

Peter Anderson: Educating future presidents

By **DEMETRIA IRWIN**

Special to Amsterdam News

"Go hard or go home" has been a popular phrase in the Black community for years, and it seems to be the mantra of Peter Anderson, the principal of Future Leaders Institute, a progressive charter school located in Harlem. Anderson, who has worked in the education field for over 15 years, doesn't know how to give less than 100 percent towards whatever goal he sets. This is due at least in part to his parents' strong emphasis on character development and education.

"I'm the youngest of five kids, and all of us are college graduates. My mother was involved with numerous organizations, and even though I was enrolled in school, she was basically homeschooling me as well. Dad was always reading and writing. He wrote journal entries every day from 25 years old until he died a few years ago. My parents did not graduate from college, but they assumed we would all go to college," said Anderson of his Jamaica upbringing in a community just outside of Kingston.

That passion for education has been a constant in Anderson's life. After graduating from high school early, Anderson moved to the U.S., earned a bachelor's degree from Haver-

ford College in Pennsylvania and then snagged graduate degrees from the London School of Economics and New York University.

Anderson brings more than

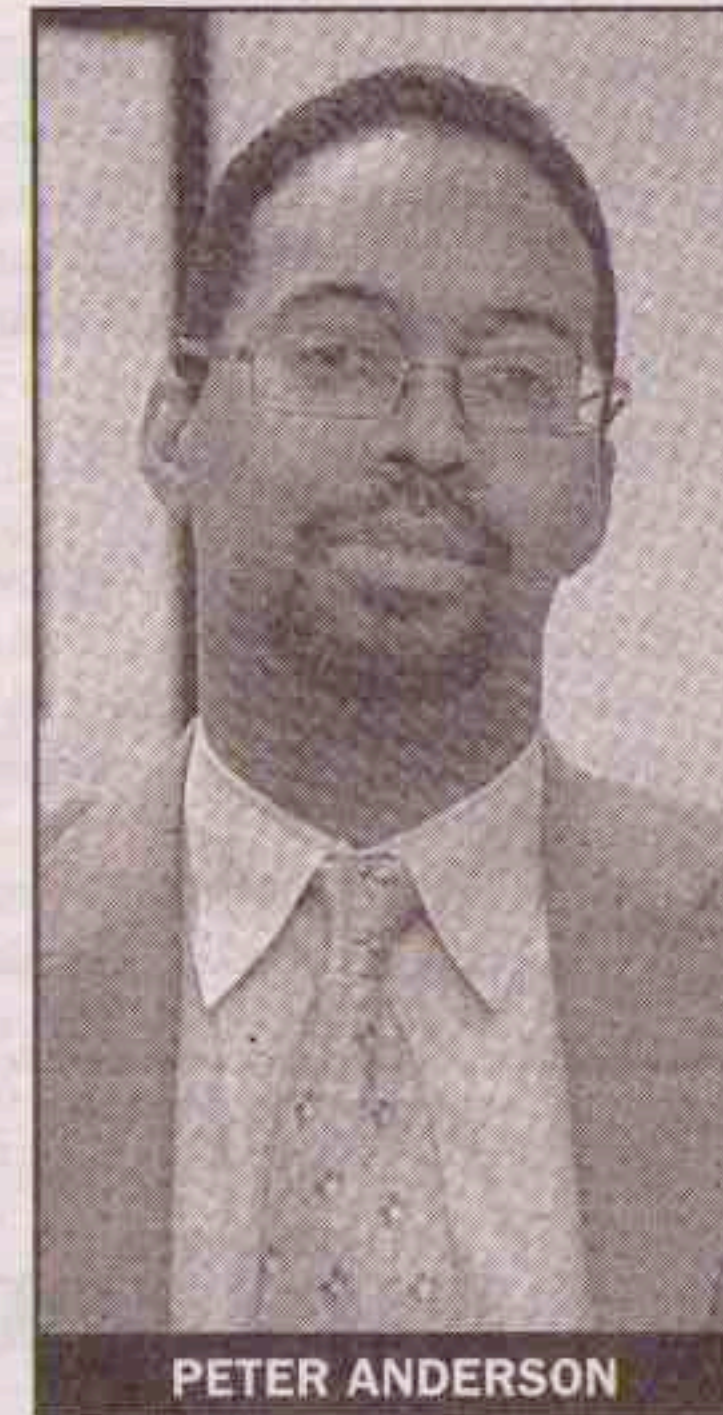
Black New Yorkers

just impressive degrees and a collection of passport stamps to the top job at FLI; he also brings a wealth of experience in various positions in the education field. He's taught kindergartners through college students and has taught several subjects, including debate and drama. While principal at a small parochial school in New Jersey, Anderson also had to fill the roles of janitor, substitute teacher and even bus driver due to budget constraints. Anderson clocked in 18-hour days at the job for two years. "I definitely burned out on that job, but it was all worth it. I've worked in almost every position you can have in a school setting and that experience helps me to be a better administrator. All kids deserve the best, not just kids in rich districts. I taught at a school in New Jersey where I had the grandchildren of Tony Bennett, Walter Matthau and other wealthy people. Most of the kids who come to FLI are from Harlem and the South

Bronx, and many are from low-income households. All of these children deserve teachers who are willing to stretch themselves. True education is holistic," said Anderson, who began working at FLI in June of 2008.

Last year, FLI received 680 applications for 75 open spaces. The 300-seat charter school is for students from kindergarten through eighth grade. Because FLI is a charter school, it has more flexibility in terms of curriculum and teaching methods than traditional public schools. Anderson talked excitedly to the *AmNews* about the programs FLI offers, which include informal breakfast meetings with parents a couple times a month and a chef coming to the school twice a week to create healthy meal plans. "We are working to get chocolate milk out of school lunch offerings for the reduced lunch program. You'd be surprised at how few schools serve water at lunch. We also have a monthly dinner for our families prepared by a local restaurant, along with a demonstration on how to make healthy meals. Many of the kids in my school don't have access to healthy foods and healthcare. We do what we can to help."

In addition to ensuring that FLI students are filled with the



PETER ANDERSON

necessary fuel to maintain an active life, Anderson is looking forward to the school's new lacrosse program and would love to find more volunteers to help with that.

On the academic front, FLI students will get hands-on experience and academic credit this spring via a program that focuses on entrepreneurship and fiscal responsibility. "I think it's very important to share these skill sets with the kids," said Anderson, who is quite familiar with fiscal responsibility due to the fact that FLI must raise \$500,000 annually (in addition to state funds) in order to continue

operating the school. "In the past, we relied heavily on foundation grants, but we are trying to diversify our funding streams. We recently held our first online auction using donated items, and we raised \$10,000. We expect to make a lot more from auctions in the future, and we are making a concentrated effort to get smaller donations from people in the community," said Anderson, who stated that charter schools are essentially public schools with more local control, more flexibility and more accountability.

Anderson, who regularly clocks in 12-hour days at FLI and frequently works on weekends, somehow still finds time for his personal interests. The 38-year-old jazz enthusiast likes to hike, play tennis, watch sports and travel. Though he has no children of his own, several of the students he's taught over the years have reached out to express their appreciation of his work. "I'm always humbled by the impact of working in education. I don't think I deserve the gratitude, though, because I was really just doing my job."

For more information about the Future Leaders Institute or to find out how you can volunteer, call (212) 678-2868 or visit the website at www.futureleadersinstitute.org.