

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Saturday, June 30, 2007

Subject: Baby College Graduation, Week 9
 Location: HCZ and Promise Academy Gymnasium
 Time: 9:45-1:00

Baby College Graduation

6th week I have been present, 9th and final week of Baby College

I ride the bus at 9:30 and watch 125th street wake up on my way. Popeye's chicken is opening their metal gates, while several places, including a nail salon, are not yet open. When I arrive a woman pushing a stroller crosses 125th away from the Promise Academy.

Outside the Promise Academy there are three men with two large cameras. An African American man and a middle-aged white man have cameras, and an African American man with dreadlocks tied up in a cloth buzzes around the white man with cables.

When I ask approach the security desk and ask for the Baby College graduation, the security guard asks me to sign in. I do so, and she directs me around the corner to the cafeteria, which is on the ground floor. The sign-in sheet consists of legal-sized paper stapled together. I do not see anyone collecting tickets, although that may be because I obviously do not have one.

There is a sign-in desk in the hallway on the way to the cafeteria. Two staff members in white sit behind a table set up with blue programs and name tags attached by paper clip. The staff members also hand out multicolored fabric leis to participants. I do not get a lei at this time. I wonder if I should recognize the woman; she does not look familiar to me. Once a childcare worker at the registration desk remembered me but I did not remember her.

Breakfast in the cafeteria. Baby college participants sitting with family members and friends around round tables in the school cafeteria, which overlooks the gym. Breakfast includes apples and oranges, muffins and mini bagels. I arrive around 9:45, and there are probably about eighty people present that are not HCZ employees. Some people look bored, others are excited. One family takes a picture of their "graduate." There are at least 60 people in the room when I arrive.

BC participants and senior staff members are dressed in white tops. Some, like Marilyn Joseph, wear white dresses. Others wear white t-shirts and jeans, cropped pants, high heels, sandals—the range from casual to dressed up.

Around 10am Brenda arrives. She is wearing a khaki dress that looks expensive and a white sweater with 3/4 sleeves. I kid her about wearing white, and she says she just grabbed it because she thought she might be cold. We chat a bit longer, then decide to go down to the gym. We run into Mr. Abasi on the way, who tells us that the front row is

53P

47P

48P

38P

39P

87P

88P

304

319

494

reserved for us, on the left side. Mr. Russell announces that guests need to go downstairs. HCZ staff members open the doors that lead to a staircase down to a gym. An HCZ staff member stops a parent from bringing her stroller down the stairs. Brenda explains in Spanish that she can't take the stroller down.

The gym is set up with white folding chairs in three sections, the middle reserved for the graduates. At the end of each row three balloons are tied to the last chair, in red, yellow, and green. The middle section has balloons on each side, while the left and right have balloons on the chair closest to the middle section. There is a stage in front, about three or four steps off the ground. There are two sets of short stairs with rails, one facing the audience on the left side, the other on the right side of the stage. There is a lectern on the stage. Three packages sit on the stage, one clearly an air conditioner. The second package is a gift basket, and the third, larger than the air conditioner, is wrapped in brightly striped wrapping paper. The stage looks unadorned with only a single silver printed balloon taped to the wall behind the stage providing decoration.

On the floor in front of the stage sits a row of gift baskets wrapped in clear cellophane. Spotting diapers inside, Brenda correctly surmises that these are for the expecting parents. In front of us there are large brown paper shopping bags with name tags labeling them. We take a peek in to find certificates and small toys for children. On the left wall a table is stacked with plaques that commemorate each participant's participation. Brenda makes admiring noises.

Brenda comments that she thought there would be more guests, then says maybe people are still arriving. There are perhaps eighty or so guests, apparently fewer than Baby College participants.

An HCZ staff member garlands Brenda and I with the leis. Kimberly shows up around 10:15. She comments that she has not dressed appropriately. Like Brenda, I am wearing a dress, but not as nice a dress (black synthetic with small flowers). Kimberly is wearing dark jeans and a bright green blouse. Brenda hands Kimberly a stack of papers. She had explained to me earlier that she was doing some data entry for HCZ. It sounds like Brenda is indeed working for Betina, not that Brenda is heading the project. Brenda and I have already been taking notes, and Kimberly also takes out her notebook. When Mr. Abasi walks by he remarks incredulously that we are still evaluating. He says he is kidding. After he leaves, Kimberly says she asked Betina, and Betina told her just to enjoy the show. We all put away our notebooks.

With a welcome from Mr. Abasi, the "graduates" dance their way in to R. Kelly's Happy People stepping song. I believe an instructor leads each class. Some graduates are smiling, others look bored.

Each class performs, including the children. According to the program, first is the Processional, then the Welcome by Ms. Joseph. Then the video presentation of Baby College on Oprah. Next is the 0-11 class, which means moms and a few dads with babies, performing "Open, Shut Them." The Spanish class goes next, singing "My Body Makes

Music” in English then Spanish. Next the Grandparents of the year awards are handed out. Mr. Abasi calls a grandmother onstage to recognize her. She is too shy to say much but “Muchas gracias” on stage. The 2 year old class is scheduled to go onstage next, but they are late. Mr. Abasi also calls the fathers onstage to recognize them. There is a lot of applause. When he asks if any of them want to speak, one by one about three-fourths of them (probably 10-12) speak. One man who talks about responsibility is met with a great deal of applause.

When the 2 year old class arrives, parents with children, they arrive with a massive prop: a cardboard bus, carried by childcare workers. The group sings “Wheels on the Bus.” Next, the French class performs “Tekere/Inspirational Dance,” which draws a lot of applause and cheers from the crowd. On stage this consists mostly of women dancing around in a circle. Their teacher introduced them as coming from Burkina Faso, Mali, etc. Next the young adults perform Maya Angelou’s Phenomenal Woman. Most are very nervous and it’s difficult to understand them. The instructor, a young man, introduces them by saying that they aren’t just “good,” they had to find something better than “good.” The expecting class goes onstage and reads their pledges.

The other video presentation, made by videographer Aisha Norris, showcases parents and children. This draws lots of cheers from participants. The three year olds enter with their parents, singing, “If your [sic] happy and you know it,” as they walk onstage. Someone, perhaps Ms. Joseph, has asked everyone to stand up and sing along. Some do, some do not. One family audibly grumbles behind us. Onstage, the three-year-olds sing the “Hokey Pokey.” Next, the 6 and above children perform short pieces they wrote entitled “Baby College and Me.” The children draw a lot of applause and enthusiasm from the crowd, particularly the shy ones.

Mr. Caldoun gives “inspiring words,” some of which seems to be received with puzzlement and some with enthusiasm. His comparisons of Baby College and HCZ to the civil rights movement (“We Shall Overcome”) is met with silence.

Next the baby baskets are given to expecting parents [There are no bassinets in sight]. Then there is the plaque distribution, including Perfect Attendance Awards. This large group, maybe over 30, are eligible for the raffles for the air conditioner and for the month’s worth of rent. Women from the French class win both these prizes, the one who won the rent hugging everyone exuberantly, especially Ms. Joseph, who gave out the prize. [Kimberly and Mr. Caldoun, the Chief Operating Officer, were asked to come onstage. Kimberly commented nervously to Brenda and I, saying she was not even dressed for the occasion. She was simply asked to draw a name for the prize.]

Each class is asked to walk up to the stage. As their teacher reads their names, each “graduate” shakes hands with Mr. Abasi, Ms. Marilyn, and Mr. Caldoun. They are handed a pink scroll tied with curly ribbon. They then walk in front of us, where HCZ workers stare at their name tags and hand them the right brown bag. They then proceed to the plaque table. Again, some participants look excited, some bored. Some family members take pictures.

Family behind us

Apparently French speaking

Young girl, around 10, dressed in a pink and white dress

She sits very straight

Father and female relative keep a strict eye on her, scolding her when she talks, leans forward, or otherwise moves

They do not participate in much of the activities, possibly due to language

Two African American women behind us who talk audibly through much of the ceremony, particularly the last hour as it dragged interminably.

This is a very well-run, if overly lengthy, production. One to two young HCZ-shirted workers are always at hand to make sure small children don't run off the stage and to help people down from the stairs off of the stage. Each class is ready to go except for one, and Mr. Abasi easily fills the time by calling for some group or the other to be recognized. After about an hour, people start getting squirrely. This is a long, long program. After the children come in and perform they add to the growing din of squalling babies and talk in the gym.

Afterwards, Brenda, Kimberly and I stand and talk for a few minutes. Everybody makes noises about how "nice" the ceremony was. Kimberly says something about needing to wrap up her thoughts on Baby College. She lets me know that she is moving to Atlanta. For a job, I ask confused. She tells me that she does have a job there, but she just wanted to move to Atlanta. She says she is done with New York, that she has lots of family in Atlanta.

Brenda and I go around and thank the instructors whose classes we observed. Brenda also talks with Aisha Norris, a graduate of TRUCE, who made a video of this "cycle" of Baby College. [During the ceremony there is a lot of repeating that this is the 24th or whatever cycle of Baby College.]

When we try to leave, Marilyn Joseph corners us and talks and talks about Baby College and the graduation. She repeats to us her response to the comments about how well-put together the ceremony was, saying that they do this each week. Marilyn gladly exclaims over Brenda's lei. I have taken mine off and stuffed it in my purse, so she garlands me again.

The program includes an advertisement for enrolling in Baby College, with qualifications, discussion topics, and free services including the \$100 gift certificate for all who complete the program.