

Palo Alto Weekly

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A league of her own

Charlie Mae Knight, Ravenswood City School District's controversial superintendent, has spent seven years trying to improve East Palo Alto's troubled schools—and she's not through yet.

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New School fifth-grader Manuel Valencia and Ravenswood City School District Superintendent Charlie Mae Knight watch a video on black history. Knight says the biggest challenge she faces is to convince the general populace that "there is a real effort to raise the achievement level of youngsters in schools that are poverty-stricken."

Editor's Note:

When Charlie Mae Knight took on the job of superintendent of Ravenswood City School District, history did not bode well for her future. Ten superintendents had held the post in the previous nine years. Knight came to Ravenswood from the Linwood School District in Southern California. She took the job knowing that Ravenswood was riddled with problems, from its dismal financial status to drugs, crime and political turmoil. Now, with seven years under her belt, Knight says many of the problems still exist, but generally the district she directs is in better shape than it has been in decades.

While critics claim Knight takes on too much and is too often in the public eye, supporters and followers say everyone should be thankful the determined 60-year-old educator has stuck it out in a school district plagued

with poor student attendance, low teacher morale and widespread physical deterioration of school facilities.

Almost as if to accent the district's needs, the thermostat in the office was broken and stuck in an "on" position, making it unbearably warm on the day of the following interview. Lights flickered on and off several times during a two-hour visit. A lamp sitting on Knight's end table has never worked. These small hardships are nothing, she said, in comparison with the larger issues facing the school system across the freeway from more prosperous Palo Alto.

In the interview that follows, the native Georgian, who now lives in East Palo Alto, addresses the current issues, her plans and concerns, and her hopes for the future of Ravenswood.

A LEAGUE OF HER OWN

Ravenswood City School District's controversial superintendent, Charlie Mae Knight, has stuck it out for seven years—and she's not done yet

Interview by Melinda Sacks
Photographs by Carolyn Clebsch

Weekly: What are the biggest issues facing the district today?

Knight: The biggest issue has to do with academic achievement. The greatest challenge to any inner-city school is to convince the general populace that there is a real effort to raise the achievement level of youngsters in schools that are poverty-stricken. The book "Savage Inequality" talks about how unequal these schools are in terms of money and tangibles, but it doesn't talk about how uneven they are in terms of people. I'm talking about the quality of teachers you get in the inner city. It is not the kind of place that attracts the brightest and the best.

Q How have the demographics of the district changed since you came?

A They have changed significantly. When I came in 1985 the district was 15 to 20 percent Hispanic. Now it has tripled and it's 53 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Tongan, 38 percent black and less than 1 percent white.

Q What effect has the Tinsley desegregation settlement had?

A The Tinsley case has not had a significant effect on the district. We've lost about 1,500 kids. They were not the cream of the crop.

Q What can be done to improve the quality of teachers and teaching?

A What I have done is when I go out and talk to Stanford students, for example, I say, 'You are the best and the brightest. I need people who are altruistic. I need someone who wants to do something for the good of all people.' So this year I got a John Gardner Fellow (to work for free within the district). She has been assigned to my office for the first time. Usually this fellowship is given to people who want to go to exotic places like Africa or Australia, who want to study something like the environment. For her to say, 'I want to learn more about the inner city' is a great plus. She also serves as an assistant teacher. She can give these kids hands-on experience. She's been in my office a lot, where there is controversy, there is politics, there is creativity, and now she's convinced she wants to be a teacher. She wasn't thinking about going into elementary education, but she is now. This kind of thing makes a real difference for us.

Q Describe the working environment and what kinds of obstacles there are to improving the classroom situation here.

A The situation in inner cities is that we have people who have already resigned themselves to the inevitable. Based on the projections that all of the research tells us, these children are not going to do well and it's fixed. People assume there's nothing that can be done about it. There is a high correlation

between educational performance and achievement and parental involvement. We can't do anything about that. If a child is born of a parent who is 18 years old and is unskilled, based on what they've been told it is inevitable that these youngsters will always be poor and won't do well in school. They are pre-programmed to fail, and we have to fight against it.

Q It's a self-fulfilling prophecy, then?

A Yes. All of this research mitigates against what we are trying to do. We have the children who are unhealthy. They're more likely to stay home. Our attendance is poor. Given all that, these teachers have to somehow forget it, strike it, don't even think it. But they don't forget. They do think it. As a consequence, they say, 'Well, I could do this but I won't. What's the point? These kids will fail anyway.' Principals often get that same kind of feeling: 'This is an insurmountable task.'

Q What creates that feeling for teachers?

A A big part of it is that they're told or they hear that they have the lowest salaries and that compounds the morale problem. It's also not true at all. They don't have the lowest salaries, but nobody out there will look at it logically.

An example is Las Lomas (School District in Menlo Park). Granted, Las Lomas pays very high salaries. If you look at their salary schedule, yes they are paying \$2,000 to \$5,000 a year more than we are. But do the flip side and compare the fringe benefit packages. It's \$2,000 per teacher there and ours is \$4,000.

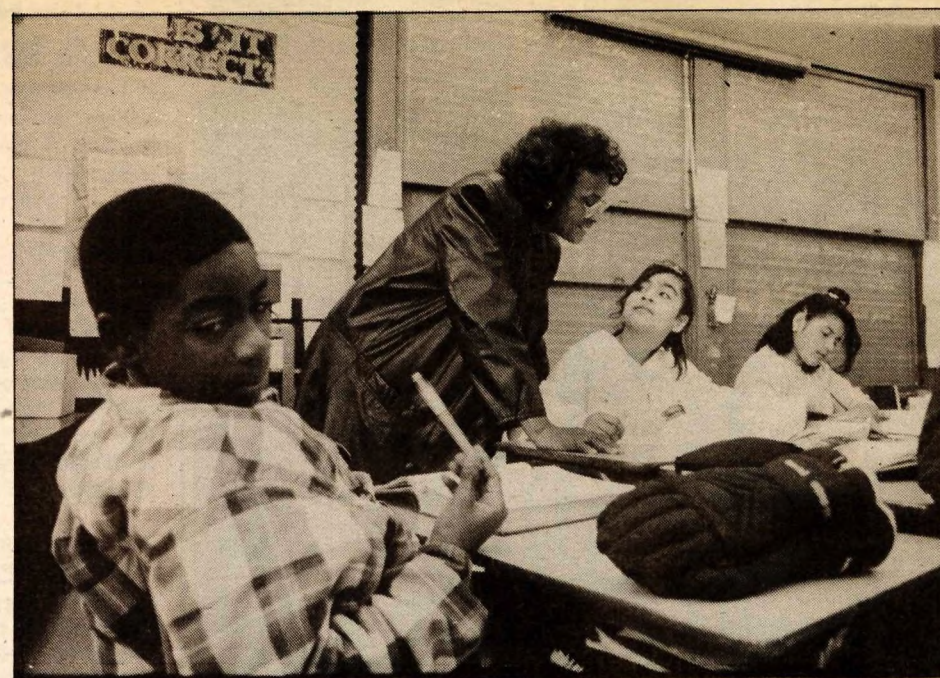
It's easy to accuse management of not doing right about teachers when folks don't know the kinds of things that are going on.

What I'm saying is if we all decided that we were going to eliminate the perils of inner-city schools and put everything in the middle of the table—all the things that cost money—we may be able to turn around and give back some salary.

Q What job responsibilities of yours are out of the ordinary realm of your position as superintendent?

A My job goes far beyond any description on paper. For example, if you're talking about the problem of vandalism, it costs this district so much money. How can we get the community involved in reducing the amount of vandalism? That's a big concern to me. I have an expense every Monday morning. People who don't want to get a dumping permit come and dump their trash on the school grounds and I have to remove it because I have to create a safe environment. If they decide they want to come on campus and drink beer all weekend and drop beer cans and then while they're in a drunken stupor shoot out 42 windows, well, my first job is not to

(continued on next page)



Top: Knight discusses how things are going at New School with principal Gwen Gholson-Driver. New School, along with six other schools in the district, was put on academic probation by Knight and given one year to raise its California Assessment Program scores. Bottom: Knight chats with seventh-graders Daron Patton, Magdalena Castrejon and Yesenia Quiroz. She spends as much time as she can in classrooms.

Profile of a district

The Ravenswood City School District comprises eight middle school and elementary campuses. Two cover kindergarten to fourth grade, two are for fifth- through eighth-graders, and four are for kindergarten through eighth grade. Ravenswood High School was closed in 1976, so Ravenswood graduates attend Menlo-Atherton High School in Menlo Park. The student population of the district is 4,292 this year.

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Knight

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go and educate kids, but to repair those windows before somebody gets hurt. We spend lots of time and money that is unnecessary, primarily because of the lack of police protection and security.

Q What kinds of programs have you developed to try and address these problems?

A The adopt-a-school program is just one example. Many of these kinds of programs are purely ceremonial. But our adoptions are different than others and sometimes they really work. I've been very selective. Cisco Systems (an electronics company based in Mountain View) gives us not only manpower but money. If Hewlett-Packard adopts a school, they give time and money. Our adoption by the MBA students at Stanford is something you can feel. Our program has worked so well that when I stand up and talk about it in other states they think I've been smoking something. They are just really amazed.

That's the thing about our schools here. Even though it has not moved as fast as I would have liked it to move, it is light-years from where it was when I came, no matter what people who like to be very critical would like to say. They measure everything in test scores. But we need to talk about the system that fosters the non-attendance of children because things are not in place to support them. We have a poor health system that plays into children not attending schools. Our families don't have medical insurance, the kids don't go to the doctor, and they don't eat well, so they are sick much more often than they should be.

Q Can you summarize the other obstacles?

A One of the biggest challenges is finding the right instructional process that will result in higher achievement for inner-city children.

The second most critical one is, how do you take teachers who are not trained to work with inner-city children and assist them in the acquisition of the right skills to be effective in teaching children in areas like East Palo Alto?

The third thing is figuring out how to build a meaningful collaborative (process) that would engage all these people who are supposed to be focusing on this one little area—the government offices, the educators, the county. . . . It is incredible, the waste that takes place.

There must be just millions and millions of dollars being poured into East Palo Alto in some form or another, much of it on the same child. But it is not done in a coordinated way so that the money is well spent. We have a welfare system where some people living here may be on welfare somewhere else. There's just no discussion about this child and this child's life. There's money pouring in on these "government services," but a lot of it is useless.

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Q Can you give an example?

A Sure. I have three children coming here from San Francisco, which is a different county. It will take three months for those children's records to get here, and it's not 30 miles away. It will be three months before their grandmother (who now has custody) will receive any compensation for the children or any of the services due them.

These kids were found in the Sunnydale Apartments in San Francisco (notorious for drug and crime problems) and these three children were being cared for by an 8-year-old. One baby was a year and a half and the other was 3 years old. The adult is out there on the streets running in and out probably every month, and they had evidently been there a long time. Of course there is a concerted effort to reunite the children with a relative, so they brought them to the grandmother here in East Palo Alto. She had had a single life and a little apartment and she works in San Francisco. She had not had any children around for sometime. But she said, 'Well, I'm their grandmother.' So she came to me and asked me, 'Dr. Knight, I just want to know what can you do for us?'

Q Is this the kind of thing people say you shouldn't be doing?

A Exactly. But if I can't help children in need in my own district, and their parents too, for that matter, what good am I do-



Knight visits a district program for crack babies. Ironically, Knight says she is so busy minding the district's students that she doesn't have enough time to spend with her own grandchildren.

ing? So I said, 'All right, I will meet you at the day care center' (run by the district). This grandmother has to catch a CalTrain at 7 a.m. to go to San Francisco every morning and she doesn't get back until 6:30. In the meantime her nice neighbors said they would watch the kids while she came to see what Dr. Knight could do.

Well, I thought, 'perfect.' We have a subsidized center. But not so. You go to the center and they say the child must have evidence he has been immunized. Well, wait a minute. We found these children in an apartment. They had nothing on the floor but a mattress. And they are talking about they have got to have records. I said to the director, 'Well, we'll put them in because the mother has already gone to work. The father is blind and he certainly can't take care of them.' The director, who works for me, said, 'We cannot take those kids because they will expose the other children to some other disease.'

I said, 'Hold it. I will personally

see to it that these children are immunized today.' But I didn't have the vaguest idea how to do it. I called every agency that is supposed to provide these things, but the agency people in East Palo Alto are only there every other Monday, so we were out of luck. I finally called a doctor I had met in Rotary Club. Dr. Harmond at Lucile Packard said, 'Charlie, if you are willing to come over and sit I'll make time for you,' and I said, 'No problem.' I took them over and we got them not only their immunization, but their physical exams and it took us two or three hours. So that's how I spent one whole day.

At the end, though, those children were eligible to go to the center. Now remember, this is where I am the superintendent. That's supposed to mean I have some control. Anyway, I finally got the kids into my own center.

Q What kind of cooperation do you have among the others in the district in trying to accomplish things like this?

A It is interesting how people in this district have become so acclimated to these delays that they just accept them. The secretary said, 'How did you do that? It's a miracle.' They have actually adjusted and said, 'That's the way its going to be. So I'll do my little thing and you do your little thing and we'll go home.' There's no collaboration.

What I am simply saying is if there were just some effort other than rhetoric . . . If you did build a true collaborative (process) where there could be a hotline for any family with a problem to call this number and they could get help . . .

But the community thinks school people are not supposed to be too smart. Even if you tried it they would say, 'Oh that sounds dumb.'

Q You must get very discouraged.

A There are times if it were not for people like Dolly (Sacks, a program officer at the David and Lucile Packard Foundation) and Bill Somerville (founder of Philanthropic Ventures in San Mateo) who I can always call on, we would be up a creek.

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The gang problem

Even in elementary school, gang-related violence isn't unusual

Two years ago, the Ravenswood School Board approved a reconfiguration of the district's schools to do away with middle schools and return seventh- and eighth-grade students to elementary campuses. One major reason for the change was a desire to split up youth gangs that were believed to be the root of increasing school violence.

Since the reconfiguration, said Superintendent Charlie Mae Knight, the problem has decreased significantly. But gangs whose members range from 9 to 14 years old are still a presence in Ravenswood schools.

"We do have some evidence of gangs and we're working with the police and staff trying to learn the symbols and how to diffuse the activities these gang members participate in," Knight said. Drug usage and sales and territorial fighting are the signposts of groups like the Midtown Hogs, the Crips and the Bloods, a few of the gangs thought to be active in East Palo Alto.

The symbols of gang membership, according to Knight, are wearing pants "below the butt," certain sports jackets like the Oakland Raiders and the Cardinals, blue and white shoelaces, and bandannas. Teachers are asked to be on the lookout for anything they think might be a gang symbol and report it to Knight or the police. But the gangs change their symbols often so the effectiveness of banning certain attire is limited.

"Putting the middle school kids back into the elementary schools reduced violence by about 99 percent," said Knight, "but it still happens."

One troubling development observed recently is the spread of gang activity to girls. But Knight said she is determined to track and put an end to violence in the district. ■

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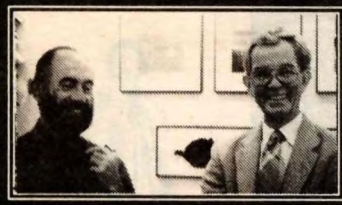
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Things like when children are homeless and we have no way to deal with them. It can be so discouraging. According to the government, in order to qualify for assistance, they have to be living in a shelter. But if parents are evicted, they are homeless even though that's not the definition if they're staying with friends or relatives, 10 people in one room.

I have children coming to school saying they were evicted because their mom didn't have the money for rent so they're living in their car. Or they left their apartment because they were afraid from hearing shooting all night long.

I went to Bill (Somerville) and said, 'There are some types of situations that aren't being addressed by the system.' These kinds of homelessness that evolve because somebody didn't pay the rent, but they still come to school and we are expected to teach them. And they might not have had much to eat the night before either.

So I asked what would happen if I put together a needy children's fund. Then if I find a family like that I could take a small amount of money and go to the landlord and say, 'Look, this is a good family. Here's the first and the last month's rent. You move them in and if you have any problems call me.' And he said, 'Charlie that's a great idea.' He gave me \$3,000. Dolly (Sacks from the Packard Foundation) was in another group that had \$15,000 and didn't know what to do with it. She suggested giving it to the needy children's fund. So we were able to put the fund together and now it's in operation.

Those funds we use to move those families into an apartment, that's not something you get any brownie points for (in the community). People say that's not something you ought to worry about. It's not in the realm of your work.

If there's any way I can improve the quality of life for parents of children in my district, though, I consider that's my job.

Do you get angry at the lack of support and appreciation

I don't get angry because I get psychic energy by looking back at where we used to be. That's what keeps me going.

What's your biggest frustration?

What's most frustrating is when I get misunderstood. This business of health insurance that I was promoting got turned into a story about burial insurance. It was never the intention. The sad thing and the hypocrisy is that it would have brought us closer to what Palo Alto is already providing—blanket coverage for children while they are in school. They pay it in one of the wealthiest communities and it's done through the general fund.

And Palo Alto doesn't even have the perils we have, or the need. I was simply looking at when our children have the greatest number of accidents. I saw San Jose offering their parents a 24-hour-a-day coverage, and I thought, if I can get

an insurance broker to provide that it could include health insurance, accidental death and dismemberment and it would be a unique help to parents.

More than 55 percent of our children have no insurance at all. Why is it that we as a school district could not take a leadership role and make it affordable? If we can do it for employees, why not extend it to children?

"I don't get angry because I get psychic energy by looking back at where we used to be. That's what keeps me going."

People went crazy over it because the press assumed term life insurance is burial insurance and that makes good press. If you look at the mortality rates and the numbers of health problems and multiple birth defects we have, it makes perfect sense. These kids lose eyes, they injure limbs, they're hit by cars more often than other kids. The death and dismemberment is just an adjunct to the rest of the policy.

I still think it's a good idea, and I'm going to be working with nonprofits to look at other districts who want to do this. In our district it's been turned over to the safety committee.

What are you proudest of?

It's gotten me in a lot of trouble, but I'm proudest of Flood School. We've demonstrated that you can assemble a group of teachers in an inner-city school and make it work. Other people have bought into the idea of a magnet school. We pooled all our resources and put together a school that works. The students were not the brightest kids, but we proved that parental involvement makes the difference. The parents promise to contract two hours a month.

People complain that I am singling out Flood, but I'm hoping others will look at it and ask what ele-

ments they can use elsewhere. The reason I opened it was I was tired of upwardly mobile families coming along and asking to transfer where their kids can be more challenged. Now I can show them the scores at Flood, and they compare favorably. I wish I knew why it wasn't full.

What we are attempting to do here is provide the greatest quality of education and focus on the complete needs of the children living in an area where problems aren't often understood—things like early teen pregnancy, for example. In our elementary schools we had three live births in the last year.

What do you want people to know about the Ravenswood School District?

I wish people knew that we want to pay salaries comparable to any other district. We are not being mean-spirited when we say we are doing the best we can. Until people are willing to compromise and say, 'I would rather take benefits than salary,' we will always be perceived as a poor area.

We are far from poor. We are above the state average for the amount paid per child by the state. We are not at the bottom. I would like people to know that the district is run smoothly.

What keeps you going?

There is no way I could have done it without the support I've gotten on this peninsula. People have extended me so much trust. When people ask me, 'Why aren't you down? Why are you doing it?' I say, 'Look, I know one of these days somebody will catch up with the ideas I'm promoting,' like the group insurance for children.

What do you hope for?

What I hope for is to have a district moving smoothly ahead, with academic achievement steadily rising each year. If I could be instrumental in getting that long-awaited high school open that everybody in this community would like to have, I'd feel great. I'd like to play a leadership role in that. I'll stick it out if the people stick with me. ■



Knight's popularity among East Palo Alto children is evident as they swarm around her after an anti-smoking parade ending at City Hall.