

GREGORY FREEMAN
URBAN VIEW

Generosity Still Exists, Teacher, Students Learn

IRL SOLOMON is a history teacher in one of the nation's poorest school districts: East St. Louis.

Solomon, 55, joined the East St. Louis school system in 1964 and has taught at East St. Louis Senior High School for 22 years. He is challenged daily by his students and by his school.

His school has little equipment, and much of that is broken. He can't show videos he tapes off of TV at home because there's no VCR.

His un-air-conditioned classroom has six windows, four of which leak and two of which will not open.



Some toilets don't work, some sinks don't work and toilet paper is rationed; during an interview Monday, he was approached by a student who needed to go to the restroom. Solomon

reached into a drawer, pulled out a roll of toilet paper and handed several sheets to the young man.

The school system doesn't have the money to regularly maintain and repair the plumbing.

"The district is always strapped for funds," Solomon said. "We've had a few superintendents and members of the Board of Education over the years who I felt were not primarily concerned with the education of our students."

So just a few months ago, Solomon was considering retirement.

After 30 years, he was pondering a statewide early-retirement plan.

"There's so much stress and burn-out involved in teaching, not just here but across the country," Solomon said. "It's getting harder and harder to be a teacher in America. There's less teaching and more policing, more social work, psychological counseling, role modeling, being father and mother."

But as Solomon pondered retirement — a difficult decision, he said — along came Wahlert High School of Dubuque, Iowa. There, Tom Keating, a psychology teacher, had assigned his students to read Jonathan Kozol's book, "Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools."

In the 1991 book, Kozol contrasted the benefits of the most affluent school districts in the United States to the poorest. His point was to make clear that kids in the poorest school districts are being cheated out of a proper education because they've never been given a level playing field.

Kozol interviewed Solomon, who's featured in two paragraphs, discussing the school's difficulties.

Those paragraphs caught the interest of the students in Dubuque.

In a phone interview, Keating said his students were looking at the effect of environment on people's behavior. "We were reading about East St. Louis and what can happen if people have to live and learn in less than ideal conditions," he said.

And then his students — from a 99 percent white, blue-collar school — had an idea: They wanted to help the students in the virtually all-black, poor school. "They wanted to help someone like them," Keating said.

He had thought his students might try to raise \$100-\$200. He was pleasantly surprised.

The students at first raised \$466 for the school, and Solomon plans to buy a TV set for his class. They also got Sears to donate a VCR.

The students have since raised \$200 more, and have talked a Dubuque grocery chain into giving a percentage of the money raised over three days to Solomon's class. They also got information to the East St. Louis school about an Iowa-based company that makes science equipment. The company usually donates its slightly imperfect equipment to schools. Science teachers at East St. Louis have made a formal request and are keeping their fingers crossed.

"The whole thing went way beyond my expectations," Keating said. "The hard thing is going to be getting them to quit."

So what's been the response from students at East St. Louis?

"There are some who think it's a shame that we have to depend on the kindness of strangers," Solomon said. "But most of the kids are pleased that someone is really putting their money where their mouth is. They're happy that some other kids care about their problems."

Solomon — who cares so much about his students that he was never sure about retirement anyway — was so inspired by the Dubuque students that he's decided to stay. "I was bowled over that students would go out of their way like this," he said.

So if you want to find Solomon this summer, look for him at the high school. You'll find him volunteering his time and supplies to paint the walls of his classroom, which were last painted 15 years ago.