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He's an intellectual inspiration

Philip Emeagwali spurns the title of genius.
Nurturing is the key, he told Willingboro parents.

By David Cho
INQUIRER SUBURBAN STAFF

WILLINGBORO — Philip Emeagwali, a man of immeasurably high intelligence, spurns the description people most often attach to him: genius.

"I don't like that term. People think it only means genius in the mathematical sense or that it refers to a select group of people," Emeagwali, 44, told about 50 parents last night at a public forum on schools. "But I think every one of us has the power to be a genius. I was not born a genius; it was nurtured in me by my father."

When he was 10, growing up in western Nigeria, Emeagwali was drilled daily by his father to solve 100 math problems in one hour. There was no time to write solutions on paper — he had 36 seconds per problem. So Emeagwali did them in his head.

"People later called me a mathematical genius, but you would be a genius, too, if you had to do 100 math problems in an hour," he said.

In the last two days, the man who has been called "one of the greatest intellectual giants Africa has produced" has been taking his message — the importance of homework, cultivating encouragement at home, and surmounting obstacles — to a school district that has been mired in problems.

Standardized test scores here sank

to such lows in recent years that the state placed the district in a special monitoring program. And even as the roofs of the town's school buildings crumbled, taxes soared.

Not that Emeagwali didn't have his own trials to overcome.

When he was 12, Emeagwali lived underneath ceilings that crumbled from rocket shells. From 1967 to 1970, Nigeria fell into civil war, forcing schools to close. Emeagwali had finished only seventh grade.

"We ate only once a day. Some days we had nothing to eat. We were among the poorest families in the world," Emeagwali told students at a high school assembly earlier in the day. "Growing up poor and overcoming several obstacles made me a stronger person. I became more determined to succeed in life."

Studying on his own from 6 a.m. to midnight, Emeagwali passed entrance examinations to the University of London with top grades. In 1974, he immigrated to the United States, obtaining degrees in several subjects. His parents and eight younger brothers and sisters followed him to America.

Since then, Emeagwali, whose IQ is too high to be measured on conventional tests, has put together a resume that extends like the decimals of pi. He is listed in Who's Who in the World and Who's Who in America. He has won numerous awards, including the Gordon Bell

Prize — computer science's Nobel Prize. He devised ways of making oil fields more productive, saving the United States hundreds of millions of dollars a year. His inventions include the world's fastest computer, which in 1989 computed 3.1 billion calculations in one second.

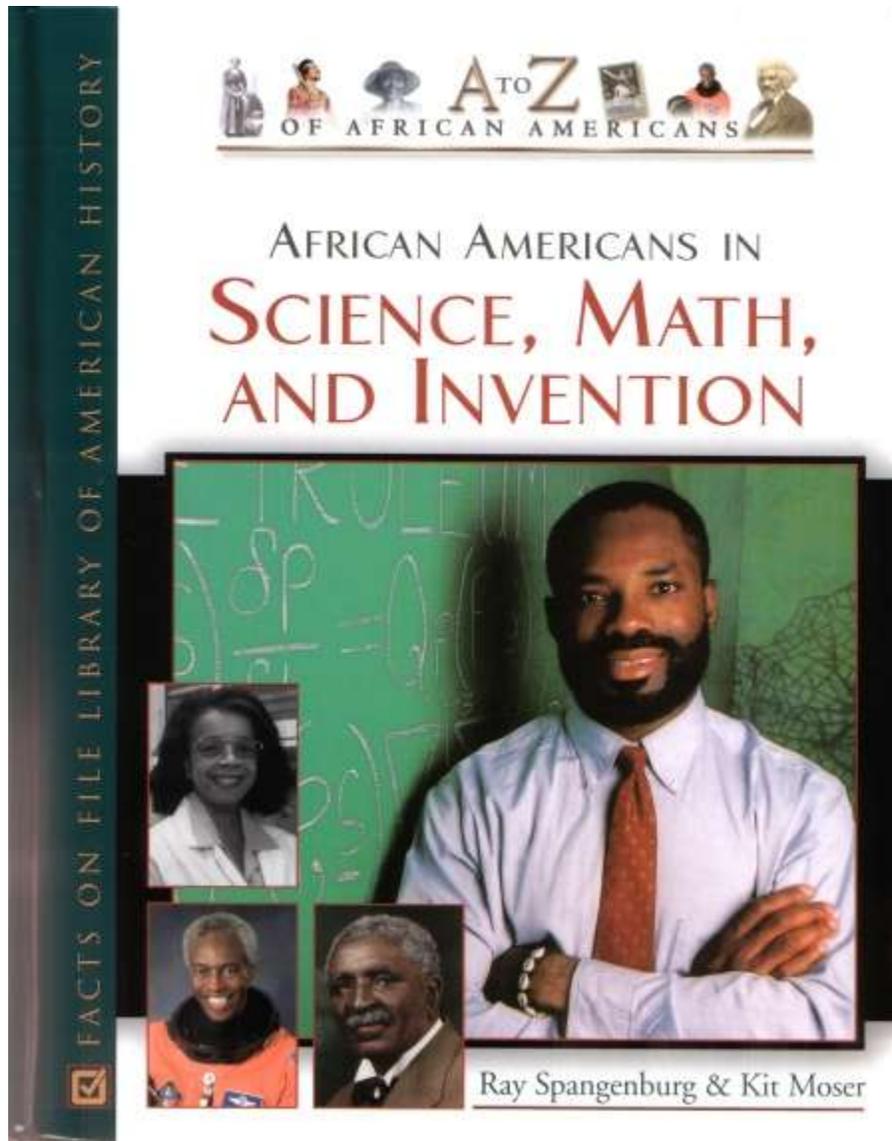
He is now setting up a consulting firm in Baltimore, whose services are wanted by everybody from the United Nations to telecommunications firms.

While this was only his third speaking engagement in schools, students in Willingboro gave an enthusiastic response to his message, mobbing him with questions and requests for autographs after his speech. He is scheduled to speak at Willingboro's Bookbinder and Pennypacker Park Elementary Schools today.

Emeagwali came to Willingboro after Robert Matthews Jr., a sixth grader at Garfield East Elementary School, asked him, via e-mail, to speak at his school. Matthews had been assigned to do a report on an African American scientist for Black History Month.

School administrators then asked Emeagwali to speak to parents at a public forum, which was scheduled for last night. Draped in a sky-blue North African robe and cap, Emeagwali stood out in an otherwise formally suited crowd.

"Genius is not beyond the reach of these students," he told the parents. "You just need to show them how to tap into the genius that lies within them."



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Award-winning scientist Philip Emealgwali (left) finally met face to face with sixth grader Robert Matthews at the Garfield Park School in Willingboro.

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