Black leaders visit schools in D.C. and elsewhere to inspire students
By EMMA BROWN  October 4, 2015

Hundreds of black leaders in business, the arts, education and public life have visited the nation’s schools in recent weeks, telling their personal stories in an effort to provide students with role models and inspiration.

One of them was Roger Gore, a beauty-products entrepreneur and D.C. native who turned down a college scholarship to pursue his interest in barbering, much to his mother’s dismay. Now his company’s hair-care products are sold in CVS and Wegmans stores, he said, and they soon will be available at big-box stores including Target.

Speaking to sophomores Friday at Phelps Architecture, Construction and Engineering High School in the District, Gore offered a message that has guided his life. Figure out what you love, he said. Follow that, and if it doesn’t lead you to college — that’s okay.

“Whatever you choose to do, it has nothing to do with anyone else,” Gore said. “It’s got to be what you’re passionate about.” When Gore concluded his remarks, a student in the back row raised his hand. “Can you bring a barbering trade to the school?” he asked.

Bringing successful black men and women into schools is a project of the HistoryMakers, a Chicago-based nonprofit group that has conducted thousands of oral-history interviews with black leaders and compiled them in a digital archive.

Its founder, Julieanna Richardson, said she believes that such personal stories have the power to change young people’s perceptions of what they can achieve in their lives. “I really grew up not knowing that black people had accomplished anything,” Richardson said. “Everybody needs role models.”

HistoryMakers attempts to provide a spark of possibility, especially for students who have grown up in poverty and who don’t have a wide variety of examples of what they can become, Richardson said.

Four hundred African Americans visited classrooms in 200 schools and 67 cities this fall, the sixth time that HistoryMakers has organized the back-to-school event.

Outgoing U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan helped launch this year’s visits on Sept. 25 in his home town of Chicago. With him at Paul Robeson High School on the city’s South Side was Thomas Burrell, founder of the nation’s largest African American-owned marketing firm and a 1957 graduate of the school.

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Burrell said in an interview that it’s stunning to see what has happened to the school, as anyone with the wherewithal to leave has left. After decades of enrollment decline, there are just 200 students remaining. Almost all are from poor families, and many are homeless.

“I’ve come from where they are, and it just seems like it was just yesterday,” Burrell said, explaining why he wanted to speak to them. “Those children are me. Those children are my children. I love them and I feel for them and some of them are doing quite well considering the circumstances that they’re going through.”

Burrell said he told the Robeson students his story, in which a teacher sent him on a path toward success by suggesting that he might be a good advertising copywriter. “I said, ‘What’s that?’” Burrell said in an interview. His teacher explained it, and it sounded pretty cool. He went and told his friends that he was going to become an advertising copywriter.

“I tell kids now, if you’re going to do something, go out and tell people you’re going to do it,” Burrell said. “Because if you have any pride, you’re going to live up to what you said you’re going to do.” Does he believe the students heard his message? “I felt a couple of lights go on,” he said.

At Phelps, in the District, students watched attentively as Gore spoke during what would have usually been their world history class. Next door, seniors in a U.S. government class soaked up college advice from Joan Langdon, a mathematics and computer science professor at Maryland’s Bowie State University.

“Sometimes we think of history as being really old, as being such a long time ago,” said Phelps government teacher Shayla Adams, explaining why she likes HistoryMakers. “What they bring to the classroom is the fact that history is here, it is now.”

Langdon touched only briefly on her own story of growing up on a farm and being one of seven children whose parents had not graduated from high school. “I’m a scholarship person,” she said, explaining that scholarships had funded her education through her doctorate.

But the theme of education as a path to a better life was embedded in everything she told the students. “Fun is important. You should have some fun in college. But not too much fun,” she said.

She drew connections between their willingness to work hard and their earning potential. They might be poor for four years during college, she said, but then they could expect to support themselves. And wherever they started, they could keep going, working for promotions.

“You want to go higher than $75,000,” she said. “You want to earn $100,000. You want to earn $120,000,” she said.

One student smirked, as if that salary were unbelievable. “What?” Langdon responded, telling them they had a right to dream big. “You have so many opportunities.”

Emma Brown writes about national education and about people with a stake in schools, including teachers, parents and kids.