
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



The Chicago Connection

I made a call to Al Slappy today. Al is the current president of the Emporia Eastside Community Group, and I just wanted to say thanks.

The Eastside group stepped up recently to help with student recruitment. If you are a follower of Ad Astra, you know how strongly I feel about the importance of town-and-gown relations. Our collective efforts, be they economic, quality of life or civic, are only as good as our commitment to one another.

And that sort of commitment is just what Emporia State Inclusion & Diversity Director Jason Brooks encountered earlier this year after telling his friend Al Slappy the news of this visiting group from Chicago.

Jason has been working for more than two years building a relationship with these students. The school, Urban Prep Academy, is the first all-male, African-American, public charter in the heart of downtown Chicago. Their mission encompasses high academic achievement, positive self-esteem and a civic responsibility to the community.

Despite arriving at Urban Prep from economically disadvantaged households and behind academically, these young men consistently attain a 100 percent college placement rate. Urban Prep students are accepted to competitive universities all over the United States, and we are very pleased to be included among them.

None of the 13 young men visiting Emporia had ever been outside the state of Illinois; in fact, most had never left the City of Chicago. And Al knew his group could play a role in welcoming these students to Emporia. He offered to cook them dinner.

Al told me, "The conversation is out there about the community and the campus, but I'm not seeing a lot of action yet. So, I thought this was a good opportunity to step-it-up."

The Eastside, a historically black neighborhood in Emporia, has a long history of stepping-it-up when it comes to civic engagement. Al recalled a story from his high school

graduation when community elder, Paul Terry (I'll tell you his fascinating story another time) asked him, "You are still going to be around when we are gone so what are you learning about the future and about the kids?"

Al kept Paul's guidance in mind as he settled in and raised his family on the Eastside. And in 1999 the neighborhood came together and officially chartered the Emporia Eastside Community Group.

One of the first projects the group completed was a fundraiser for improvements to the Ninth Avenue and East Street Park — today known as the Eastside Memorial Park.

But perhaps most well-known among the group's activities is the annual Memorial Day barbeque which honors all who have called the Eastside home. The event routinely draws over 300 guests to the park. And Al is quick to tell me that the Eastside group is a place for folks new to Emporia to feel at home and for those who've moved on to stay connected.

So how did that dinner event go?

Being a fellow Chicagoan, I was disappointed I couldn't attend but am told the smell of ribs and roasts floated through the Didde Catholic Campus Center as about 20 members of the Eastside group met up with the students of Urban Prep. And lively conversation and laughter filled the room as the students marveled at the community support, the quality of our academics and the flatness of the Kansas prairie.

I'm happy to report that 11 of the 13 have applied and been accepted. The next step is getting them enrolled. Even if these young men call Emporia home for just a few short years, I suspect they will have a forever-home in the hearts of the Eastside Community Group.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
