rigid, out-of-date educational system. “What might have been appropriate in 1900 is not appropriate in 1980,” she maintains.

Compracholos, she says in revealing the range of her reading interests, were victims of the Middle Ages in Spain. Babies were placed in irregular jars as a pattern for weird growth. Then they were sold almost as trinkets. “It was their form of black humor,” she says.

“We do the same thing with our children with spelling, say, plus astronomy and individual learning tracks where each student sets his own pace.

Better to be No. 1 in Peoria than even No. 2 in New York.

But, as Whitaker well knows, the real limits are the ones you set for yourself, so Learning Tree has an “Ambition Board” where pupils are encouraged to shoot for the moon.

“You shoot for the moon, you’re bound to lift a star, but if you never shoot, you never hit anything. You’ve got to aim,” she says.

“See, I was brought up to believe that there was nothing I couldn’t accomplish. I always had the support of my parents, whatever I wanted to do. I don’t know what would have done if my parents had not been the sort of people.”

At the Whitaker household in Houston, the main rules were, “You can’t say can’t. You may not succeed in every endeavor, but at least you’ve tried.” Today, Whitaker says she’s been fortunate enough to have her successes balance her failures. “Everyone should be that way.” That’s all that counts, she always said.

Babies? I become interested in them when they reach age three.

Francis Scott Key Whitaker and his wife, Julia, were graduates of Yale University in 1933. Francis Whitaker, a Houston social worker, was a writer, his wife was in the rest of the world.

There would be discussions at the dinner table about China, for instance, recalls Whitaker’s daughter, Martha Collins, a Houston social worker.

But Juliette, the elder daughter by 18 months, was interested in a closer world. “I was always saving butterflies, worms, things on my porch,” she remembers. “I was always interested in how things were put together.” When the turkey was sacrificed for Thanksgiving, she kept the blood and stored it in a mason jar in the refrigerator. Mother mistook it for honey sauce, nearly ruining the dinner.

So biology and chemistry and physics were her school interest. “I made As without any problem at all, because I liked to read. That’s all it is.” By age 10 or 12, having read the Book of Knowledge from cover to cover, Juliette already was staging plays on the recalls, and starting to by spinning tales to her sister girls would be won. Juliette, tell me what barracks urging her sister on.

If they grew, they entered a curious envirion where nothing but the beside a city life where fountain, was off limits, the NAACP had taken Negroes, later Texas. But Juliette couldn’t get.

She remembers seeing from a fountain marked, you know, what the all cold,” she says.

Richard Pryor, in a daily report card, and it gone home to the Pool Pryor showed up one day. Center play practice drawn from nearby art colin, Webster and McKee Pryor.

But Pryor had her wants a part, even the east. “I don’t care. I’ll do thing,” Whitaker recalls time, he was a little slum he lived in a corner house as a servant, but also p let him take home the memorized.

Inevitably, the actin...
Francis Scott Key Whittaker and his wife, Julita, were graduates of Vassar College in Nashville and she went on to Harvard Law, graduating in 1929. She was a teacher, Julietta's first guide to literature. He was a lawyer, her window to the rest of the world.

"There would be discussions at the dinner table about China, for instance," recalls the Whittakers' other daughter, Martha Collins, a Houston social worker.

But Julietta, the eldest daughter by 18 months, was interested in a career world. "I was always saving butterflies, worms, things on my porch," she remembers. "I was always interested in how things were put together." When the turkey was sacrificed for Thanksgiving, she kept the blood and stored it in a Mason jar in the refrigerator. Mother tasted it for cranberry sauce, nearly ruining the dinner.

So biology — and chemistry and physics — were her school interests. "I made As without any problem at all, because I liked to read. That's all it was." By age 10 or 12, having read the Book of Knowledge from cover to cover, Julietta already had the same thing our children with

That might be an apt description of Julietta’s latter-day approach also — like father, like daughter. Admission to Learning Tree, in fact, is as often dependent on parental attitudes toward education as it is upon the gifts of the student. "Parents are very often the deciding factor, depending upon our perception of their cooperation," she says. The daily report card must come back signed by a parent each morning.

Richard Pryor, in an oft-told story, had no daily report card, and if he did, it would have gone home to the pool hall. In the early '50s, Pryor showed up one day at Whittaker’s Carver Center play practice. The actors had been drawn from nearby schools — Douglas, Lincoln, Webster and McKinley — not attended by Pryor.

"But I heard about the play and wanted a part, even though the play had been cast," "I don't care. I'm doing anything," Whittaker recalls him begging. "At that time, he was a little skinny kid. He was 13, but he looked like he was nine." He won a bit part as a servant, but all the same, Pryor and Whittaker were out of work. "Let him take home the entire script, which he memorized.

Naturally, the actor playing the king was absent one day, and Pryor pleaded, "Miss Whittaker, I know that part.

"The kids, they were just hilarious!" about the new king. "They just laughed," she says.

When the original actor returned, he was persuaded to watch his understudy and decide who did a better job. Reluctantly, he said, "Yeah, it's true, he does it better," Whittaker remembers.

"That's the way Richard got on the throne of comedy, and he hasn't been down since.

Pryor became a regular at her Youth Theater Guild, but wouldn't always show up for practice. He'd be out at the pool hall racking balls. "So I'd just go over to the pool hall and get him," Pryor told Whittaker, "They'd be cussin' and fussin', and when you walked in, it would be quiet like a church.

The silence signaled the gulf between the two worlds. The pool hall was a man's world. The theater was for girls, or sissies. He was very bright, something he had to conceal for a long time. It wasn't quite masculine," Whittaker says.

"We lose so much by that. We don't know what losses we have lost by that approach to human potential." Twenty-four years ago, Whittaker observed: "The dramatic arts offer an outlet for precocious child-

---

lute
trolled car brought to school by one of the students. The toy just needed batteries. Photos by Linda Henson.

---

Continued on Page 8-4
Juliette Whittaker — ‘If You Shoot For The Moon . . .’

Continued from Page B-1

eventually. The trade-off in educational benefits certainly makes the extra cost worth it.”

But others, including McClard and Barbara Penelton, an associate professor of education at Bradley University, feel they’re priced out of most parents’ markets. “I don’t think the economy is going to allow a lot of those,” she says, while praising the school’s program as “one of the outstanding ones.”

Not every school can have a benefactor named Pryor, who donated about 70 scholarships — essentially one per child — last year. At that time, Whittaker said the school’s subsidy ranged from a minimum of $1,000 to the full cost of about $2,000 per pupil. Jackson, however, who is on the board of the school’s parent corporation, estimated that 60 percent of the funding comes from parents and the rest from donations, including government grants to support breakfast and lunch programs.

There’s also another commitment — teachers. “What we’re looking for is people who are making a lot less money than in the public school system,” says Penelton, who adds of Whittaker: “I think she draws upon the professional excellence of her staff in that make it very rewarding for them in basic educational functions. There is an air of excellence that permeates that school, an esprit de corps.”

The principals of District 150 schools that get a majority of Learning Tree graduates praise them for “a good start, a lot of confidence” but say their arrival and any ideas they bring haven’t had an impact on the public curriculum. Bob Baldwin at Roosevelt School concedes that Learning Tree students get a better start. But distinctions between them and Roosevelt students, he argues, tend to narrow the longer pupils stay at Learning Tree, which adds a fifth grade next fall.

“The higher you go, our expectations are probably higher than theirs,” he says.

But a generation ago, Juliette “was kinda like an oasis, you know?” says Andy Boone, now a Caterpillar Tractor Co. employee. “I was a pretty wild kid. Then she came to the Center, and I got introduced to classical music, jazz — there was just oodles of things to do. I virtually grew up under her influence, and it actually turned my life around. It gave me a lot of insight into growing up. There were a lot of kids the same way.”

Jackson, who grew up in Warner Homes, notes that “We’re not supposed to succeed from an environment like that. I thank God she was there when I needed her. Hopefully, she’ll be around for my grandchildren.”

She may, taking her cue from her favorite comic strip character, Pogo. “Pogo overcomes, no matter what,” she says. “He doesn’t bother anybody. He perseveres.”