

Chapter One

IN 1985 ORLANDO R. GOBER was the principal at St. Mark's, a Lutheran elementary school in Bushwick, Brooklyn, one of the New York City's poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods. He was the school's first African American principal and, at thirty-one years of age, the youngest Lutheran principal in the metropolitan area—a distinction he'd held since 1977, when he became the youngest principal at any school, public or private, in New York City.

Every fall, Orlando organized class trips to give his mostly African American youngsters a memorable experience in nature. That year, he took forty-five fourth graders and their teachers on a three-day overnight camping trip to Highland Lake in the Catskill Mountains, a two-and-a-half-hour drive upstate.

On the afternoon of the outing's second day, Wednesday, October 30, Orlando took half the students, including nine-year-old Samantha Brown, on a canoe trip, while the rest went hiking. When it came time to switch activities, "I tried so hard to convince Samantha to accompany me again in the canoe because she was asthmatic," Orlando recalled. "I thought the walk up the mountain would be very exhausting for her." But Samantha insisted on the hike, and after a prolonged argument, Orlando gave in.

Over an hour later at 4:30 P.M., Orlando and half the students pulled their canoes on shore and talked about dinner. Meanwhile, the other

youngsters trod down the mountain behind the camp with two teachers. They crossed the bridge that Orlando and his crew had canoed under minutes before and were almost in view of the campsite when Samantha suffered a severe asthma attack. One of the teachers and several students ran ahead, their echoing voices sounding an alarm. Orlando ran up the trail toward them.

By the time Orlando got to Samantha, she was drawing tortured breaths. Orlando dispatched one counselor to call an ambulance and another to retrieve the girl's medications that were neatly packed in her book bag at the camp's homestead. Orlando took Samantha in his arms and held her. He rubbed her face and hands as the temperature dropped through the forties. He held her close to keep her body core warm and prevent her from catching pneumonia.

When the paramedics arrived, Orlando insisted on riding in the ambulance with Samantha. He held her hand until the emergency room physician took her for examination at the hospital. Orlando wouldn't leave her side as the doctor examined her.

"Is she going to be all right?" Orlando asked several times.

"Didn't you realize that she was cold?" the doctor finally answered.

"We were up in the mountains," Orlando answered. "It was close to freezing."

"I'm sorry, but we're pronouncing her DOA," the doctor put his hand on Orlando's shoulder and said.

Orlando gasped as he realized Samantha had died in his arms, then he fainted for the first time in his life. Half an hour later, Orlando regained consciousness in an emergency room bay. Immediately he began to tremble at the thought of calling Samantha's parents.

Orlando decided to phone St. Mark's pastor first to ask him to be at the Brown residence for the dreaded call. Twenty minutes later, Orlando summoned enough courage to dial the Browns' number. He has no memory of the conversation other than fighting to maintain his composure as he related the afternoon's events. Mr. and Mrs. Brown drove to the hospital right away with the pastor to see their daughter's body. Orlando met them in the lobby and struggled to offer his condolences.

Orlando boarded the bus with his other students around midnight. He felt his mind and body go numb, and fell into a near comatose state on the ride back to St. Mark's, as the phrase "Up with 45 and down with 44" pounded relentlessly in his brain. When the bus arrived, Orlando stepped off in a trance. His father, St. Mark's maintenance man, had been told

about Samantha and was waiting for his son. Without saying a word, Orlando collapsed into this father's arms and began to sob.

Arrangements had been made for a doctor to meet the arriving bus to examine staff and students. The physician advised Orlando's father to take him to the family house in Queens. Orlando crawled into his childhood bed and stayed there a week without showering, and he refused to eat. Orlando stared straight ahead, his near catatonic state broken only by uncontrollable crying. He suffered violent mood swings from guilt to anger, and then despair. Orlando felt unforgivably responsible for the young girl's death since he had allowed her to go on the hike.

Orlando pulled himself together to attend Samantha's wake and funeral, albeit under sedation. He found it impossible to converse with the girl's parents or her classmates. When he saw Samantha laid out in her school uniform, he went into hysterics.

After the services, Orlando sent a letter of resignation to St. Mark's and resolved to leave education, feeling utterly incapable of dealing with the possibility of losing another student. The school's board of directors refused to accept the resignation, insisting that he come back to work as soon as possible. The board considered his return a crucial therapeutic step for both principal and students. The board also notified the school's parents about Orlando's crisis. In response, many parents visited daily, along with Orlando's relatives and friends. "There was a tremendous outpouring of support," he recalls. They also brought food and prayed with Orlando, which began to assuage his guilt.

Within two weeks of Samantha's passing, Orlando was back at St. Mark's, although not functioning fully. Perhaps miraculously, it was Samantha's parents who saved Orlando's psyche from self-destructing. They visited him often and kept repeating, "Samantha lived a good life; it wasn't your fault." Samantha had convinced her parents to let her live normally and accept the consequences.

The Browns paid Samantha's tuition for the next four years, so that another child could take her place. Orlando created the Samantha Brown School Spirit Award to honor her, and on the day she would have graduated from the eighth grade, he presented her parents with her diploma.

"Many of my friends thought I would suffer permanently from massive depression, but it didn't happen," Orlando recounts. "They recommended medication and psychotherapy, but I relied on faith instead. At church services, I was brought to the front and prayed over. For weeks, the minister

laid his hands on me; maybe it's unusual, but I felt a healing going on without chemicals."

After taking the dean of students' position at Rice High School in central Harlem in 1993, Orlando lost touch with Samantha's parents. Yet every October 30, he travels to the cemetery on Long Island where she was buried to honor her memory.

For months after Samantha's passing, "Up with 45 and down with 44" repeated in Orlando's mind as an unstoppable rhythmic refrain, and it branded his psyche with guilt. Fourteen years later, the phrase no longer sounds in his mind. Instead it has become the fault line beneath the powerful persona that he has built to lead inner-city children to education's Promised Land.

Orlando strides into Rice's cafeteria to address the new students at their orientation on Wednesday, September 8, 1999. His pumpkin-hued suit, black shirt and rust-tinted tie attract everyone's attention. The orange tones vibrate warmly against his dark brown skin, and Orlando exudes confidence and strength. He knows his presence can be intimidating, which is useful in establishing a leadership role, but he also wants the young men to feel welcome. Orlando smiles expansively and gathers his boys as if into a hug. At 8:28 A.M., he takes charge of their high school careers as both father figure and school administrator.

Orlando's suit has been tailored to fall gracefully over his six-foot, two-inch frame. He weighs 250 pounds, with a slight thickening at his midsection, but otherwise looks fit for a forty-six-year-old. Orlando projects a robust, invincible energy, and moves with studied ease, although not with the grace of a natural athlete. He never had the talent nor inclination to play sports. Instead he's buoyed by a righteous pride as the Rice chief elder.

In order to ensure that his entrance would be dramatic, Orlando had kept the door to his office off the school's foyer closed. For this first morning of the school year and only for this one time, he avoided socializing with students or answering questions from the many parents who accompanied their ninth graders to school to take care of tuition payments. Mostly he wanted to sweep into the assembly as if from a higher dimension to establish that he is the general in "the war against the culture of academic failure that affects most of the freshmen," as he says. Few perform at grade level in all subject areas.

One hundred and thirty-five pairs of eyes are riveted on their principal as he approaches the podium. The ninth graders, together with eight new upperclassmen, sit in complete silence on rows of plastic molded chairs, forming three sides of a rectangle centered around a six-inch riser that functions as a stage. Five pillars down the center of the room hold the acoustic-tiled ceiling about dunking distance from the green and black tiled floor. The students sway in their seats, as if rocked gently by the breeze slipping through clattering vertical blinds along the cafeteria's 124th Street side. Most of the young men wear their hair shorn close to the scalp, and all appear exceptionally well-groomed. Rice students are allowed to wear their hair as they choose, within reason. Typically, closely-cropped styles dominate in September, and by spring, a third of the students have let their hair grow long enough to be braided or sometimes worn as an Afro.

As Orlando steps onto the stage, he still hasn't decided what he's going to say to the largest freshman class in over a decade. He always trusts that God will inspire the right words to flow from his mouth.

"You are going to learn how to empower yourself, how to take charge of your own education," Orlando begins softly with what the new students will hear daily in various versions until it seeps into their dreams at night.

"You'll make the decision to be an A student, or a B student, or worse," he continues. "YOU—not your parents or your teachers." Young minority males who have never seen a black man running a white-owned institution lean forward to listen. The leaning may save many, for the idea of being responsible for oneself and capable of fulfilling that charge is both new and scary. Many have attended low-functioning public schools since kindergarten. When asked about the daily classroom experience, they all talk about the lack of discipline and accountability. Some recount using cell phones to talk to friends on the other side of a classroom, because it was too noisy to shout.

Orlando rubs a hand over wiry black hair that's been cut short and gives the impression of squaring the roundness of his head. Behind aviation-style glasses, his eyes are dark brown and, although opaque, twinkle as he launches into an explanation of his academic expectations. Not only is the passing grade 70 percent, that's merely a minimum requirement. As Orlando clarifies, a student's real passing grade is the measure of his potential, and each student here, he emphasizes, can make the honor roll.

Two-thirds of the new students inhale at once. This is a moment of challenge that they've never experienced before. Getting on the honor roll seems far too lofty a goal for youngsters worried about merely passing their

subjects. Many of these freshmen scored low enough on Rice's entrance exam that they were required to attend a summer readiness program. After five weeks of remedial math and English classes, they know that Rice makes real academic demands, in contrast to what most experienced previously.

Although the majority of freshmen enter Rice with academic deficiencies, Orlando accepts few scoring below the fifth-grade level on entrance tests. Urban Catholic high schools don't have the resources to remediate students approaching functional illiteracy. Zoned public high schools must accept these youngsters since they are obliged to register students according to geographic area of residence. This accounts for some of the difference in outcomes. But the public system also has the resources, in terms of available funding, to deal with those who lag far behind. Regrettably, failed pedagogies, such as variations on whole-language reading programs and constructivist math classes, are still in vogue, contributing significantly to the problem.

To be fair, Orlando points out that students from inner-city Catholic elementary schools aren't always prepared for high school work either. Many students transfer in and out, depending on the parents' ability to pay tuition. In addition, tuitions are so low at urban Catholic elementary schools that five times less is spent per student, sometimes pushing the no-frills approach beyond effective limit.

Orlando assures the young men that their teachers will show them how to succeed, and that he is always available to discuss academic problems and arrange tutoring. He addresses lingering doubts with the assurance that "All we have to do is call up the presence of God; I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Orlando emphasizes "strengthens" in a vocal crescendo, and for a moment it seems that the students will respond by breaking into a chorus of "Amens." Orlando grew up in a Lutheran congregation, joined several evangelical churches, and then became Catholic after joining the Rice faculty. However, the preacher bred in Orlando's bones has taken little notice of his latest conversion.

Nor does Orlando miss an opportunity to proclaim his message. He wears two buttons on his jacket's left lapel, one reading "Rice Men, You Are Worthy. Believe it," and the other with the letter N stricken through with a red line. Orlando's first campaign when he arrived at Rice was to ban the word "nigger" (invariably pronounced "nigga") from the building, and hopefully beyond. At first, the students had trouble understanding why, since they heard the word used so often in the street, and sometimes at home, that they failed to see it as derogatory. The N-word hasn't disappeared completely from the

students' vocabulary, but it's seldom invoked within the school walls and never in a teacher's presence. As a result, there's been a noticeable improvement in the camaraderie and civility among students.

About a dozen black men peer over Orlando's shoulders from various angles, as if trying to communicate with the new students. These are the patron saints of the civil rights movement: Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and so on. Their portraits float on white clouds in a blue sky on a forty-five-foot mural painted by a local artist and paid for by the class of '92. Most students don't know who these men are. They might have heard names like Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Dubois at their grade schools during black history month, but they've inherited little curiosity about older black males. Sometimes the positive presence of fathers in their lives is a question mark; other times, it's an endless ellipse.

Orlando ends his talk by presenting each student with a Bic pen as a welcoming gift. All the pens have been engraved with Orlando's slogans, either "Attitude Is Everything" or "Believe and Succeed."

"Does any student have masking tape on his pen?" Orlando asks.

Three young men rise tentatively to their feet, unsure of whether the tape bodes well.

"On Monday, you'll get a free lunch on me," the principal announces.

A loud "Oooohhhhh!" rolls around the cafeteria as the three students smile broadly. When Orlando became the dean of students, he instituted rewards for good behavior after realizing that many students get into trouble partly because the detentions and "talkings-to" earn the attention they ache for. Now there's a behavior honor roll, a Student-of-the-Month Award for each grade, a "Goodfinder's" list for students who turn in lost property or books, and a bulletin board honoring "Responsible Men." Every marking period, Orlando throws pizza parties or shows movies to reward good grades and positive conduct. This year, he hopes to extend the practice to random groupings of students as a way of "affirming each one's intrinsic value" and encouraging positive feelings about the school.

Orlando smiles to signal the end of what amounts to his induction ceremony. He has effectively adopted the new students as Rice Men and sons. Orlando's boys file toward the stairwell holding the pens in their fists like wizard's wands—and perhaps they are. Writing instruments are history's most transformative invention, and learning to use one properly will profoundly change the lives of these young men.

The stakes are high. If a young man stays four years at Rice, he will graduate and be accepted into college, or perhaps choose a career in the military. If he does reasonably well, overt or subtle forms of affirmative action, together with need-based financial aid, will make it feasible to attend college. On the other hand, if a young man leaves Rice, he will almost certainly have to attend a zoned or otherwise low-performing public high school where less than a third of students graduate, and only a few of these go on to postsecondary schooling.

Ten minutes later in classrooms on the seventh floor, teachers direct the freshmen to their assigned seats, answer questions about their schedules, then usher them to the fifth-floor bookstore to receive a locker number and a lock. Many youngsters have never used a combination lock before, which produces one of the year's most amusing rituals: widespread fights between man and metal.



Orlando slips quietly back into his office after the orientation. He is pleased he was able to command the attention of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds for almost half an hour—no small feat given their predilection for fast-paced video games. Orlando pads across the worn industrial carpet to his desk against the wall. As he waits for his computer to reboot, Orlando complains about his stuffy office. There's only one narrow window, giving him the choice between a small air conditioner or occasional scoops of fresh air, which he prefers. But today's humidity makes the room feel warmer than the seventy-two degrees outside.

The principal could install himself more comfortably in an office one flight up on the second floor, but here his door faces the foyer, making it easy for students to flow in and out from early morning into the evening. Orlando became an educator at eighteen to get involved with students. This is his seventh year at Rice, and his twenty-eighth as an educator. Last year, he became the first African American to head this or any Christian Brothers academy in the country. In fact, Orlando is the first black principal in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York, which includes Manhattan, Staten Island, and the Bronx in New York City, and seven counties extending north to the foothills of the Catskill Mountains—with 2.2 million Catholics belonging to 413 parishes. Orlando's installment was especially fitting for Rice, which has the highest proportion of black students of the archdiocese's high schools. He's also the first black principal

at a Catholic school in the city, which includes the Diocese of Brooklyn and Queens.¹

After logging onto Rice's computer network, Orlando tweaks the returning students' schedules, which he will give out tomorrow. He started calculating class schedules last April, so he could present teachers with class rosters at their orientation at the end of August. Consequently there's no sense of administrative panic as the new school year begins. At Catholic schools, the principal is empowered to organize students and faculty according to what experience and common sense prove most efficacious, without cumbersome regulations or union rules to follow.

Ten minutes later, Orlando sighs deeply and closes his eyes. He prays for the strength to shoulder the responsibility involved in taking on the new students. Through observation, counseling, and feedback from the faculty, he will soon get to know each boy's academic, behavioral, and family issues. He will also become intimately involved in addressing their weaknesses and challenging their strengths. Already Orlando feels tired. Instead of taking his normal and badly needed summer vacation, he served on the grand jury in Manhattan criminal court for five weeks, while also teaching a Regents' global history course for students who failed the exam in June.

Predictably Orlando was chosen as jury foreman and presided over fifty-four cases. Most of the alleged offenders had been arrested on drug charges, while some were arraigned for violent crimes. Orlando was struck by the sense of hopelessness underlying "their big-shot attitudes." He said the defense lawyers obviously hadn't bothered to prepare the young men for the courtroom. They were dressed in hip-hop styles and spoke as if standing on street corners in their neighborhoods. Orlando's fellow jurors quickly lost sympathy and pushed to process each case as quickly as possible. Orlando slowed down the deliberations and confronted several jurors concerning what he considered their indifference to the alleged perpetrators. The young men looked so much like his students at Rice and were the same age or only a few years older. Orlando couldn't help but feel a sense of fatherly obligation, while at the same time he was overwhelmed with futility as the evidence against one after another proved convincing.

"The stark reality of seeing this parade of young African American male offenders was so devastating," he declared afterward. "These kids had been emotionally hurt and abandoned. The adults in their lives failed to guide them properly or reassure them that they could pull it together. Instead, parents and teachers made excuses, which crippled their willpower. There's definitely racism in society and a culture that makes you feel worthless;

that's a given. But we use racism as a scapegoat too often, instead of rising above it. People have to be held responsible for what they do."

With searing regret, Orlando felt compelled to recommend indictments for all the accused, knowing they wouldn't get the help they needed in jail. "The experience redoubled my determination to teach the young men at Rice the responsibility that's the heart of manhood, and the worthiness they need to feel about themselves," Orlando resolved. "God knows how many of our young men are just one step away from doing something terrible. I get phone calls all the time from students asking to come over to my house because something's going to happen on their block, and they don't want to be around." Several times a year, Orlando bails out a student, fortunately not for anything serious so far. Statistically, a black male has a one-in-three chance of going to prison in his lifetime, a rate more than six times higher than that for white males.² Without a high school diploma, jail becomes an expected event in the life of many African American boys.

Orlando also resolved not to waste time on what he considers pointless discussions, as one parent now finds out. A knock at the office door pulls Orlando back to the present tense. He rises with noticeable effort, then directs the mother of a prospective sophomore to the couch along the wall opposite his desk. Orlando asks her why she wants her son to attend Rice. The woman responds with a lengthy monologue about violence at public schools. Orlando asks about the young man's grades, to which the mother apologizes for her son's mediocre performance, blaming it on gang activity.

"We've been talking for twenty minutes now," Orlando finally says with obvious exasperation, "and you haven't asked one question about our academic program. I know safety's an important concern these days, but Rice High School was not built for the sole purpose of protecting your son."

Orlando pauses to give the mother a chance to respond, but she's dumbfounded. "I'm not going to waste your money," he continues. "Clearly Rice is not the right school for your son. You need to get your priorities in order before enrolling him here." The woman's face registers dismay and she begins to protest. Orlando stands and directs her curtly back to the foyer, then closes the door sharply behind her.

At 11:30 A.M., Orlando stands in the hallway between the main office and the stairs down to the front door. He shakes hands and chats with his boys as they're dismissed. Some take his hand and pump vigorously, while others

seem confused by the simplicity of the gesture. Orlando doesn't know all their faces yet, and variations in size and physical maturity are striking. One appears prepubescent while the next looks almost like a man. Regardless of their stage of adolescence, Orlando has conferred Rice Man status on every new student as fully initiated members of the Rice family.

An incident this morning showed that given their first opportunity, the students honor the Rice tradition. One freshman left his Walkman under his chair in the cafeteria when he went upstairs after the orientation. A classmate found the Walkman and brought it to the school office to become the year's first "Goodfinder." This pleased Orlando immensely, and he declared that "this affirms right away what we're doing."

On an amusing note, a freshman asks why the school was named after a type of food. Orlando laughs loudly and makes a mental note to ask the freshman religion teacher to clarify the point with his students.

Directly behind Orlando, and reaching about six inches overhead, is a large statue of Blessed Edmund Rice, set on a pedestal.³ Rice founded the Congregation of Christian Brothers in Ireland at the beginning of the nineteenth century to teach the children of the poor. Playing out now in front of the founder's figure is the expansion of his legacy to include educating black and Latino students. The shiny white plaster representation overshadows Orlando like a guardian angel, transmitting Edmund Rice's leadership role to an African American.

I sit on a bench in the foyer watching Orlando interact with the new students. I'm struck with both how familiar and fascinatingly exotic Rice seems. There's no mistaking that Rice is a Catholic school: religious icons adorn walls throughout the building, and of course there's an impressive array of sports trophies on display in the foyer. The students are neatly dressed and well behaved. There is no hint of the threatening chaos that characterizes many urban public high schools.

At the same time, almost all the students are black, which is a striking visual contrast to the Catholic schools I attended in Canada and to most of Catholic schools that middle-class Americans attend. As much as I cringe at the admission, I'm having trouble telling some of the students apart. Although I met the majority of freshmen during the summer session, now they're wearing uniforms and most have similar haircuts. Most likely I'd have less trouble at a predominately white school. Before going home, I'll

ask for a copy of last year's yearbook to prepare for the upperclassmen who arrive tomorrow. The freshmen I'll get to know thoroughly within a few days.

Listening to the students, I'm confounded by some of their vocabulary and idioms, which are specific to urban minority teenagers, and some expressions are peculiar to Harlem and the South Bronx. For example, overhearing one freshman say, "My shorty's a dime," is bewildering. Fortunately several students at each grade level catch on and furnish translations over the next few weeks until I'm conversant. The freshman above is bragging about his girlfriend, a "shorty," by saying that she's a 10 on the beauty scale.

Behaviorally Rice students are more boisterous than their white peers; their positive energy, melodic speech patterns, and frequent laughter charge the school with an irresistible vitality. Most remarkable is something I sense but struggle to name. Finally I perceive the obvious: these young men have hope in their eyes.