

Political Dreams Drive bold teen

Tar Heel of the Week

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DeWarren Langley, left, stands out in a coat and tie -- his usual dress for school -- next to Brian Jones in a psychology class at Jordan High School in Durham.

Staff Photo by Chris Seward

DEWARREN LANGLEY

BORN: Sept. 28, 1984, in Durham

FAMILY: Mother, Djuana; sister, Peytan, 14; brother, Lavioris, 17

EDUCATION: Senior at Jordan High School; plans to attend Hampton University in Virginia, majoring in business with a minor in leadership studies

ACTIVITIES: Founder and executive director of Teenagers Politically Active; director of the office for chapter formation of the National Youth Rights Association; Herald-Sun newspaper columnist; peer counselor for Planned Parenthood of Central North Carolina

FAVORITE POLITICIAN: Durham City Council member Cora Cole-McFadden

MOST QUOTED POLITICAL FIGURE ON HIS WEB SITE: Martin Luther King Jr.

FAVORITE PLACE TO SIT AT DURHAM CITY COUNCIL MEETINGS: The front row

Before darkness cedes to dawn, DeWarren Langley is rubbing out the wrinkles from his uniform on an ironing board propped on his living room floor.

He steams his khaki pants so the creases stand up on their own and slides in his cubic zirconium posts, a beacon in each ear. He no longer considers them inappropriate, after seeing the mayor of Detroit sporting an ear piercing. Then he retrieves his blue blazer

with the American flag pinned above his heart, which is how the president wears his on television.

Except on "casual Fridays" when he wears his "Tims" (teenspeak for Timberland boots), Langley rises an hour early to prep this self-inflicted dress code. If you dress nice, you act nice, a math teacher once told him. Then he's out the door of his mother's bungalow near Maplewood Cemetery, hopping the bus that will take him to Jordan High School, where new teachers mistake him for the principal and classmates catcall "preacher man."

But sometimes, the local newspaper columnist with the tamed dreadlocks feels as if he's screaming at the top of his lungs and nobody's listening. That'll happen when you're trying to persuade the most politically unplugged slice of society -- according to recent voter tallies -- to get pumped about sewer easements and budget hearings.

Langley, 18, is convinced that the adults in power are making decisions for teenagers without stopping to find out what they want. So he has proposed forming a teen panel to advise the Durham City Council, county commissioners and the school board. He's also pressing for the appointment of young people as voting members of government agencies, such as the City-County Planning Commission and the Open Space and Trails Commission.

For more than a year, Langley has hounded county staffers -- to the point of alienating some of them. But he's getting somewhere. The word is that the city and county need four months to draft an agreement, which is expected to endorse Langley's idea for the teen panels -- in spirit, without allocating funding for it.

The school board won't sign on until Langley finds a way to pay for the three, 10-member commissions, school board Chairwoman Kathryn Meyers said last week.

A youth panel linking three branches of local government would be a first in the state, and possibly the nation, said Debra Henzey, executive director of the Civic Education Consortium at UNC-Chapel Hill's Institute of Government. About 20 youth councils exist statewide, but most operate under parks and recreation departments, where they struggle to be taken seriously, Henzey said.

Still, the panels have managed to find favor among average teenagers to balance out all the "student government types," described by Henzey as politically astute overachievers who juggle multiple school clubs and tend to hail from affluent families.

"We don't often tap into that middle group," she said. "Kids with the potential."

A vision for youth

The mother of this Future Business Leader of America is a Duke University housekeeper named Djuana who "can't stand" politics and raised three children whose father visited on weekends.

Occasionally, she'll turn to the one child with the resume longer than hers -- who corrects her pronunciation and refuses to clean up his room during the State of the Union address -- and wonder, "Where did you come from?" Then she'll order her son to go out and play.

"Sometimes we'll tell him we don't want to hear about Iraq today," she said flatly. Langley learned how government isn't supposed to work during a spring break trip to Washington four years ago with Duke-Durham Partners for Youth, which pairs mentors with teenagers from Durham's West End neighborhood. One day, program participants trudged up Capitol Hill to meet with U.S. Sen. John Edwards (pre-presidential bid). They rapped with a staffer instead.

"My first thought was, this was pointless," Langley recalled.

Upon his return, Langley said he learned that Durham leaders were blaming youth for "demonizing an entire city" and that they considered imposing a citywide curfew on teenagers.

While attending a town meeting, Langley petitioned for comprehensive job programs for people his age. Five TV crews ambushed him, he recalled, and one reporter followed him home.

Relaxing on his porch later that night, Langley and his cousin, former City Council member Angela Langley, designed a mission for a new nonprofit organization rolling out the welcome mat for teens to participate in civic life.

The absence of youth leadership "has led to a generation of young people being led by gangsters, athletes and entertainers, who have become leaders ... merely by their celebrity status," Langley broadcasts from the Teenagers Politically Active (TPA) Web site.

TPA enrolls more than 70 Durham youths, ages 11 to 18, who have tackled bus driver shortages, classroom searches and emergency protocol in the schools. Langley recruits members through a flurry of instant messaging.

Membership has its obligations. Two unexcused absences a year are grounds for dismissal, and Langley sends out notices tracking attendance rates. The group meets at 10 a.m. on Saturdays -- not conducive to teenagers whose Friday night ends only hours earlier at someone's house party.

"It's DeWarren's show," said Moses Ochola, 17, who isn't considering a career in politics because "it's, um, politics."

Ochola, a senior at Riverside High School, joined TPA last year because his 15-year-old sister did, and he'd like his voice to be heard by someone other than an MTV veejay.

Langley "acts too mature for his age," he said. "He feels that it's more important to do his job than to go out and party."

"It took me a while to get him to crack a smile," said Emily Adams, director of education and training for Planned Parenthood of Central North Carolina, where Langley works as a peer educator for a teen outreach program.

Langley, who talks openly with teens about gonorrhea and gives condoms to his sexually active friends, is reserved when discussing politics, she said. Langley asked that his political affiliation not be revealed in print.

"He doesn't want to be pinned in a hole," Adams said. "He doesn't want to be easily read."

A bold beginning

As a freshman, Langley said, he "came in loud," his silver chains blinding, baggy pants hanging low, a sneer befitting a "gangbanger." Inside, he was the reluctant warrior, he said -- like Secretary of State Colin Powell.

That is, until Langley was suspended for five days in 2001 for getting in a fistfight with another student over a "false rumor." It was about that time he was nominated for the Independent Weekly's Citizen Award.

Langley said he has since checked his temper and urges local officials to "be more sensitive of each other's feelings," particularly members of the Durham school board, whose bickering borders on "embarrassing," he said.

On a regular visit to Durham City Council chambers, for instance, he watched council member John Best Jr. spontaneously embrace his colleague, Cora Cole-McFadden. "I was all, like, I doubt I would see this at the school board," Langley said.

This fall, Langley will begin Hampton University's five-year MBA program with a minor in leadership studies. He feels he has already earned a master's in political science by virtue of growing up in Durham.

"He'll probably be calling every night with, 'Did we see this in the paper?' " his mother said.

Langley's in the market for a successor, since he'll be too involved with national youth advocacy to sustain the momentum in Durham.

Until he returns to claim Mayor Bill Bell's job. And then Gov. Mike Easley's. And then In the meantime, he flashes a Hollywood moxie smile reminiscent of Ronald Reagan and warns that if Durham doesn't make this youth commission happen, "They'll be hearing from me."