

On a Supreme Path

During his sophomore year at Buckingham County High School, Ty'Leik Chambers made a decision that focused the course of his life and set him on an education and career path that he hopes will culminate with a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. Although Ty'Leik was a strong student, he did not feel challenged. "I wanted to do something hard," he says. So, Ty'Leik decided to apply for admission into the Governor's School of Southside Virginia.

The Virginia Governor's School Program began in 1973 to help address the needs of academically motivated young people like Ty'Leik who thrive in a demanding, interdisciplinary environment. The curriculum provides a rigorous challenge designed to test the limits of students' academic abilities and help them reach their fullest potential.

GSSV, one of 19 academic-year schools within the Governor's School program, is sponsored by the Virginia Department of Education in partnership with ten participating school divisions. Southside Virginia Community College hosts the school at its two main campuses. Students from Brunswick, Greensville, Mecklenburg (Park View High School), and Nottoway counties attend classes at SVCC's Christanna Campus in Alberta. Ty'Leik and his classmates from Buckingham County High School along with their peers from Amelia, Charlotte, Cumberland, Lunenburg, Mecklenburg (Bluestone), and Prince Edward counties attend classes at SVCC's John H. Daniel Campus in Keysville.

Admission into GSSV is highly competitive. Participating school divisions follow a matrix that considers teacher recommendations and each applicant's test results, grade point average, and writing ability. Additionally, by the end of their sophomore year, students must have completed a strenuous sequence of mathematics courses that includes Algebra I and II and Geometry.

Laurie Michaelson, GSSV Director says, "We have wonderful students at GSSV, and Ty'Leik is a great example of our student body. He is intelligent, grounded, service minded, and motivated to learn." Regarding his role in the GSSV community, Director Michaelson adds, "Ty'Leik is always positive, energetic, willing to help fellow students and instructors. He seeks solutions and provides encouragement to those around him. His personality is infectious!"

Ty'Leik credits his family for encouraging him. "My mom always promoted education. She encouraged me to apply to Governor's School. She was my inspiration and was very supportive."

His older sister was also instrumental. "Instead of reading just stories, she would read to me out of her text books. I still remember some of the facts she read."

GSSV students spend half of their school days on the college campus and half at their home high schools. During their college classes, they learn in a nontraditional environment, featuring advanced content, small group instruction, and hands-on experiences that involve original research and mentoring from professionals working in related fields. For college-bound students the opportunity affords an excellent transition to the type of independence they will experience in their postsecondary pursuits.

Now in his senior year, Ty'Leik reflects on his education journey so far, "It's been way better than I expected. I have friends from other counties who are people like me, people who really value the education and opportunities they have and do not waste it."

One of his teachers, Leslie Poling, says, "Ty'Leik is a wonderful student. He is equally adept at being a leader and a worker bee. He also knows when to take each role. I had him in chemistry last year and research this year. He is hard working, a high achiever, and able to work well with anyone."

Research is a key component of the GSSV curriculum. All students are required to participate in the development and execution of an original, two-year research project. Ty'Leik's project focuses on a safety issue. "If someone is cooking on a grill, it can start a fire if it is too close to the house." With two other students, he is investigating a way to determine if the type of paint used on a building's exterior impacts its risk of catching on fire.

In order to design an appropriate experiment, the group first had to do a lot of research. They needed to learn about wood composition, the different measurements used to describe how things burn, the mechanisms by which heat transfers to wood, and the chemicals used in paints. They also had to learn about statistics and develop a strategy for processing the data their experiments will eventually produce. David Braun, a certified welding inspector and welding instructor at SVCC, worked with them to fabricate a metal tool that will enable them to test the burn radius produced under different conditions. When they are finally ready to conduct their tests, Ricky Lyles, Instructor of Fire Science and Emergency Medical Services, will help them with the fire aspects of the project. Next April, just before graduation, Ty'Leik and his group will present their findings at a research symposium to be held on SVCC's Daniel Campus.

The opportunity to conduct and present original research makes an impressive entry on students' college applications, and Ty'Leik has ambitious plans for his future. "After graduation, I would like to attend the University of Virginia with a double major in pre-law and American studies, or at least a minor in American Studies. After graduation from UVA, I'd like to go to Harvard Law School." He also has his ideal career path plotted. "I'd like to become a district attorney, then a judge, and then a justice on the Supreme Court."

He explains, "I grew up hearing stories of great African Americans who influenced and shaped the direction of our country." Ty'Leik hopes to follow in the footsteps of examples like Carter G. Woodson and Thurgood Marshall.

Carter G. Woodson, born in 1875 in Buckingham County to parents who were former slaves, received a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1912, only the second such award ever bestowed upon an African American from that institution. Woodson devoted his life to historical research and education. He authored more than 30 books and was instrumental in establishing the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, launching of the *Journal of Negro History*, and initiating of the observance of Negro History Week, the precursor of today's nationally recognized Black History Month. Woodson noted, "Real education means to inspire people to live more abundantly, to learn to begin with life as they find it and make it better."

Thurgood Marshall, the first African American justice to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court, offered similar sentiments. He summed up his commencement address to students who were graduating from UVA in 1978 by exhorting his audience, “Do not wait for others to move out. Move out yourself. Where you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country. This is your democracy. Make it. Protect it. Pass it on.”

Ty’Leik is eager to take up that mantle of leadership and help steer the nation toward a brighter future. To students who may be considering applying to GSSV, he offers this advice: “Yes. It can be a challenge. But it can be overcome. Classes are hard but the relationships with the teachers and the knowledge they provide makes it possible. GSSV is a wise and smart decision.”