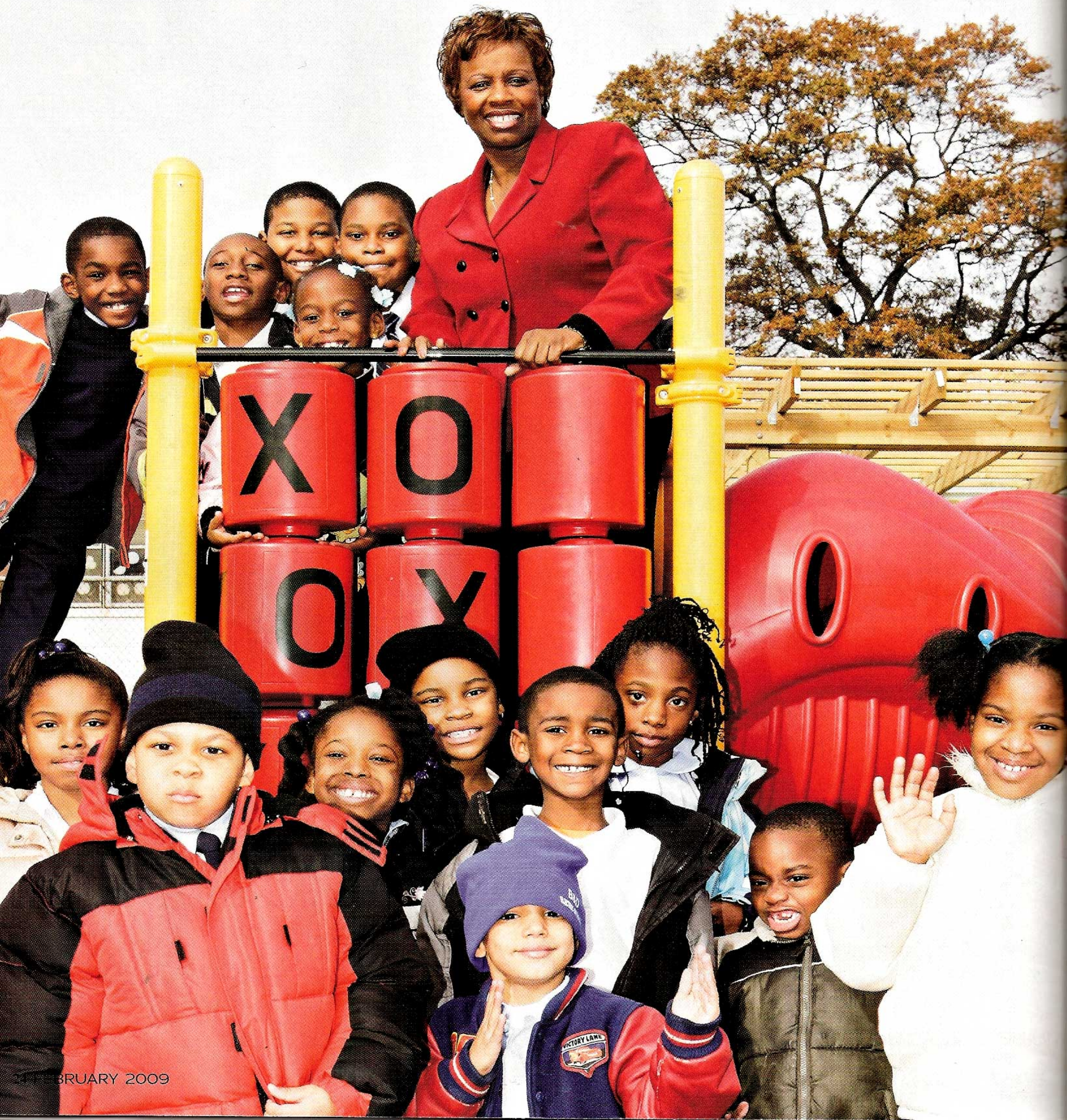


personality >>

# PLAYING FOR KEEPS

For principal Cynthia Ward, life's lessons are learned on the playground

BY MELANIE LEMAY



## BEST-SELLING WRITER ROBERT FULGHUM THOUGHT WE LEARNED EVERYTHING WE NEEDED TO KNOW IN KINDERGARTEN.

Princeton Alternative Elementary School principal Cynthia Ward thinks it's even simpler than that. "Think about what you learn on a playground," she says, motioning toward the brand new play area behind the school. Her eyes get as big as her grin, and she uses both hands to draw a well-appointed imaginary playground in the air.

"You see all that equipment to play on. What do you want to do first? You learn to set priorities."

She air-sketches a line of children. "You learn to take turns when you line up for the slide. You overcome your fears when you get on a swing for the first time." Her hands swoosh back and forth and back again.

Cynthia's enthusiasm is infectious, and was no doubt an important factor in Princeton's receiving a brand new playground in October 2008, courtesy of KaBoom!, Home Depot, and popular country music group Rascal Flatts.

Cynthia needed more than enthusiasm to get that project off the ground, however. The application required hours of conference calls, support from the community and creative ideas from the school's teachers and students. Early on, Cynthia enlisted Princeton's longtime coach Jeff Cantrell to work with KaBoom!'s project managers on logistics. To involve the children, she turned to fifth-grade teacher Tikki Hines.

Cynthia persuaded parents and members of the community to support the project, too. "Some of the children in this area had never even seen a playground," she says. "We had some old, old equipment in a field behind the school, but it wasn't a safe place to play. We couldn't have the traditional 'recess' most people remember from childhood."

With help from the KaBoom! project manager, Cynthia, Tikki and the teachers designed lessons on play that spanned the curriculum. Teachers integrated the playground into all sorts of subject areas — children figured angles and square footage in math, learned country line dancing in P.E., drew pictures in art and wrote thank-you notes in language arts.

"In the planning stages, we had the children draw pictures of their 'ideal' playground equipment," Ward says. "They drew everything — swimming pools, big tall slides, rock walls — but mostly they wanted the traditional things, especially swings."

Cynthia gathered parents to make the final equipment choices. "One parent thought we should have a world globe on the playground," Cynthia says. "Glidden Paint helped us make that happen."

On construction day, Home Depot employees, parents and community members gathered at the school on Birmingham's 2nd Avenue West. All three members of the group came to help, stopping now and then for media interviews, when they stressed the playground's importance to the community.

As the group worked on the playground, teachers and children serenaded them from the edge of the construction site with the Rascal Flatts song "My Wish," which they learned for the visit.

"It was a whole, complete school effort," Cynthia says proudly, "and to make it even more remarkable, we did all this preparation and construction during the first six weeks of the school year."

"It was pretty overwhelming," she admits, "but you know, even now, children come up to me in the hall and hug me and tell me thank you for our playground. And some of our veteran teachers say it's so nice to hear the sound of children outside playing."

The playground isn't the first improvement project Cynthia spearheaded for the school. "We've added classrooms and a teacher workroom. We had a tiny cafeteria not much bigger than this office, and now we have a state-of-the-art lunchroom and a new gym."

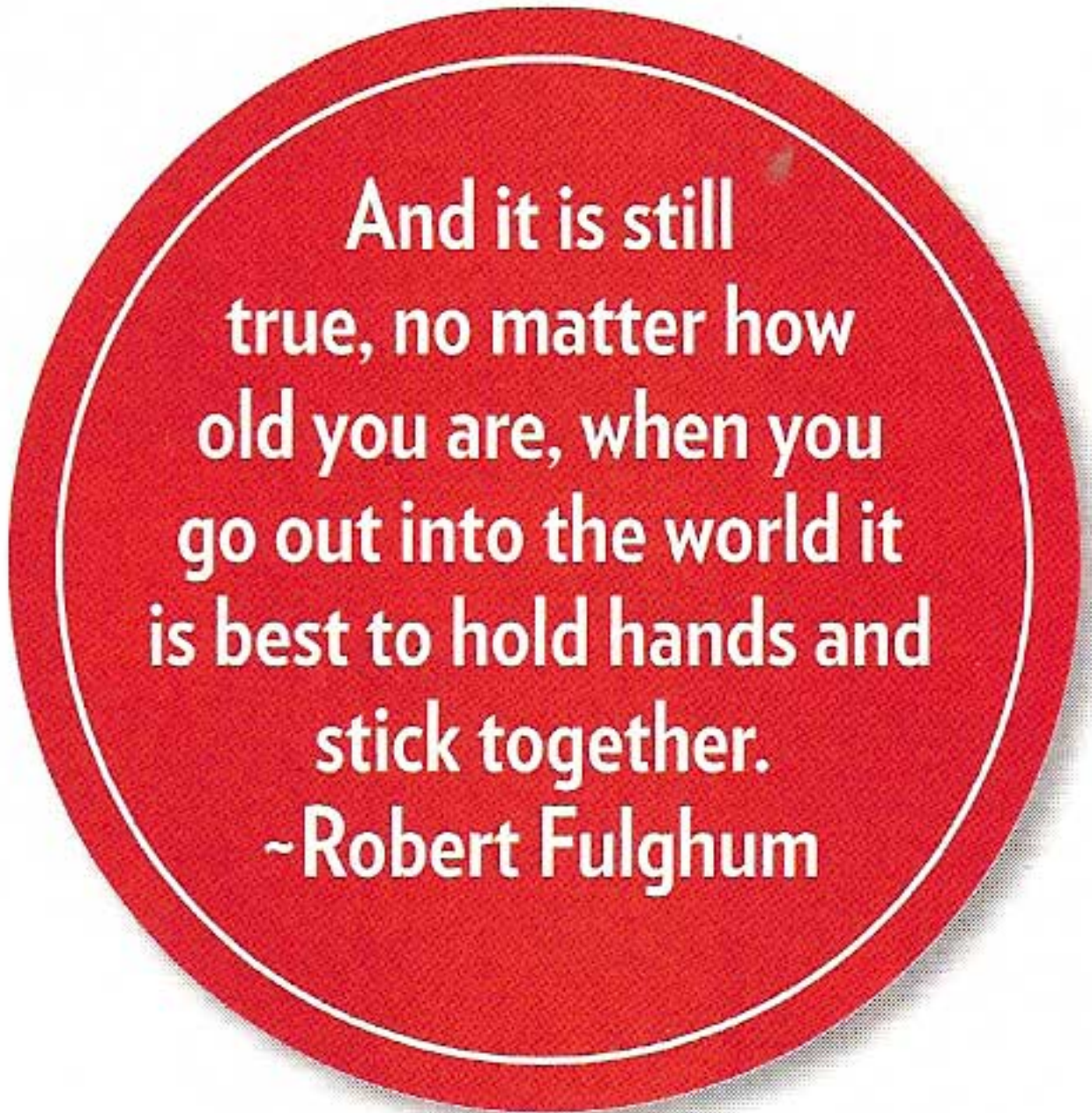
Does she have another project in mind for Princeton? Cynthia laughs. "I've got a little something up my sleeve," she says, and then looks at Tikki Hines and Coach Cantrell, who are sitting near her desk. "But I guess I'd better give everybody a little break before I bring it up."

Tikki and Coach Cantrell exchange a knowing glance. "There's always a new project," Tikki says.

Cynthia is a career educator, and she grew up not far from the school she now runs. "I've wanted to teach since I was a little girl," she says. "Now there was a time, when I was in college, that I looked at the average teacher's salary and thought maybe I should change my mind. I didn't, though, and I've never regretted it."

Cynthia says she never wanted to be a principal. She'd planned to spend her whole career in the classroom. "But I had mentors who pushed me," she says. "They took me to meetings and introduced me to people and places I'd never have been exposed to on my own."

When one of her principals asked her to leave the classroom and become a Title I resource



And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world it is best to hold hands and stick together.  
~Robert Fulghum

teacher, Cynthia balked. "I was satisfied knowing I was touching the lives of those 20 children in my classroom," she says. "He asked me to just try the job and promised I could go back to the classroom if I didn't like it."

"But it changed my perspective. I saw that I could meet the needs of more than 20 students. That made me go back to school and go into administration."

As a newly minted assistant principal, Cynthia went to work with Dr. Louise Caskey. "She didn't limit me to the typical duties of an assistant principal," Cynthia says. "She stretched me. She had me work on policies and procedures — something most assistant principals don't get to do. When the principal's position opened up here at Princeton, she pushed me to apply. She even practiced with me for my interview."

Cynthia has earned a reputation for effective leadership in the Birmingham City Schools system. A former superintendent praised her consistency, and noted her unique ability to get others to share her vision. "Maybe it's because I love learning so much," she says. "I go to a professional development meeting and the teachers just groan because they know I'll come back all excited about some new idea."

Family and faith are important to Cynthia, who grew up in a family of 12. "I always wanted to be married and have children of my own," she says, "but then I think, if I'd married and had children, I couldn't have done as much here."

The recent election of Barack Obama underscores Cynthia's most cherished belief. "Obama was already thinking about his future when he was in the third grade," she says. "You don't have to wait to become something great. You become great right now — right here, in your home, in your community. If you score 98% today, you can score 99% tomorrow."

"There's always territory to be won."