

We Teach Kids Real Life Things

By Dionne D Peoples

Yvonne Griffin's husband Kenneth calls her "one of Gds special people." Everyone else at Agape Academy and Child Development center calls her a visionary. As the school celebrates its 30th year, griffin and her tall are committed to teaching children about God in addition to reading, writing, arithmetic and a host of other subjects, such as art appreciation and science. It's a school where 3 year olds are writing sentences and kindergarteners recite a prayer daily that calls then to forgive their enemies and reminds them they are empowered people. It is a place where first graders recite "I Too Sing America" by Langston Hughes. And, for the upper grades, community service is a requirement. "We teach kids real life things," Griffin said. "Part of living is giving of yourself." The school is located at 7400 Olive Blvd., offers an accelerated curriculum ad serves children from infants to the eight grade. There are 410 students at school, and 65 percent of them are subsidized through the federal government. The school includes a daycare, preschool and elementary school. Griffin also implemented tan after school program that ends at midnight. "There are so many demands on parents because of the recession. Some are working two jobs or going back to work full-time," griffin said as she walked the halls of the 25,000 square foot facility. "We had to them because they needed a safe place where they could leave their children." Staff members said Griffin always introduces new, cutting edge ideas. And she has high expectations that they can turn her ideas in to reality. School administrator Donna Griffin said that one year, Yvonne griffin announced that Donna Griffin would teach Spanish to the children, but Donna Griffin did not speak Spanish. She learned basic Spanish, developed a curriculum and taught the children. "She has the vision, and she brings things out in you that you didn't know you have," Donna Griffin said. "The word can't is not in her vocabulary." But "no" used to be, for a very short time.

The Agape School started in 1978, but the Griffins did not own it. In 1989, Billye Crumpton told her that God wanted the Griffins to buy the school. "I said, 'No, no, no,'" Yvonne Griffin said, shaking her head. The griffins bought it in 1990 from the St. Louis Bible Way Church. The school originally was located in Page Avenue and had 13 students As soon as the Griffins began to lead the school, it began to flourish, Yvonne Griffin said. They moved the school to Pagedale and occupied three buildings with 400 students. "I knew I was walking in God's plan for my life," Yvonne Griffin said. "The more we talked to the children about the love of Jesus Christ, the numbers increased." Kenneth Griffin said that he had faith in his wife's vision. "I said, 'Whatever you want to do, it's my job to take care of you.'" As the school continued to grow, Yvonne Griffin remembered a dream she has had since she was a child. In the room there were many dreams glistening with gold. There were pearls and fine jewelry everywhere, she said. "It was all mine, and I was rich," she said. "But the jewels were in the church." She believes that the jewels represented the children of Agape. "After we purchased the building," she said, "I never had that dream again."

In 1997, the Griffins bought the Olive Boulevard site, where several Agape alumni teach and volunteer. Former student Daria Golliday, 17, works as a receptionist before she leaves to college in the fall. She will attend Clark-Atlanta University where she plans to major in pre-medicine. Golliday, who attends Hazelwood Central, started Agape as an infant and graduated from eighth grade there. Former student Marian Merriweather also works at Agape. She currently is working on her associates degree in early Childhood Education. "Some jobs, you just work there, said Merriweather, who is a pre-school/care and teacher and staff trainer. "But here, you grow."