

# Immersion-style initiative helps children thrive at school



Photos by Rebecca Slezak/Staff Photographer

**Jill Louis, the wife** of At Last! The Urban Boarding Experience's founder, talks with children during a creative writing lesson. The ambitious, free program is designed to help students thrive at the schools they already attend.

## A path to visualizing and realizing potential



**SHARON GRIGSBY**  
sgrigsby@dallasnews.com

**A**s poor kids growing up in Pleasant Grove, 10-year-old Randy Bowman and his siblings raced to Pemberton Hill Park on summer days because volunteers were often there to provide free sandwiches.

Randy was grateful to those good people, but the handouts were a hit-or-miss proposition, and he knew it. The sandwich didn't erase the boy's worry that "if they aren't back here tomorrow, then I've got another issue."



**Founder Randy Bowman** fist-bumps a student leaving for home. "My trying hard doesn't make life better for one child in this program. Succeeding at this will," he says.

The food distribution solved the Bowman children's problem of the moment, but

didn't make a dent in the bleak trajectory of their future.

Now, almost 50 years later,

that memory helps Bowman explain why he opened At Last! The Urban Boarding Experience. It's an idea born of his own experience — and his candid grasp of the struggles his own loving mother faced.

Among the many anti-poverty initiatives in Dallas, At Last stands out as an ambitious, immersion-style live-in program designed to help kids thrive at the schools they already attend.

It is free of charge to the families it serves and was launched largely with the Dallas businessman's own money.

The operation's rigorous and results-driven strategies reflect the same standards that

SHARON GRIGSBY

# Dallas program provides e

Continued from Page 1B

made Bowman a successful corporate lawyer and logistics company owner. He's interested in creating proficient learners ready to tackle whatever path they choose after graduation.

"We have the lives of kids and their mothers in our hands," he said. "My trying hard doesn't make life better for one child in this program. Succeeding at this will."

Slowed but not deterred by the pandemic, At Last opened its first building March 7, 2021, across the street from South Oak Cliff High School, just east of Interstate 35E.

COVID-19 restrictions currently allow for only 10 students in the building, which is designed for 16. The participants, known as scholars-in-residence, can't stay overnight until the pandemic subsides, so for now they attend from 3:15 to 8:15 p.m. Sunday through Thursday.

Based on the individual reports that Bowman shared with me, the enrolled participants, who range from third- through fifth-graders, have already seen significant academic progress. He hopes to eventually expand to two more buildings planned nearby and to serve 180 students from first to sixth grade.



## Wanting better for kids

At Last is founded on the gold standard of parenting: mothers, like Bowman's own, who want better for their own children than they got for themselves. Mothers who so value education that they are willing to make the personal sacrifice to allow their kids to spend substantial time away from home.

The program doesn't choose its kids — the moms and students choose At Last, then go into a lottery system. Interviews and assessments follow, but no child is ever rejected because of poor grades.

Bowman's own mother, Annie Lois, remains the single greatest influence on his life. The pain he saw daily in her eyes is the fuel that propels him to do this work.

With a spouse "out and about," in Bowman's words, and two of her four children born while she was still a teenager, Annie Lois had no choice but to give up her own ambitions.

As the oldest son, Bowman knew school was only one of his responsibilities. He started working at age 10 — deodorizing vehicles for a dollar apiece at a local self-service car wash. At age 12, he washed dishes at a diner; at 14, he scrubbed pots and pans at the Timberlawn psychiatric facility.

Every dollar he made went to making ends meet.

Bowman did it all without complaint. "How could I not?" he said, recalling his mother's long-untreated depression and her desperate attempts to feed her kids and get medical help for them when she had no way to pay.

Those years also speak to why Bowman believes so strongly in education's potential to break poverty's stranglehold, one family at a time.

Graduating in the top 10% of students at Spruce High School, Bowman attended the University of Texas



**Elicha Edwards, known as the At Last** " across from South Oak Cliff High School

at Austin while working to help support his family. He returned to Dallas after law school, and with his wife, Jill, built the kind of life in North Dallas for their children that he never knew growing up.

But Bowman, now 58, never forgot his roots. He served as the Parkland Foundation's board chair as the group raised funds to build the new county hospital. He also has invested in the Redbird Mall revitalization, a mixed-use development serving southern Dallas.

Bowman sees his mother, who passed away just days before he opened At Last's doors, in every mom who makes the decision to entrust her child with him.

"They are at least as aspirational as they are impoverished," Bowman said. "I am not seeing them through a lens of judgment. They get enough judgment from society."

## Joy and potential

A through line of misery and trauma exists in the families At Last serves, but that doesn't mask the joy or the potential in these children.

The several hours I spent observing at At Last revealed a place of boisterous young people and nurturing adults — a mix of structured rigor and near-chaotic creativity.

The day followed At Last's regular schedule: The first part of the afternoon was devoted to learning, with specially trained staff counselors using precise data-driven tools. Dur-

at Austin while working to help support his family. He returned to Dallas after law school, and with his wife, Jill, built the kind of life in North Dallas for their children that he never knew growing up.

But Bowman, now 58, never forgot his roots. He served as the Parkland Foundation's board chair as the group raised funds to build the new county hospital. He also has invested in the Redbird Mall revitalization, a mixed-use development serving southern Dallas.

Bowman sees his mother, who passed away just days before he opened At Last's doors, in every mom who makes the decision to entrust her child with him.

"They are at least as aspirational as they are impoverished," Bowman said. "I am not seeing them through a lens of judgment. They get enough judgment from society."

## Joy and potential

A through line of misery and trauma exists in the families At Last serves, but that doesn't mask the joy or the potential in these children.

The several hours I spent observing at At Last revealed a place of boisterous young people and nurturing adults — a mix of structured rigor and near-chaotic creativity.

The day followed At Last's regular schedule: The first part of the afternoon was devoted to learning, with specially trained staff counselors using precise data-driven tools. Dur-



**In a creative writing lesson**, students create sock puppets to help them perform a story. The At Last team focuses not only on the children's school obligations but whether they understand what they're taught.

ing dinnertime, "house mom" Elicha Edwards played question-and-answer games designed to sharpen social-emotional skills.

After completing their designated chores, the students ended their evening exploring extracurricular interests. This night's activity was sock puppet-inspired creative writing.

Cornell Lacy, chief programming officer, told me the stability that At Last provides and the amount of time the staff gets to work daily with the students is transformative for them

all.

The team keys in on tackling not only the children's school obligations but whether they really understand what they were taught. "Yes, I want you to complete your homework, but I also want to see what you know about the learning behind it," Lacy said.

Lacy, who grew up in South Dallas and graduated from DISD's Townview Science and Engineering School and SMU, was the head of the math department at the Barack Obama

Male Leadership Academy when Bowman persuaded him to join At Last.

It was a hard choice for Lacy, who is passionate about classroom teaching, but he sees At Last as filling a gap that no one else is.

He talks daily with the children to understand and address the roots of what shows up in their performance. How do they feel about learning? Why is one student having a tough time reading this book? What is causing another to shut down?

“I get to have those conversations with them and they have those breakthrough moments,” Lacy said. “Once a week one of them will say, ‘I really feel differently about school.’”

## **Proof that it works**

Bowman said the building blocks of comfort and trust are still being put in place, but he has enough results to know At Last works.

Among the statistics that keep him awake at night is this one: The U.S. churns out impoverished children at two times the rate of youngsters destined for middle-class life. That number compounds from one generation to the next.

“That portends bad things for America if we don’t improve the education we give these underserved children,” Bowman told me.

“I need to make this work for as many kids as I can.”