



Landon alum and Upper School head Neil Phillips with students, from left, Kai Knight, Kamil Turkmani and Blake Shue.

PATRICE GILBERT

VISIBLE MAN

Neil Phillips, head of Landon's Upper School, is leading an effort to create positive role models for African-American boys

By Steve Roberts

On a bad day, it can take Neil Phillips a whole minute to commute to work. As head of Landon's Upper School, he occupies a roomy brick house on that prep school's 75-acre campus of gently rolling hills and pampered playing fields. And though "the commute is great" and the location "overwhelmingly positive," living so close does have its negative side, Phillips says. "I can see my office window from home, and even on weekends it's calling me. I know the work is always there."

These days, that work is largely administrative, "making sure the trains run on time."

But that's his "day job." Phillips' other mission extends far beyond the Landon campus on Wilson Lane: He's the founder of an organization called Visible Men, a play on the title of the famous Ralph Ellison novel *Invisible Man*.

Too often, Phillips believes, the models of achievement in the black community are limited to rappers and running backs, while the research scientists and real estate developers get scant attention. "There needs to be a real dedication to providing success imagery," Phillips says. "Young black boys don't see enough black men in positions of accom-

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plishment. The perception is that in order to make it, you've got to be an athlete or an entertainer. But that can be tremendously limiting and defeating, if those are the only images of success that you're seeing."

Phillips was fortunate to have "images of success" in his own home. His father, Percy Phillips, was working for a mining company in his native Jamaica when he decided to move his wife, Ann, and two children to America. "It was a typical 'land of opportunity' story," says Neil, who was 4 at the time. "He was a hard worker, and he was very enticed by the American dream." The family had connections in the Washington, D.C., area, and Phillips remembers moving into the Summit Hills Apartments on 16th Street and East West Highway in Silver Spring. His father did "odd jobs" before landing a bookkeeping position with Martin Marietta (now Lockheed Martin) and returning to school to qualify as a CPA. His mother worked at the International Monetary Fund, rising from administrative assistant to event planner, and the family eventually moved to

Germantown, where his parents still live.

Percy and Ann Phillips are the kind of people President Barack Obama was talking about in his inaugural address, when he celebrated "the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things... [who] packed up their few worldly possessions and traveled across oceans in search of a new life." And their fierce ambition focused on their only son, who did not always live up to his promising potential. "I was a solid student," Phillips admits, "but I was very much the kind of student that needed to be pushed." A family friend attended Landon, and Phillips' parents thought he would benefit from the school's small classes and challenging climate. "If you're going to be in a classroom with eight or nine others," he says, "there's no place to hide."

There was no place to hide in more ways than one. When Phillips entered the eighth grade at Landon in 1980, he was the only black student in his class. But "in no way was that a burden," he insists. He carried a "mind-set" deeply ingrained

by his parents: "Stand on your feet; people will take you for who you are." He made friends quickly (the first student who showed him around campus was the best man in his wedding). And he was the biggest, fastest guy around. "The fact that you're a capable athlete at an all-boys school where athletics is a big deal gets you some clout," Phillips says.

He starred in three sports—football, baseball and basketball—and the Ivy League came calling. Phillips narrowed his choice to Penn, Brown and Harvard, and while the Penn Quakers had the best basketball program, Neil's father swayed his decision: "He said to me, 'Son, you don't have to go to Harvard because it's Harvard. But if you say no to Harvard, you'd better have a good reason.' And I didn't have a good reason."

In college, Phillips won All-Ivy honors in football and basketball, and he fantasized about a pro hoops career: "Every college player who meets with success says, 'Hey, I'm in the game here.' I always felt that if I got to an NBA training camp,



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and a coach got to see me for a few days, he'd say, 'I need to have that guy on my team.'” But that never happened. At 6 feet 4 inches, with broad shoulders and thick muscles, he was not quite tall enough for the frontcourt and not quite nimble enough for the backcourt. He played pro ball in Australia, but left after a year: “My parents had paid all this money for me to go to college, and I thought it was time to get a real job.”

After returning to this area, he discovered his real love: working with young people. He started a basketball training program called One on One, which still exists, and then moved to California to work with the Positive Coaching Alliance, a nonprofit organization devoted to focusing sports programs on character development. “The win-at-all-cost mentality that exists at the professional level and increasingly at the college level was seeping into youth sports,” Phillips says. “PCA was formed to combat that.”

Phillips was newly married and enjoying the West Coast when he got a call

from an old friend who wondered if he would be interested in returning to Landon as athletic director. Phillips didn't think so, but he gave it some more thought. His wife, Shannon, was from Maine, and the couple wanted to be closer to their families. And he liked the idea of applying his theories about sports to the very place that had taught a young boy from Jamaica important “life lessons” many years before. He arrived in Bethesda in March of 2003, and became head of the Upper School two years later.

At 42, Phillips is happy to be home. He often sees Shannon and their two small sons from his office window. (She's of Irish and German stock, and he calls the boys “rainbow-colored.”) But Landon is still a largely white school, and as Phillips describes himself: “I am a black man, slightly darker than your typical chocolate bar. Really, I'm brown, but that's beside the point. I like being called black. I'm proud to be called black.” And he feels a deep need to touch the lives of black youths who will never make it to the elite green

world of Landon: “Look at the incarceration rates, the unemployment rates. What do those numbers tell you about black boys who don't graduate from high school? What their fate is likely to be? It's maddening, it's tragic, and it has to change.”

Visible Men is Phillips' answer to his own question. A Web site is up and running—www.visiblemen.com—where black men can contribute their stories and connect with others. Plans include speaking programs, mentoring networks, school curricula and a book of profiles. Phillips takes heart from Obama's election and thinks he provides a positive image “for all to see, every single day.” But most black boys will not become a president or a point guard. For a real role model, and real “life lessons,” they can look to Neil Phillips—father and son, husband and teacher, coach and counselor. **B**

Steve Roberts' new book, From Every End of This Earth, will be published in September and focuses on recent immigrants to America.

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