

# FORUM

## Spelling bee contestants are all W-I-N-N-E-R-S



**Nigel Alston**

Motivational Moments

"If we are not happy and joyous at this season, for what other season shall we wait and for what other time shall we look?"

— Abdul-Bahai

I sat in a very small chair at a little desk in the middle of a room filled with computers that also serves as an elementary school television studio. I was the celebrity pronouncer for the Spears Elementary School spelling bee, being broadcast on the school's television channel, WBUZ.

The school's mascot is a bee. In the middle of the room is a big red rug with black letters spelling out a familiar message: Say no to drugs! A blue draped background hung down from the ceiling and provided a backdrop for the microphone in front of it. Each participant stood in front of the microphone, listened to his or her word and attempted to spell it correctly.

The first round — a practice round — was rather easy and moved quickly. Each student knew his or her assigned word in advance and spelled it correctly, with confidence I might add. Each listened to the word as it was pronounced, then used in a sentence,

followed by hearing it pronounced again. For example, the first word was "computer." "A computer is a machine that performs computations and processes information. Computer."

Eleven class spelling champions competed for the top prize, a trophy and competition at the next level in February, 2003. They are fourth- and fifth-graders named De'shaun, Taja, Rebecca, Jeffery, C.J., Raquel, Brian, Moniqua, Michael, Shanquela, Alexis and Frederick.

It hurt me to watch as a student misspelled a word, but "amphibian" gives me trouble too. "A frog is an amphibian because it begins its life in the water as a tadpole, then becomes a land animal with smooth, wet skin. Amphibian."

At other times I smiled as a student reacted with a "yes!" after being told the student had spelled a word right.

Raquel Welch, a fourth-grader, placed second. She is a competitor and was a little disappointed. "It's OK. I could have done better," she told me after the contest was over. She missed a more difficult word in one round, and the next person after her had the opportunity to spell an easier one, "patio." I heard her tell another student later that she would have spelled that word correctly.

Spelling is one of her hobbies. "It's fun when you do it several times," she said. The interviewer that I am, wanted to know why. "People see you as a good speller,"

she said.

"What would you tell other students?" I asked.

"You should do it and try your best," she responded. She walks the talk.

One incorrect letter in the word "conquistador" was the difference in first and second place for Raquel. Her challenger, Frederick Beal, did not miss it. A few letters at a time and he nailed it. That qualified him for the next word and a chance for the championship trophy. "Piñata," I said, speaking into the microphone. "Children swung at the colorful piñata so that they could knock it down in order to get the candy that was inside. Piñata." I said one more time, completing my assignment.

Frederick concentrated and spelled the word slowly, one letter at a time: "P-I-N-A-T-A. Piñata." The judges conferred and acknowledged it was the correct spelling. Frederick visualized the word before he attempted to spell it. "I was thinking about it in my head," he told me in our post spelling bee interview in the cafeteria. "I could picture it in my head."

Frederick knows something about perseverance too. He started participating in the fourth grade (last year) and came in third place. Like Raquel, he can't explain why he likes spelling, but he just knows he likes it. "It's fun!" he said without hesitation. His eyes light up when he talks about it too. "I like

spelling!" he said.

"He will not be a dressed-up dummy," Lonnie Allred, his grandfather told me at the reception honoring the class spelling champions. Allred shared with me the images of people like former pro football player Dexter Manly who excelled in sports, but could not read as an adult. "What a shame," Allred said.

That is not going to happen to his grandchildren, not if he can help it. In a conversation the night before, Allred told his grandson that it was about time for him to place a trophy in his case. He did this day and it is one of many. I am sure, that will follow.

What a sight to see — fourth- and fifth-graders sitting around a table, eating peanuts, slices of apple, drinking punch and talking about words.

If you think spelling those words was a challenge to the students, think about pronouncing each one, like this one that stumped another student — "equestrian." Raquel didn't feel too bad about that as she hit the nail on the head when she told me, "Some adults can't spell these words."

My interview ended with Frederick when I asked what advice he had to offer students. "Do your best," he said. Each of them did and they are all winners.

Nigel Alston is a radio talk-show host, columnist and motivational speaker. Visit his Web site at [www.motivationalmoments.com](http://www.motivationalmoments.com).



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## Best interest of children ignored

**Carlton Eversley & John Mendez**

Guest Columnists

The Ministers Conference of Winston-Salem and the Education Caucus of the NAACP expressed disappointment and dismay over the recent decision about a new principal at Latham Elementary School.

Our thinking has nothing to do with Ingrid Medlock, who was appointed. It has everything to do with Dr. Gwendolyn Johnson, who was rejected. It is a tool of oppressors to keep the oppressed fighting among themselves, always diverting their attention from the central conflict with the oppressive system itself. This we refuse to do. We have nothing bad to say about Medlock whatsoever.

Only one school in Forsyth County educates poor people well. This is not a subjective opinion; it is an objective fact. There are 21 equity-plus schools in Forsyth. These are schools full of children on free and reduced lunch, i.e. poor. They are predominantly black and brown (Hispanic/Latino). Only Latham is at the School of Distinction level, meaning it has scored over 80 percent on the end-of-grade testing.

All the others are in the high 40s, 50s, 60s or maybe low 70s. Latham's progress from the bottom of this scoring toward the top was led by the late, great principal and educator, Dr. Larry G. Fields. He set the high expectations, hired the right teachers, found a teaching method called Project CHILD in Florida and tolerated nothing else but discipline and excellence.

It took Fields 10 years to get Latham to this point. For over half of that time, Dr. Gwendolyn Johnson was one of his "right hand" people. He hired her away from Diggs Elementary as a curriculum



coordinator. Though she already had a master's degree, he encouraged her and helped facilitate her, to earn her doctorate from N.C. State University. She helped him shape and implement Project CHILD at Latham.

For the last three years, she was Field's assistant principal, and he assigned major responsibilities to her, such as chairing faculty meetings. She shared Fields' vision and was prepared to carry on his legacy.

The parents of Latham, through its PTA, gave unequivocal support to Johnson. The faculty voted two-to-one to bypass the usual hiring process and simply appoint her! It should be pointed out that this is a 70 percent approval rating. It may actually be 80 or 90 percent if you include those who supported Johnson but who voted against bypassing the usual hiring process.

Latham Mentor/Tutors, a group of black men who'd done an outstanding job working with students there, were unanimously behind Johnson.

Moreover, Johnson supported by the entire Ministers Conference of Winston-Salem, the NAACP Education Caucus, the

Executive Committee of the Presbyterian Interracial Dialogue, the Winston-Salem Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, and state Rep. Larry W. Womble.

And Pam Carson, PTA president, Rev. Laura Spangler, pastor of Lloyd Presbyterian Church; Dr. Ellen Yerber, parish associate at Green Street United Methodist Church, and Fleming El-Amin, co-moderator of the Black Leadership Roundtable, went to the School Board to speak on behalf of Johnson.

We have to wonder if she wasn't selected in a spiteful power struggle initiated by Superintendent Don Martin and the seven white School Board members who voted against the only black board member present (and the only one who's actually run an elementary school), Geneva Brown.

Again this is not about Medlock; but when you line her 12 years of experience against Johnson's 27, Medlock's master's degree against Johnson's doctorate, Medlock's four years of elementary experience against Johnson's eight, Medlock's one year of administrative experience against Johnson's three, Medlock's no

experience at Latham against Johnson's six years of experience at Latham, and Medlock's no Project CHILD experience against Johnson's six years, it's hard to make an objective case that the best decision for children was made here. These children and teachers will now have gone through four different principals (Fields, Bobby Robinson, James Brandon and now Medlock) in this one school year. How can that possibly be good for stability and security for someone they know and respect and who knows and respects them?

The superintendent has said essentially that parents, teachers, pastors and communities of support don't count. He and the board have apparently valued Medlock's hypothetical answers to their hypothetical interview questions over Johnson's actual lived experience in leadership at Latham. This makes no good sense.

The Rev. Carlton A.G. Eversley is pastor of Dellbrook Presbyterian Church. The Rev. John Mendez is pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church and president of the Ministers Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity.



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deadline for all stories will be

**Dec. 20, 2002.**

**Week of Jan. 2, 2002**

deadline for all stories will be

**Dec. 27, 2002.**

The business office will close on Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve at 2 p.m. The office will be closed Christmas Day & New Year's Day

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