

PUPP scholar from TCHS makes a case for himself

By PENNY RAY

pennyray@trentonian.com

TRENTON — While standing in the hallway of Trenton Central High School Friday afternoon, 17-year-old Micheal Whittington recalled an argument he and his sister had when he was just nine years old. His sister was around 19 years old at the time, Whittington said, and he doesn't remember what the argument was about. But what he does remember is that his sister hit him first, and then he hit her back. Whittington, of course, was punished for his actions; but his sister was not.

"I felt bad after I did it," Whittington said. "But now we look back and laugh."

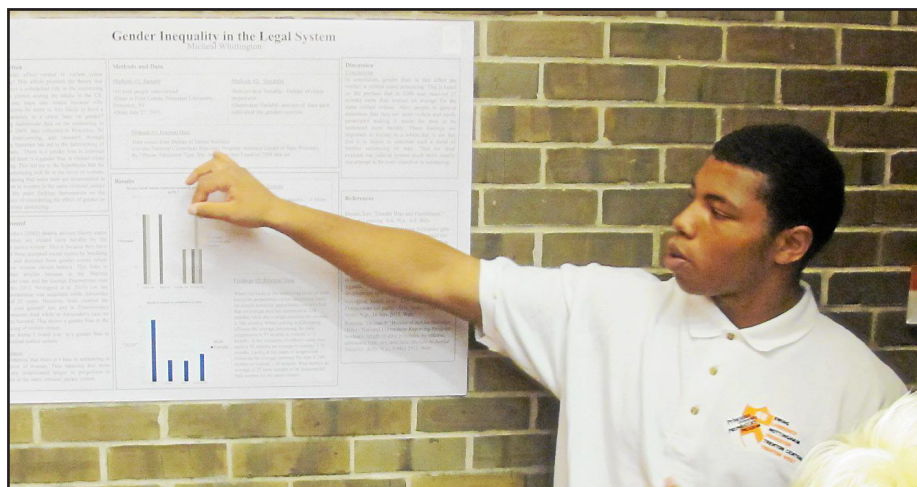
That small incident from his childhood is a perfect analogy for a research paper Whittington wrote this summer titled "Gender Inequality in the Legal System." In that paper, Whittington argues that there is gender bias in the criminal justice system, specifically in violent crime sentencing. And while Whittington realizes the argument with his sister does not constitute as violent crime, he believes women receive lenient punishments compared to men who commit the same offenses. And that leniency, Whittington said, is an extension of the compassion women receive when being punished as young girls. Whittington feels that judges and jurors with female offspring find it difficult to harshly punish female defendants.

"No matter who you are, it's hard to separate those principles learned in the home from what is just and fair in a legal courtroom," Whittington said. "We should live by justice and equality, and if that means that both men and women receive the same sentence, then let it be."

The Jodi Arias trial, which earlier this year garnered worldwide headlines and was broadcast live across the nation, is just one example that illustrates Whittington's point. Arias admitted to killing her boyfriend, but claimed it was self-defense. In May, a jury convicted Arias of first-degree murder; but they could not reach a verdict on her sentence. The prosecution had asked for the death penalty, but there is some speculation that prosecutors will now accept a penalty of life in prison. To this date, Arias has yet to be sentenced.

"I'm not surprised, but I don't think it's right," Whittington said. "If roles were reversed and the boyfriend had killed Arias, he would have been sentenced to death already."

Whittington is not alone in his thinking. Using data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Whittington says his research shows that men are incarcerated longer than women who commit the same or similar offenses. Whittington also surveyed a number of peers and learned that 81 percent of them feel that, in general,



Trenton High student Micheal Whittington discusses his paper on gender equity in the legal system at a recent symposium.

men are more violent than women. The survey participants also believe men are more likely to be murderers than women. Whittington believes his research supports the hypothesis that gender affects violent crime sentencing. And he feels the United States should evaluate its judicial system more closely and strive for objectivity when deciding sentencing terms.

"My greatest takeaway from researching this paper is to always try my hardest to look at everything and every situation in an unbiased manner," Whittington said.

Whittington has lived in Trenton all of his life. He is the youngest in a family of seven, and he's a junior at Trenton Central High School — West. To date, Whittington has a 3.9 GPA. And this year he played both offense and defense for the Trenton Central Tornadoes varsity football team.

"He's an all-around great kid," head coach Tarig Holman said in a conversation this week. "I think he exemplifies everything that's good about high school athletics and high school academics. He's very dependable and trustworthy. Mike not only knew his position, but he knew everyone else's on the team. He was a keystone to our program, and he leads by example."

Whittington is also a PUPP Scholar.

"One of the things I appreciate most about Micheal is that he's not afraid to be smart and be curious," Princeton University Preparatory Program Director Dr. Jason Klugman said this week. "He's going to explore what interests him, and he knows that college is where he's going."

Princeton University Preparatory Program, or PUPP, was founded in 2001 to address the low numbers of high-achieving, low-income students who apply and matriculate to elite colleges and universities. PUPP identifies freshman high school stu-

dents who are considered "high-potential students," and then works to prepare them for acceptance into elite colleges and universities.

"The top students at a majority of minority schools in urban areas typically enroll in colleges that don't match their academic profile," Dr. Klugman said. "At PUPP we identify kids who have academic potential and the desire to go to college and be successful. Once they become PUPP Scholars, we give them the academic preparation, wrap-around services and support they need to really jump outside their comfort zone and make good decisions about where they will attend college."

Whittington wrote the paper about gender inequality in the legal system this past summer during a PUPP sociology course. Before researching the paper, Whittington felt as though the American justice system was exactly that: just and fair. Now, though, he is not so sure. Whittington now conducts his own research when analyzing legal hearings, as opposed to simply accepting the narrative supplied by mainstream television news. And he strives to view life through an unbiased lens.

"I look at every situation, and every problem or conflict as unbiased as I can," Whittington said.

And he advises citizens across the nation to know their constitutional rights.

"Even as a regular law-abiding citizen, you should learn your constitutional rights," Whittington said. "Television seems to make a lot of cases cut and dry, but the legal system is not black or white in the real world."