

Henrico students delve into ‘buried’ history at Maggie Walker Governor’s School

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Maggie Walker Governor’s School students Mona Garimella (left) and Annabel Tang, editors of the school’s newspaper, the *Jabberwock*. (Courtesy Albert Tang)

As one of the top-ranked high schools in the nation, Maggie L. Walker Governor’s School has been regularly featured in the pages of *Newsweek*, and consistently lauded for its academic rigor and high-achieving student body.

In recent years, however, the school has come under fire for what many see as glaring shortcomings, particularly in the school’s lack of diversity and in admissions requirements that appear stacked against students of color.

An October series by former *Richmond Times Dispatch* reporter Kenya Hunter addressed these issues and more at Maggie Walker, noting that implications of elitism and racism are particularly troubling in light of the school’s legacy as one of two all-Black high schools in segregated Richmond.

Founded in 1937 as a Black women’s college, the building in the city’s historically Black Carver neighborhood went on to house Maggie Walker H.S., named for the pioneering Richmond banker, activist and community leader. Alumni interviewed for the *Times-Dispatch* series proudly described MWHS’ lively culture, challenging coursework and supportive community, and expressed to Hunter their dismay that such a thriving Black school had been shuttered after 1970s-era integration – only to be “effectively resegregated as a predominantly white school for gifted children.”

While some alumni and administrators were appalled by the series’ findings and the negative publicity, the *Times-Dispatch* stories had a galvanizing effect on several current students – particularly a pair from Henrico County, Mona Garimella and Annabel Tang.

“I still remember the exact moment I read the first paragraphs,” said Tang.

She was struck by the revelation that today’s student body is less than six percent Black, and that students of color frequently feel isolated or encounter racism and microaggressions. In addition, said Tang, it bothered her to see the school so widely touted for academic success, despite leaders’ failure to “substantively address” its roots in segregated Richmond.

Garimella agreed that while she knew about the school’s Black namesake, she was unaware of its history prior to becoming a governor’s school.

“We were shocked at how much we didn’t know about our school,” said Garimella. “To hear about this buried history from an outside source was definitely jarring.”

Both Tang and Garimella agreed that many of the topics addressed in Hunter’s series were not only eye-openers, but worthy of closer scrutiny. “[It] motivated us,” said Tang, “to seek a student and teacher perspective from inside the school.”

And as co-editors of the MLWGS student newspaper, *The Jabberwock*, it so happened they were in a position to do exactly that.

Not-so-global studies

From the first germination of the idea, said the two editors, Kenya Hunter lent invaluable assistance and encouragement to their plans to publish a *Jabberwock* special issue, from advising them about writing to guiding them in the interview process.

“She provided us with so much advice and support throughout our own journalism,” said Garimella. “We simply could not have done this without her.”

With the backing of school administration and the *Jabberwock* sponsor, the students set out to provide an in-depth, insider’s view of steps the school administration was taking toward remedying diversity and inclusion issues. They titled their 16-page special issue *Project 1937: Buried History, New Promises*.

The opening pages of the issue were devoted to the school’s 80-year-plus history, and input from MLWHS alumni about their experiences.

“In our reporting,” Garimella said, “we learned of students whose grandparents went to Maggie Walker H.S., and those anecdotes really just pushed us even more to do their stories justice, and give them the attention they deserve.”

While attending the Armstrong-Walker parade in November – a celebration of Maggie Walker High School’s history and football legacy – Tang met a 1972 alumna of the school. The chance encounter led to a longer interview about the woman’s high school years and the changes she has seen since graduating, and to the inclusion of some of her experiences in the special issue.

“There’s so much history and so much to be learned around us,” Tang emphasized. “Just listening and appreciating the history we have is something that shouldn’t be taken for granted.”

In other sections of *Project 1937*, the writers addressed challenges that face students today, particularly regarding lack of inclusivity and feelings of isolation among minority students.

One piece, for instance, described the Instagram account created by a MLWGS alumna of color to provide a safe space for students and alumni to anonymously post their experiences with hurtful or embarrassing comments from faculty and classmates.

Another article examined curriculum, and complaints that while Maggie Walker is supposedly a school of “international studies,” too many courses are anything but global in their scope.

“World Literature?” junior Carolyn Zhuang commented in *The Jabberwock*. “It’s all European writers.”

The special issue also examined MLWGS admissions policies among the three largest school systems (Henrico, Chesterfield, and Richmond) that send students to the school, and how those policies can lead to underrepresentation of people of color.

The lack of diversity complaint is one that has dogged MLWGS and other Virginia governor’s schools for years, and the admissions process (which varies by school system but generally includes test scores, grades, writing samples and teacher recommendations) continues to be controversial despite ongoing attempts to ensure equal opportunity. Another charge frequently leveled at the process is that recruitment efforts appear to be aimed disproportionately at non-minority populations, and students of color may lack information about the school – or feel discouraged from applying.

Pushing forward

Since *Project 1937*’s publication in January, reaction has been overwhelmingly positive.

Garimella was gratified to see so many people carrying the paper around at school, and to hear the lively discussions the articles inspired.

“It made all the hard work worth it,” she said. It was also satisfying to shine a spotlight on MLWGS history, she said – particularly for underrepresented Black students, who now have a deeper appreciation of the enduring connection between the governor’s school and its predecessor, Maggie Walker H.S.

Getting positive feedback from administration – “something we weren’t necessarily expecting, especially given their reception of the *Times-Dispatch* series” – was especially welcome, said Tang.

A follow-up meeting with administration led to discussions of ways to take findings from *Project 1937* and use them as a catalyst for changing school policy and culture. Among recent changes to emerge from that discussion is the establishment of a recurring column by the school director in *The Jabberwock*, designed to open lines of communication between students and administration.

“Our teachers and administration work incredibly hard to push our school forward,” said Tang, “and it’s important to not undercut that work –

but also to provide constructive feedback to them as well. . . You can go to the fourth-best public high school in the nation and still know that it has deep flaws that have never really been addressed.”

Tang admitted that, early in the project, she had some concerns that she might be “unqualified” to report on topics of racism. “I’ve personally had a generally positive experience at Maggie Walker,” she said.

But any doubts about tackling the project were dispelled with the growing realization of the central role the *Jabberwock* could play in raising student awareness, and the importance of sharing with her peers the experiences of people who are “integral to this conversation about DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion] at our school.”

Noting that her parents immigrated to America in the late 1990s, Tang added, “I am all too familiar with the people who will yell at you on the street to go home, even though this is really the only home I’ve ever lived in. I know that belonging and inclusion is just as important as academic or socioeconomic success.”

Whatever the course of future *Jabberwock* special editions (the January issue is labeled “First in a Continuing Series”), Garimella and Tang believe the groundwork they’ve laid, and the lessons they’ve learned and shared, have had an impact.

As Garimella pointed out, a central aim of the special issue was to bring diversity issues to light, and to illustrate that “despite being a school for government and international studies, the governor’s school is flawed.”

“Yet its future is bright,” Garimella continued. “We are grateful to have an administration that was willing to listen to our concerns and sit down for interviews to lay everything out in the open, even if would hurt their image.”

Like Garimella, Tang expressed optimism about the future of the school, no matter how formidable the challenges — and no matter how glacial the pace of change may seem.

“It took months of writing and reporting just to get this information out to the student body, and it’s just barely moving the needle in the direction we need to go as a school,” said Tang, emphasizing that among the lessons she hoped readers would take to heart was the understanding that “changes come slowly, and they take deliberate effort.”

She is certain, nevertheless, that change for the better is coming, because so many in the Maggie Walker community are invested in efforts to improve, and to lay a solid foundation for the next generation of students.

“One thing I really realized, reporting on this series, is that people *care*,” said Tang. “We all care about this school and the people around us and the future students.

“I really don’t think there’s an exception to that.”

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To view the January special issue of *Jabberwock*, visit issuu.com/mlwgsjabberwock/docs/special_issue.