

# Janie Whitney

*The heart, soul and strength of East New York*

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

Janie Whitney received the unbearable news in the spring of 1989.

Trey, her handsome, strapping, 18-year-old son — a full-scholarship student at New Hampshire's Brewster Academy, and one of the top-rated high school basketball players in the country — had been killed in a boating accident just days before his graduation.

"It's still something that's hard to digest," shares Whitney, founder and C.E.O. of the Bethlehem Baptist Academy, a school in East New York, serving students in nursery through eighth grade, which Trey attended.

It was later relocated and re-named the Trey Whitfield School in memory of the popular 6-foot-8-inch, 240-pound power-forward, who led his team to the New England State Championship, and was bound for the University of Richmond at the time of his death.

"Trey was the type of child who would give the shirt off his back to anybody," says Whitney, a former financial analyst and founder of a now-defunct day care center and after-school program in Bushwick, who created Bethlehem Baptist Academy in 1983 to bring quality education to her under-served neighborhood.

She even persuaded her church to buy a vacant high school annex, and used its modular classrooms to rear a brand new generation of bright graduates — using tuition, and donations from foundations, corporations and individual donors, to fund her new school.

Many of Whitney's students have gone on to attend Penn State University, Vassar College and other heralded scholastic institutions.

A key to the school's success has been her push to involve parents.

"We call our school a miracle in Brooklyn, and we developed some beautiful children who went on to become very successful," says the woman, who also co-founded the Trey Whitfield Foundation with her son's father, Argle Whitfield, to provide gifted youngsters in need with support and scholarships.

The couple has turned the death of its own child into a better life for the children of others.

Kari Gibbs, a former troubled teen



Photo by Stefano Giovannini

embroiled in a domestic violence situation at home with her mother's live-in boyfriend, found a guardian angel in Whitney.

"Ms. Whitney had a whole lot to do with who I am today," says Gibbs, who went on to become a certified public accountant, and an attorney with her own law firm in Georgia.

She says she caught the educator's attention one day when she came to class visibly distressed and ill-prepared for an important test.

"Ms. Whitney asked me what hap-

pened, and the next thing you know, she made a call on my behalf, and got me out of there."

Gibbs went on to deliver the salutatorian address a few years later when she graduated from Brewster Academy — a school which continues to ensure that Trey Whitfield is not forgotten.

Annual memorial lectures there still honor the friendly student, who worked in summer camps, lobbied his municipal government to institute a Dr. Martin Luther King day in New Hampshire (it has one now), and was known to gravi-

## BIO FILE

**NEIGHBORHOOD:** East New York

**OCCUPATION:** Founder and CEO

**COMPANY:** Trey Whitfield School (co-founder of the Trey Whitfield Foundation)

**CLAIM TO FAME:** "Providing scholarships, helping children to further their education, cultivating young minds into mover-shakers of tomorrow, and continuing the memory of my son, Trey."

**FAVORITE PLACE:** Trey Whitfield School

**MOTTO:** "If I can help somebody as I pass along the way, my living will not be in vain."

tate toward the underdog.

He once came to the rescue of a young handicapped girl at Brewster, who was being scorned by her school mates during a formal event.

"They went over to her and asked her to dance, and everybody respected her after that," reveals Whitney, whose school choir regularly performs at Trey's tributes at his alma mater, whose website references how the devastated parents coped with their loss.

"They wanted nothing more than to make sure Trey's friends and the community he loved so much were cared for," reads an excerpt.

Derek McNeil, who was in the year below Trey at Bethlehem Baptist Academy, remembers Whitney fondly.

The investment banker, who has offices in five states, thinks of her as his second mom.

"I came from a single-parent home, and to put it simply, there would be no Derek McNeil without Janie Whitney," he contends.

It was Trey Whitfield's desire to change the lot of his challenged neighborhood, often remarking to his mother that when he grew up and became "somebody big," he would return and "build things for the children to have."

Janie Whitney has taken her son's castle in the air to heart, and made it a dream come true for East New York's underprivileged youngsters.