

ALBANY

New school named for war hero

BY JILL BRYCE
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Tara Johnson was never a great proponent of charter schools until she learned about the new Henry Johnson Charter School, named after her grandfather.

The new school, the city's ninth charter school, opens today, and Johnson said she's a convert when it comes to this independent, tuition-free charter school.

Johnson, granddaughter of World War I hero Henry Johnson, spoke at a ribbon-cutting ceremony Tuesday at the school and urged parents and the community to support the school to ensure that it succeeds.

"They can't do this by themselves. We have to invest in it," said Tara Johnson. "We can't deposit these children in a beautiful building and not invest in it. Whether it's time or money, go once a month, read a story and talk about Albany's heroes or citizens, who have reached national heights in their professions."

One of those individuals was her grandfather, Sgt. Henry Johnson, who served in the U.S. Army from 1917 to 1919. He went to France as a private with the 15th New York National Guard, an all-black unit headquartered in Harlem, but was not allowed to fight in an American combat unit overseas because he was black.

He joined a group of black soldiers in the New York National Guard's 369th Infantry Regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters.

Johnson earned France's highest military honor and a posthumous distinguished Service Cross from the U.S. for single-handedly fighting off a German raiding party, killing four Germans and forcing the others to flee. He suffered 21 wounds in the battle but managed to save an injured comrade from capture by the Germans.

"It is a great honor for the family that someone wants to name an educational facility after him," said Johnson.

She said her grandfather was an "ordinary guy who, when needed, did some extraordinary things."

At first, she had some doubts about the charter school, but she said that Principal Lillian Turner talked to her in detail about the approaches the faculty will take with curriculum instead of focusing the discussion on charter schools vs. public schools.

"She won me over. She opened my eyes," said Johnson. "We are in a new age, and we can no longer allow young minds not to develop."

Turner has a "global way of thinking" in her teaching, added Johnson.

The school is modeled after the Milwaukee College Prep School.

Statistics show that students sharply outperformed their peers in the Milwaukee's public schools on 2005 math, reading, language and science tests.

Turner, who left public education to open the International Charter School of Schenectady, that city's first charter school, said the success of Henry Johnson Charter School will be based on combining heavy character education, which focuses on the idea of choices and consequences, with three hours of English and reading daily.

The day begins with breakfast at 7:30 a.m. and runs to 4:30 p.m., and the school year is three weeks longer than in public schools. There is no tenure, so professional staff know they will be judged on the quality of their work.

Turner said the school has a first-rate curriculum and the building is state-of-the-art in terms of technology. "We just want to give children what they deserve, and that's part of it. It's very student-focused."

"The fact we have Henry Johnson as a touchstone for us is incredibly important because he is a wonderful focal point for our character program," said Turner. "We will give a lot of attention toward this."

The school's emphasis on character will help prepare students to make extraordinary decisions when needed, said Johnson. "If they don't

believe in themselves, this country and their communities, they can't step up to the plate and do extraordinary things when we need them, like my grandfather did," said Johnson, a Kansas City resident.

This fall, the school has 125 students in three kindergarten and two first-grade classes. There are 18 professional staff members.

Eventually, it is expected to enroll 350 students in kindergarten through fourth grade.

Charter schools provide alternatives to families who would like something different, said Turner.

The school has the backing of the Brighter Choice Foundation, which financed the purchase, renovation and expansion of the former P.S. 3 on Watervliet Avenue.

Johnson said parents should take time to research what school is best for their child. "Here, we have choices and options. Ask 'what is best for my child, who is teaching what's best for them.'"

After visiting the school Tuesday and speaking with several students and Turner, Johnson left very impressed. "I loved the environment, the curriculum and the approach, and I think and it has nothing to do with fact they named it after my grandfather," she said.

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