



Photograph by *Robert Clark*

*They had to go.* The Coke machine, the snack machine, the deep fryer. Hoisted and dragged through the halls and out to the curb, they sat with other trash beneath gray, forlorn skies behind Kirkpatrick Elementary, one of a handful of primary schools in Clarksdale, Mississippi. That was seven years ago, when administrators first recognized the magnitude of the problem. Clarksdale, a storied delta town that gave us the golden age of the Delta blues, its cotton fields and flatlands rolling to the river, its Victorian mansions still beautiful, is at the center of a colossal American health crisis. High rates of obesity, diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease: the legacy, some experts say, of sugar, a crop that brought the ancestors of most Clarksdale residents to this hemisphere in chains. “We knew we had to do something,” Kirkpatrick principal SuzAnne Walton told me.

Walton, Clarksdale born and bred, was leading me through the school, discussing ways the faculty is trying to help students—baked instead of fried, fruit instead of candy—most of whom have two meals a day in the lunchroom. She was wearing scrubs—standard Monday dress for teachers, to reinforce the school’s commitment to health and wellness. The student body is 91 percent African American, 7 percent white, “and three Latinos”—the remaining 2 percent. “These kids eat what they’re given, and too often it’s the sweetest, cheapest foods: cakes, creams, candy. It had to change. It was about the students,” she explained.

Take, for example, Nicholas Scurlock, who had recently begun his (Continued)