

Head *of the* Class

Award-Winning
Educator Ron Clark
Brings His Innovative
Teaching Methods
To Atlanta

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

On a sweltering day last July,

I found myself in a gritty section of Southeast Atlanta, sitting in the back corner of Harold's Barbecue while Ron Clark recalled for me how he ended up on "The Oprah Winfrey Show." Back in 2001, he'd been selected as a finalist for Disney's American Teacher Awards. I'd already seen a short video clip that showed an even more youthful-looking Clark (he was barely 30 at the time) looking stunned when his name was announced at the awards ceremony, ducking his head, and drawing in a deep breath before getting to his feet. Now I was hearing the rest of the story: Clark had raised enough money to bring his entire Harlem classroom to Los Angeles with him, and by the time he reached the podium, the fifth-graders — all decked out in fancy dresses and little tuxedos — were cheering enthusiastically. "I looked at the audience and all my kids were going 'You get it, Mr. Clark, you get it!'" he told me, his arm raised in demonstration of their victory wave. "Then I looked over and Oprah was in the audience going 'You get it, you get it!'"



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Later, Clark received a phone call from Winfrey. Moved by his acceptance speech and what he'd accomplished in his five years of teaching, she wanted to feature him in her magazine. The two conversed for a while and then, according to Clark, the media mega-star told him, "You know, the passion you have is not going to come across in the words on these pages. You need to be on the show."

At this point in the story, the waitress set our chopped pork sandwiches on the table and I temporarily set down my pen. It didn't occur to me until several days later that I didn't have a syndicated talk show to fall back on while telling this story. The daunting task of portraying Clark's passion on a magazine page was all mine.

From Singing Waiter to Schooling Mentor

While growing up in a small town in North Carolina, Clark fantasized about a life filled with travel and adventure. "All my life I wanted to get out; I had this thirst," he said. "I never wanted to be a teacher." After graduating from East Carolina University, Clark took a step toward his dream by buying a backpack and a one-way ticket to England, much to his parents' chagrin. His European escapades lasted just a few months, though, starting with a stint as a singing waiter in London, where his Southern accent was a novelty to British tourists, and ending in Romania, where a meal that included rat meat made him so ill he had to fly home.

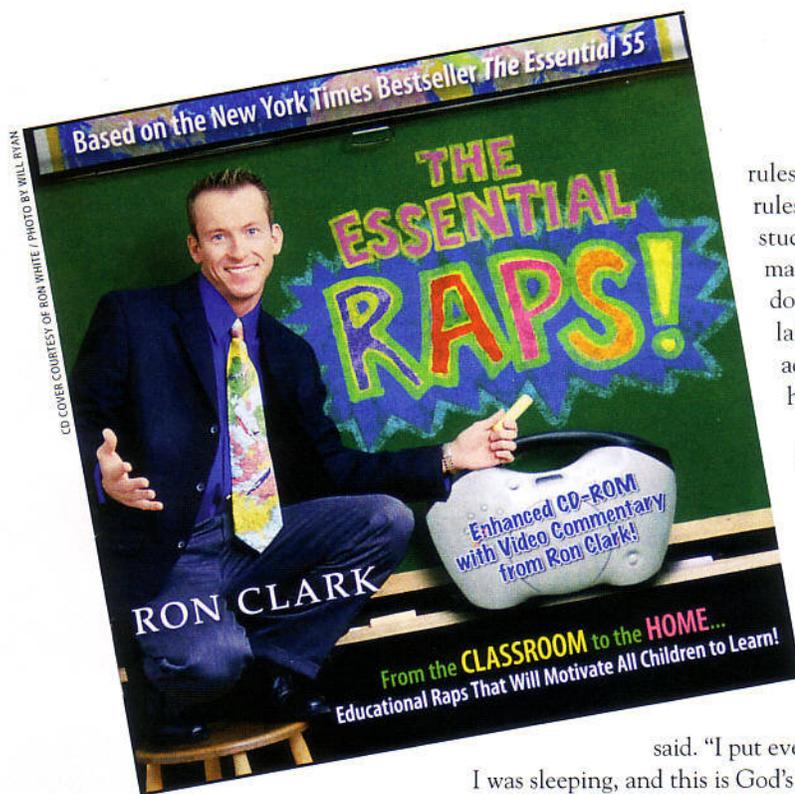
As he was recovering back home in North Carolina, Clark's mother told him of a fifth-grade teaching position that was open at a local school. Motivated to keep him close by, she cajoled him into interviewing for it, though he told his parents and the principal flat out that he had no intention of taking the job. The scenes he remembers from sitting in that classroom are almost comically chaotic, featuring an eccentric substitute teacher with a lopsided wig and no ability to control or motivate her students. (Clark actually watched her reward a correct answer by singing a whole verse of "Amazing Grace.")

His epiphany occurred when a little boy sitting near the door looked up at him with interest and excitement and asked, "Is you gonna be our new teacher?" Clark knew instantly that this was where he was meant to be. The way he tells the story, he seems to have been motivated not so much by a professional calling as by a strong desire to rescue these kids from the awful year of instability and lost opportunities that loomed before them. He told the principal he would take the job.

Getting in the Double-Dutch Groove

As a first-year rookie, Clark's youth and inexperience could easily have made him a pushover in an unruly classroom filled with disadvantaged kids. Instead, he used it to his advantage, employing unusual ways to get his students' full attention and best behavior. He read to them with energy and expression, jumped on desks and fell on the floor, encouraged applause for any kind of achievement, and made an appearance at a Saturday birthday party — the only teacher to accept the invitation. He developed a list of five





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RON CLARK

stand the program; they know what my expectations are. And by November first [in a school year], I could take my kids to the moon and everything would run smoothly."

Clark wasn't content, however, with merely commanding the respect and attention of his fifth-grade charges. He wanted their trust, and he sought it relentlessly on the playground. Skill at jumping rope was a major status symbol among the children who loved to jump double-Dutch style (two ropes turning in opposite directions). Clark set out to learn, even though the students declined to turn the ropes any slower when it was his turn and would give him only two tries before sending him to the back of the line. For months he kept at it but was always either tripped up or slapped in the face by the ropes. During this same time in the classroom, Clark was stressing compassion and the importance of supporting each other as a family. And then something happened. When he was slapped by a rope so hard that his forehead bled, Clark was finally ready to give up, but the children wouldn't let him. Instead they started talking

rules that reinforced courteous behavior, adding new rules to the list as situations called for them. And he stuck with them, applying them consistently and making sure there were consequences (silent lunches, double homework) when they were broken. "Once I laid out exactly what I expected in terms of academics and discipline, these kids were different," he said.

Clark also looked for ways to engage restless learners by making lessons come alive. Many of these anecdotes are described in his book "The Essential 55," including the tale of a special project that just grew bigger and bigger until it resulted in an invitation to the White House. Fieldtrips were just as innovative, with a trip to a bowling alley becoming a way to teach fractions. "Everything I drew from came from my heart and just plain common sense," Clark

said. "I put every hour of my life into that classroom. Even when

I was sleeping, and this is God's honest truth, I would dream up lesson plans."

During his fifth year of teaching, Clark saw a news report about problem-plagued schools in New York City's Harlem neighborhood. He got in his car, drove to New York, booked a room at the YMCA, and began looking for a job. "I guess I was naïve. I was like, I'm going up there and I'm going to teach, and they're going to be so thankful to see me," he recalled with a laugh.

Immediately upon walking in the door at Public School 83, Clark found himself breaking up a fight. He was able to talk some sense into a fist-swinging boy who was so angry he was hyperventilating, and in his mind, the kid's positive response to him was "a sign." Clark did end up with a job at PS 83, the unenviable position of leading a class the principal described as the most challenging one she'd seen in 30 years. It consisted of 37 fifth-graders, none of whom had met state testing standards for grade four the previous year. Behavior and motivation were also big problems; many students didn't bother to turn in homework assignments or follow along while the class was reading.

But Clark was determined to get control, and he applied everything he'd already learned about teaching to this new challenge. The list of classroom rules rather quickly soared to 55. "If you start out really strict, you can loosen up as the year goes on," he said. "But if you start out all loosey-goosey, you'll never be in charge. After about a month, the majority of the kids under-

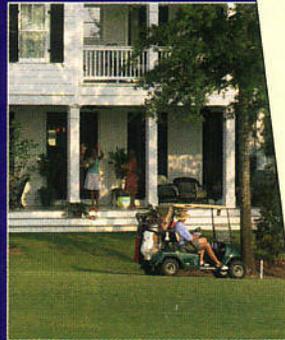
him through the process step-by-step, essentially applying the classroom rules about teamwork and supportive behavior to everyday life. Before long, Clark's students saw the power of encouragement demonstrated right in front of them, as their teacher became a master at double-Dutch. Fortunately, that power flows both ways. By the end of the year, with Clark's support, the class boasted test scores higher than those of gifted students.

"The Essential 55"

It was Winfrey who told Clark, during a commercial break, that he ought to write a book. He took her advice and penned "The Essential 55," which outlines every one of his 55 rules. They range from common courtesy (hold the door for other people) to classroom protocols (do not moan or complain about homework assignments) to more advanced social skills that come into play on fieldtrips (tip the cleaning person in hotels). Each rule is explained and fleshed out with anecdotes from Clark's experiences.

The book had an *Amazon.com* ranking of 140,000 until Winfrey endorsed it on national television. "She held it to her bosom and she said 'America, you need to buy this book,'" Clark said. "And you know what happens when Oprah holds something to her bosom ... it's amazing, the power she has." Within hours after the show aired, the book soared to the No. 2 position on Amazon, close on the heels of Harry Potter. That same week it reached No. 2 on *The New York Times* bestseller list and didn't stop there, eventually becoming a bestseller in 25 countries.

With the money he earned from book royalties, Clark easily could have retired. He also received a large check when a producer bought the film rights to his story. (Matthew Perry portrayed him in a production that premiered on TNT last month). But Clark had always poured his own money into books and supplies for his classroom, and he now used his newfound wealth to finance the fieldtrips he'd had so much success at integrating into his curriculum. This time he wasn't just chaperoning his kids to a bowling alley or Broadway play. Instead, he



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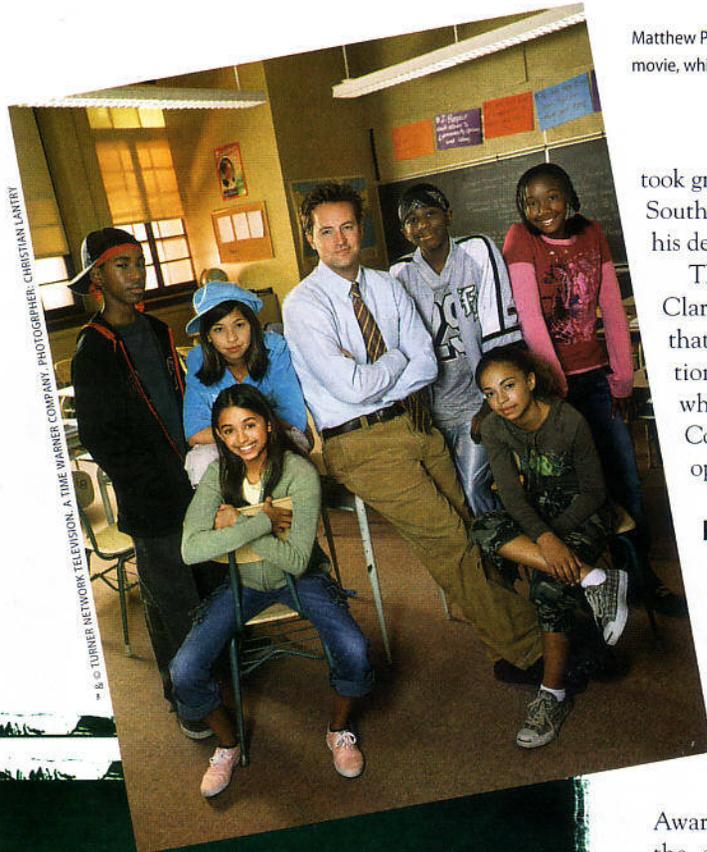
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Matthew Perry (center) portrayed Ron Clark in the TNT movie, which premiered last month.

took groups of children to far-flung places like Costa Rica and South Africa, satisfying both his hunger for adventure and his desire to expand young minds.

The rest of the money has gone toward opening the Ron Clark Academy, a nonprofit school in Southeast Atlanta that will operate on a scholarship system, offering educational opportunities to low-income, high-potential kids who could otherwise not afford private school. Construction is underway, and the school is scheduled to open in 2007. "Now I'm broke again," Clark admitted.

New Lessons

Clark moved to Atlanta several years ago to be closer to family and friends. Among those friends was Kim Bearden, a teacher who is co-founding the Academy along with Clark. Bearden has taught in Cobb County for 19 years and was named Teacher of the Year there; she also received an Outstanding Middle School Teacher award from Disney. When the two met back in 2001 at the American Teacher Awards, they connected instantly. "He and I were just on the same page with everything," Bearden said. "We thought, wouldn't it be great if we could have a school where everyone taught the way we did? The truest sense of being a teacher is to go where the students need you the most, so this is the ultimate opportunity."

The curriculum at the Academy will go far beyond the core requirements of Georgia's public education system, drawing heavily from the arts and focusing on turning kids into lifelong learners. "In most schools across the country, what you're going to find is that teachers are only teaching what you need to know for the test," Clark said. "At our school, we'll find ways to excite kids about knowledge. Once they learn something, they can apply it to life. They'll see the ways learning can enhance you as a person."

At the heart of the program will be frequent fieldtrips, both local and global, that are covered by the scholarships students will receive. Clark believes that introducing children to a variety of cultures and situations is key to academic and personal growth. By the time they're in eighth grade, students at the Ron Clark Academy will have visited six out of seven continents.

Besides revitalizing education and children's lives, Clark hopes to breathe life into a southside community. He looked at roughly 50 sites for the school before deciding on the property at 228 Margaret St., in an area of Atlanta known as the Jonesboro Road corridor. The surrounding neighborhood is an urban patchwork of older homes with tiny yards, burglar bars, and plenty of individual character. Though much of it is shabby and un-manicured, there's a sprinkling

SPONSOR A LIFELONG LEARNER

When the Ron Clark Academy opens next year with nonprofit status, no more than 10 percent of its students will be paying the \$14,000 tuition out-of-pocket. The rest will be lower-income children who have received scholarships. In some cases, local businesses will sponsor a student, donating enough to cover a year's tuition (which includes books, supplies, fieldtrip expenses like passports and airfares, etc.) For the most part, however, each child's tuition will be pieced together from smaller donations. Donors can visit the Academy's Web site to make a tax-deductible gift of cash, or to "shop" for the item they'd like to donate — student uniforms and lockers with an inscribed plaque are just two of the choices online. Those who sponsor a child fully or in part will receive regular updates on the student's progress, including postcards from fieldtrips and an invitation to graduation.

The school will enroll 60 students, equally divided between fifth- and sixth-graders, during its first year. At press time, money had been raised to sponsor approximately 34 children. Any child can apply to the Ron Clark Academy, and the selection process is straightforward. After interviewing both student and parents, Clark and his selection committee will make heartfelt and intuitive judgments about who would benefit the most from attending the academy. They'll be looking not so much at a child's past performance or current status, but at untapped potential.

For more information, to apply for a scholarship, or to make a donation, visit www.ronclarkacademy.com.

RON CLARK

of houses that sport fresh paint, flower gardens or a new deck. A realtor tried to dissuade him from the location, Clark told me. "And I said no, this is it. We're going to turn this community around. We're gonna plop this school right down in the middle of it, and we're going to bring everybody up with us."

On the day of my visit, the site was still a series of gutted brick buildings, the remnants of an 80-year-old awning factory and warehouse. We stood in the street to get a clear view of it, and Clark held up an artist's rendering of the finished facility. In it, the separate buildings were connected by a breezeway, an archway marked the entry, and two new clock towers broke up the blockiness of the existing structure. In addition to classrooms, the school will have a cafeteria and a library when it opens, with a gymnasium to follow.

"Let me show you the inside," Clark urged, as if the building were anything but an empty shell. We crossed into the future schoolyard, made a wide arc around a working backhoe, and headed for a doorway, stepping over puddles of red mud and picking our way through a thick layer of red dust that came up in puffs around our shoes. Inside, we navigated up a bare-bones, debris-littered staircase scheduled to be demolished the next day. It was just tricky enough that Clark kept turning around to offer me his hand.

The second story was an open, sun-flooded space with huge windows. We walked the length of it while Clark waved his hands around and described how it all will be. As with his students in Harlem, Clark saw untapped potential in this building and the vision is clear to him: a central corridor will run the entire length of the building with classrooms on both sides; the back right-hand corner is where his classroom will be. There will be atrium-style skylights and the interior ceiling will feature exposed ductwork that Clark plans to paint electric blue. "It'll be a really vibrant building," he assured me.

Vibrancy is the key to Clark's unassuming charisma. At a recent fundraising event, he held the rapt attention of everyone in the room as he spoke. Clark occasionally addresses groups as a motivational speaker, but this was more like listening to a storyteller. He just couldn't be confined to a podium; after bouncing around among the audience for a while, he stepped from the floor to a chair to a tabletop and continued his narrative there. How could such antics fail to appeal to children? I've never personally seen Clark in action in a classroom, but video scenes of him interacting with his students show a man who is both engaged and engaging, constantly in motion, with sleeves rolled up and shirt tails coming untucked. The children clearly connect with him; the looks on their faces are not something that could have been staged. The most revealing shot on the videotape lasts only a few seconds. In a Harlem schoolyard, Clark and a young girl are jumping double-Dutch within the same set of ropes. We see them in profile, facing the same direction, his tie and her braids flying wildly as their feet barely touch the ground. Without missing a beat, she begins to turn in his direction as she jumps, and for the instant her face is fully toward the camera, the expression you see is pure joy. ❖