

Laura Bush NEH Address by John Hiser 8/14/08

Mrs. Bush, Dr. Lindsey, Dr. Riedlinger, our CEO, invited and honorable guests and students of Edna Karr High School, on behalf of the students and staff of our school, I welcome you to our campus for this celebration of the National Endowment for the Humanities grant award. I hope that your time spent here today will prove enjoyable and valuable to you as you learn about Edna Karr High School, the NEH, and the art grant they confer to our school. At this point I must say how grateful I am of Mrs. Campo for writing and submitting the NEH grant proposal. Without her efforts we would not be here today.

Just a short time ago Mrs. Bush and Dr. Lindsey spent time with Mr. Robinson and Mr. Riley and the students of the English IV Advanced Placement class, as they discussed the interplay of art with literature and history. The conversations were thought provoking and filled with strong opinions about how art can tap into the emotional heartstrings of those who look for the connections between real and fictional people as they are involved in historic events, be it the Dust Bowl of the 1930's, the Revolutionary War of Independence, or the Struggle for Civil Rights. I am proud to say that our students' discussion was right on point and stimulated.

I would also like to tell you a little bit about our school. It was founded in 1964 as a junior high school. In 1990, it became a magnet school for junior and senior high school students. During the 1993-1994 school year we earned state championships in football and basketball (Mr. Robinson was the coach of the basketball team and still is today!). In 1999-2000 we received the first of our two National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence awards. The other was announced two months after Hurricane Katrina, when our students and staff were scattered over 37 states. Between 1993 and 2005 we graduated 99% of our students each year, we were highly competitive in both academics and athletics, and our scholastic rating was one of the top schools in the state.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, all of the public schools of Orleans Parish were closed. Edna Karr was part of a chartering effort that took part in order to open the schools in this part of town. Karr was one of the first five schools to open in December of 2005. We began with 125 students and 17 teachers on the first day. By the end of January we had 450 students and 27 teachers. By the end of February we had 750 students and 40 teachers. And at the end of March Dr. Riedlinger did us the dubious favor of sending us 55 averaged 8th graders! Thus we ended the year with over 800 students and around 50 employees. And they told me when I became an administrator that I would need to develop some flexibility!!!

That was two years ago. Our school today is very different from the Pre-Katrina Karr. We are now open to any student who comes to us, and in the last 3 years we have graduated 98% of our students. Dr. Riedlinger likes to say that there are two ways a school can improve student achievement: select your students, and that is what we did before Hurricane Katrina, or grow your teachers, which is what we do now through the

Teacher Advancement Program. I believe strongly that in the aftermath of Katrina there really is no place for selected admissions and am proud to say that our teachers are growing every day. Additionally, with partnerships such as the School Leadership Center, Project Grad USA (federally funded and supported by President Bush), and the Gilder-Lehrman Institute, schools in Algiers are flourishing, and students who would have struggled in the Pre-Katrina days are achieving in ways they could only prayed for before. Additionally, with grants from such organizations as the Baptist Community Ministries, Campus Crusade for Christ, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the George and Laura Bush Foundation, our teachers are obtaining supplies and equipment to bring relevancy to our classrooms; our school has been blessed with beautiful gardens; our teachers have wonderful paintings and photographs with which they can both teach and study avenues which lead to greater understanding of how people relate to each other; and our library is restored so that our students have new books with which they can open their hearts and minds to heretofore hidden people, places and events.

So, it is with this short story of our school's history that I welcome you to our school, its students and our staff. At the same time I would also like to introduce Dr. Thomas K. Lindsey, Deputy Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, who will relate to you the purpose for our grant award and introduce you to the Picturing America program.