Juliette Whittaker

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

By Steve Strahler

An interesting case, a complex soul. Juliette Whittaker...

• She discovered Richard Pryor — or helped him discover himself — and yet she has not sought to trade on that relationship. He may have made it 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, his gift to the world awaiting discovery and development. But she deplores our society's pre-occupation with youth over the elderly. "Those who are repositories of wisdom, we should revere them. We throw all our emphasis on youth. Youth don't know nothing."

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• 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 life? When I get up in the morning, I have to start with myself. Nothing flows from an empty cup."

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tuition bills and others to the state of Texas, demanding, "Please remit in full."

And, incredibly, the state did, according to Juliette. "My father was a lawyer," she explains tersely. "He knew the law."

Three-and-one-half decades later, Miss Whittaker carries on the family's sense of rectitude and self-confidence. She can't pronounce the words "average" and "mediocre" without a scowl on the face and reproach in the voice. Job security comes out "so-called job security," and her impatience with progress's glacial pace causes her to sigh, "We're still in the Middle Ages in so many ways."

She dreams of her own school building someday, and already can describe exactly what she wants. But what about the cost? she's asked. "I hadn't thought about the expense. I thought about the site. I don't think in those terms."

Her elementary 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."

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One expectation is that pupils will come away not only with right answers but right ideas, as well. "It's no 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?' Next to your parents,

the educational system she argues, "only the marks don't show. You have a comprachico who does not like children, but who is teaching. They are the victims, in a sense, of their own education. I could be very violent toward a comprachico if I didn't have something else to do."

Though it's an alternative to the regular public curriculum, Learning Tree isn't necessarily an enemy camp. "It's not a matter of competing in any way," she says. More so than disenchantment with the public schools themselves, "people are disenchanted with what the public schools have to live under," she maintains. "Their hands are tied. For example, they cannot teach ethics in the classroom."

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

"The public schools, of course, are strapped with a lot of legislation that prevents them from delving into various areas," agrees Bill McClard, a consultant on private schools for the Illinois Board of Education.

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was staging plays on the front porch, her sister recalls, and starting to write. Not on paper, but by spinning tales to 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 was accepted, alongside a city life where even the average soda fountain was off limits. Dad was a lawyer for the NAACP and had organized Houston College for Negroes, later Texas State College, in 1928. But Juliette couldn't get a Coke.

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ren who have no interest in athletic outlets. Drama offers a chance to take a spotlight for what they can do, perhaps better than sports."

Juliette, especially after Pryor became "the main show," was so successful at getting the boys to come out for theater, she eventually had a problem casting the 3-to-1, boy-to-girl ratio in conventional plays. So she wrote her own plays and put them to classical music, opening another horizon to the pupils. There was Bizet, for example, and, for "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves," there was Rimsky-Korsakov.

The plays themselves always had a point. In "The Vanishing Pearl" (Pryor played the lead, Ku the thief), the pearl disappeared when stolen from

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Juliette Whittaker was taught early to think big, and to get the preliminaries out of the way quickly. A high school graduate at 14, she finished college at 18 and faced a three-month wait to hear back on her medical-school application.

And why put three months to waste? 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.

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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 cranberry sauce, nearly ruining the dinner.

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Besides, Martha points out, the Whittaker girls got a chance to be tops in a circumscribed society. "We were the leaders of the kids on our street," encouraged by their parents toward excellence. "Our parents really steered us toward these things, without us really knowing it. We were just so carefully groomed and sheltered. The controls were there, but they were so lovingly given."

That might be an apt description of Juliette's latter-day approach also — like father, like daughter. Admission to Learning Tree, in fact, is as often dependent upon parental attitudes toward education as it is upon the gifts of the student. "Parents are very often the determining 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 Pryor had heard about the play and wanted a part, even though the play had been cast. "I don't care. I'll do anything. I'll do 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 also persuaded Whittaker to let him take home the entire script, which he memorized.

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Whittaker had come to Peoria in the late '40s after graduating from the Iowa program, her avocation having become her vocation. She had inquired about job opportunities at Fisk, her parents' alma mater, and Carver Center's director just happened to be attending a conference there.

In 1956, her 30th year, Whittaker journeyed to New York to see if there was a place for her on Broadway. There wasn't. "I decided I wasn't really interested in the high degree of cutthroat competition that goes on there," she said of viewing Eartha Kitt in "New Faces of 1956" and going backstage.

"I decided that was not for me. I guess I like being my own boss, starting out at the top. Somebody's got to be on top. It might as well be me. I report to no one. I share." Better to be No. 1 in Peoria than even No. 2 in New York. "Peoria has been very kind to me," she says. "It's allowed me to do anything I wanted to do. A way has always been opened."

Marriage? "Finding a man who had the same biases I did turned out to be rather an impossible task. The ideal, man, I guess, would be one that travels a lot," a thought expanded in a limerick she wrote.

'When are you getting married my dear?
Not for a very long time, I fear.
I'm looking for a man,
I understand,
Who won't be around every day of the year.'

"This society has made love such a narrow thing, and we end up losers," she adds. "That's why friendships between people of the opposite sexes are so difficult to maintain."

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Inevitably, 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 do 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 over 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 of Pryor. "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-

its owner. "The moral was, in order to be worthy of something, you have to work for it," Whittaker says. "There's nothing as short-lived as ill-gotten gains."

These were the years when she would come to work at 2 p.m. and stay up all night designing and executing sets and costumes; then, with various members of the cast or production staff, it was off to Thompson's Restaurant downtown for breakfast.

Whittaker had come to Peoria in the late '40s after graduating from the Iowa program, her avocation having become her vocation. She had inquired about job opportunities at Fisk, her parents' alma mater, and Carver Center's director just happened to be attending a conference there.

In 1956, her 30th year, Whittaker journeyed to New York to see if there was a place for her on Broadway. There wasn't. "I decided I wasn't really interested in the high degree of cutthroat competition that goes on there," she said of viewing Eartha Kitt in "New Faces of 1956" and going backstage.

"I decided that was not for me. I guess I like being my own boss, starting out at the top. Somebody's got to be on top. It might as well be me. I report to no one. I share." Better to be No. 1 in Peoria than even No. 2 in New York. "Peoria has been very kind to me," she says. "It's allowed me to do anything I wanted to do. A way has always been opened."

Marriage? "Finding a man who had the same biases I did turned out to be rather an impossible task. The ideal, man, I guess, would be one that travels a lot," a thought expanded in a limerick she wrote.

'When are you getting married my dear?
Not for a very long time, I fear.
I'm looking for a man,
I understand,
Who won't be around every day of the year.'

"This society has made love such a narrow thing, and we end up losers," she adds. "That's why friendships between people of the opposite sexes are so difficult to maintain."

Babies? "I don't get enough feedback from them. I become interested in them when they reach age three," after the "feeding, burping, cleaning" is mostly over. "The ideal situation would be to have a nurse. Bring him back when he's dry." (She did become a mother by adopting a 17-year-old girl, who now has two children, making Juliette a grandmother.)

Whittaker's pronounced individualism has been reinforced by her discovery of Ayn Rand and Richard Bach, not philosphers of the first order but ones who help define a place for economic self interest among the world's "true family . . . of joy and respect in each other's lives." In 1968, she converted to the Baha'i faith, attracted, in part, by its celebration of the individual and its lack of clergy.

Quite suspicious of submitting to a personal inquiry — "Of course, I'm not going to talk about myself" — Whittaker preferred to reveal herself indirectly, largely through philosophical discussion, during periodic interviews over two months. She was always eager, though, to promote her school and the ideas it embodies.

There's an unresolved debate over whether private, unaffiliated schools like Learning Tree are a growth industry. Don Jackson, a Peoria attorney who came under Whittaker's influence in the Pryor era and who now has a child at Learning Tree, thinks that the concept "is going to expand

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Juliette Whittaker — 'If You Shoot For The Moon . . .'

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ventually. 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 that support breakfast and lunch programs.

There's also another commitment — teachers. "What we're talking about 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 ways that make it very rewarding for them in basic educational decisions. There is an air of excellence that permeates that school, an espirit 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 self-confidence" but say their arrival and any ideas they bring with them 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 here 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."