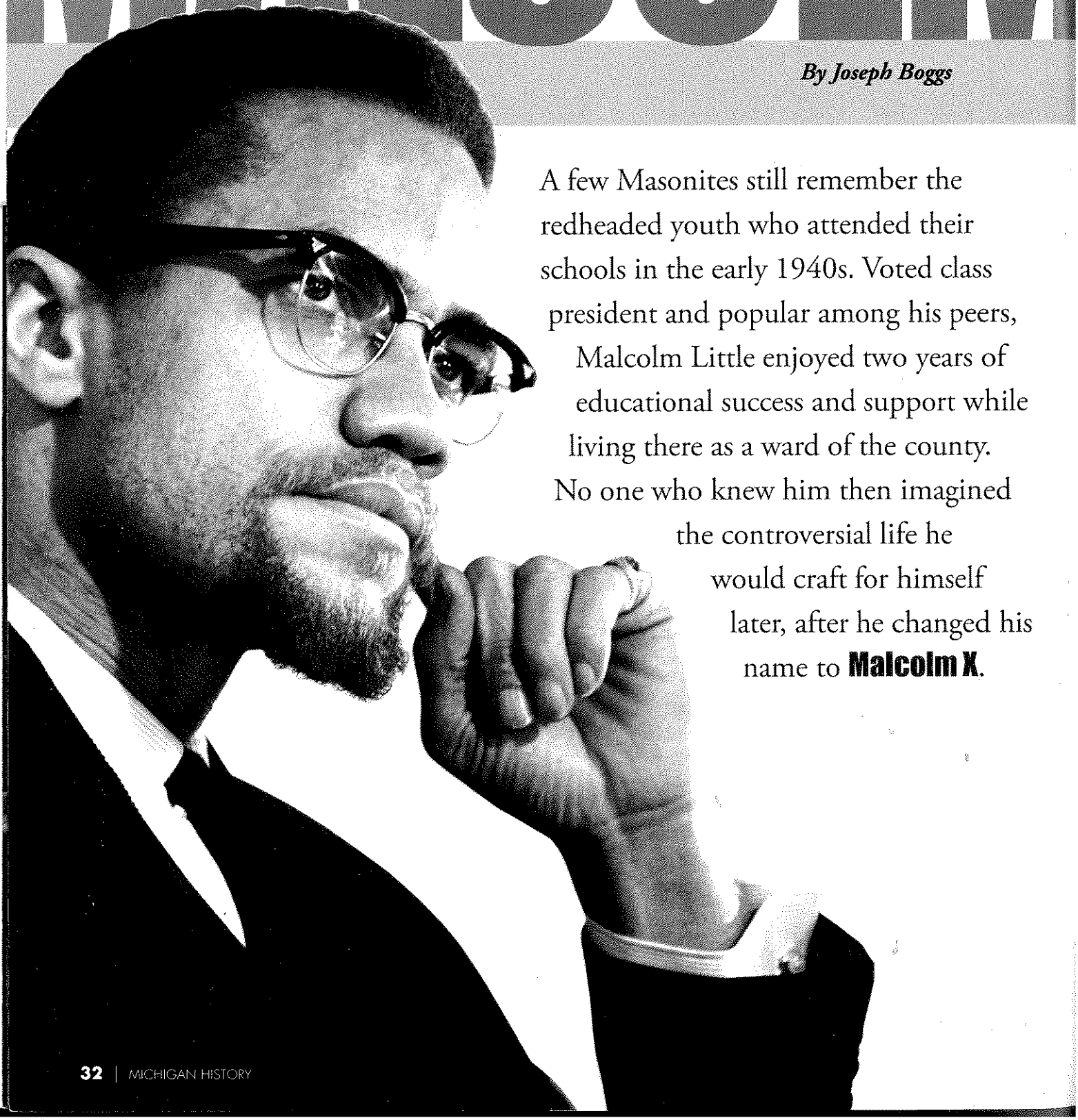
Mason Remembers MALCOLM

By Joseph Boggs



A few Masonites still remember the redheaded youth who attended their schools in the early 1940s. Voted class president and popular among his peers, Malcolm Little enjoyed two years of educational success and support while living there as a ward of the county. No one who knew him then imagined the controversial life he would craft for himself later, after he changed his name to **Malcolm X**.

Opposite page photo courtesy of Getty Images. Below: The detention center where Malcolm X lived during his years in Mason has been torn down. But the residence of the Lyons family, who took him in near the end of his time in the community, still stands.

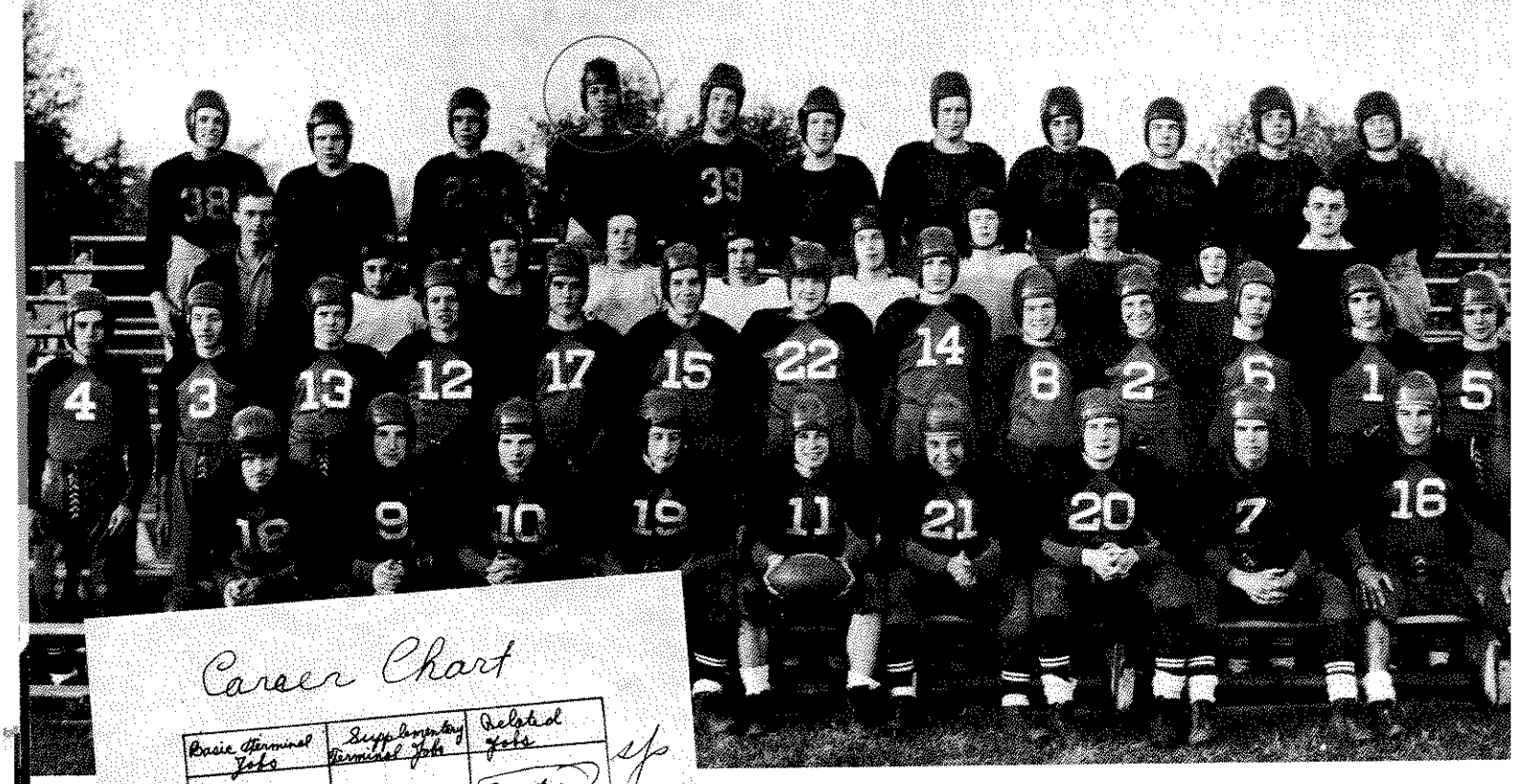
Malcolm Little was born on May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska to Earl and Louise Little. His father was an outspoken Baptist preacher who was a local leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Because of threats from the Ku Klux Klan, the family relocated in 1926 to Milwaukee, Wisconsin and shortly thereafter to Lansing, Michigan.

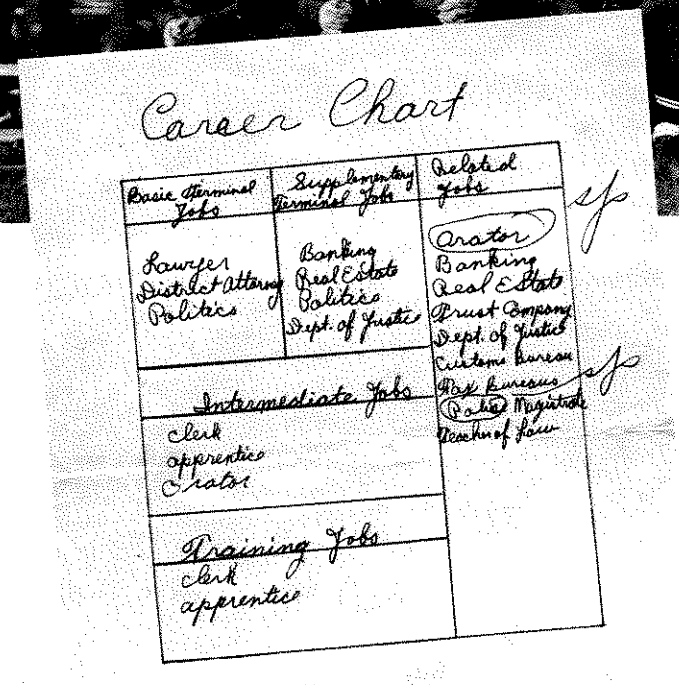
In the fall of 1931, when Malcolm was only six, his father was nearly severed in half after being run over by a trolley downtown. Even though the Lansing Police Department ruled the cause of death a mishap on Earl's part, Malcolm and other members of his family believed he was murdered. Suffering from this loss, Louise was left alone to support her seven children during the most devastating years of the Great Depression.

While his mother and older siblings Wilfred and Hilda tried to keep the household together, Malcolm made matters worse. He performed badly in school, refused to help with chores, even stole from local stores. Older brother Philbert, also a mischief maker, agreed later, "After my father got killed, we got looser and looser." To make matters worse, Louise began to lose touch with reality and, on January 3, 1939, was committed to the state mental hospital in Kalamazoo.

With his mother gone, Malcolm spent less and less time at home. Depressed, he told Maynard Allyn, a local social worker, that he felt no one in his home truly cared about him. In August 1939, he asked to become a ward of Ingham County and was assigned to the county detention center in Mason: a shelter for children without parents or reliable legal guardians. According to one biographer, Malcolm was all too pleased to be moving from a home he felt could not give him the love and attention he desired.

In the move to Mason, he first met Lois Swerlein, the caretaker of the detention center. He described her in his autobiography as "bigger than her husband...a big, buxom, robust laughing woman." He and the other children at the center called her "ma" because of the way she treated them—with wisdom and compassion. Malcolm responded in kind to the positive attention; he swept, mopped, and dusted around the center and even took on extra chores.





Above: Malcolm X was an active participant in Mason schools, serving as class president and playing on the football team. Courtesy of Rodney Jewett. At left: An 8th-grade assignment reveals the youth's career interests. Courtesy of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History. Opposite page: Malcolm X once walked the halls of the old Mason High School.

Enrolled at the local junior high, Malcolm began to perform up to his potential for the first time in his life. In class, teachers found him attentive and willing to learn. And history was one of his favorite subjects, despite the fact that Malcolm remembered the teacher telling racist jokes.

Malcolm also had no trouble making friends in his new environment. He befriended dozens of children in his own grade as well above him. Belva Otis, a classmate in the ninth grade, confirmed his popularity: "Everyone seemed to like him. ...He was a true gentleman." Rollin Dart, a good friend, said of him, "He was just so different and just so special...people always wanted to meet him and be with him." Malcolm's best friend as listed in his eighth-grade opinion book was James Cotton. "Rollin and my husband walked with Malcolm almost daily to school," recalled Belva. "They were great friends."

At the beginning of the second semester of eighth grade, Malcolm decided to run for class president. In the epilogue of the "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," Alex Haley recalled Malcolm's heartfelt reminiscence about the day of the election. "A girl named Audrey Slaugh [sic]... nominated me. And a boy named James Cotton seconded the nomination. The teacher asked me to leave the room while the class voted. When I returned I was the class president. I couldn't believe it."

In later years, Malcolm wondered if he had just been elected because—being black—he was unique in his class, "like a pink poodle." But Cotton put that idea to rest. In a PBS documentary titled "Malcolm X: Make It Plain," he declared that Malcolm was "a dynamic individual" and "had a natural ability for leadership." Dart added, "We would attribute all kinds of special qualities to the guy. It was easy to imagine he could do anything."

One example of Malcolm's leadership was apparent during an after-school incident. A band of unruly boys from Mason was about to hold a farm boy under an outdoor drinking fountain. Malcolm rose to the child's defense, saying "Hey, guys, this fella has a long walk ahead of him before he gets home. If the seat of his pants gets wet in this sub-freezing weather... ." The dangling conclusion of his sentence was enough to encourage the

boys to let their captive go.

On another occasion, he assumed the teacher's role of supervising his class during an assembly—and did it quite well.

Riding a wave of self-confidence, Malcolm took a class that enabled him to explore possible careers. In one of his assignments, he wrote in "lawyer" as his career aspiration. He also included other supplementary jobs related to law such as "district attorney," "polise [sic] magistrate," and "teacher of law." Otis agreed that Malcolm had what it took to be a lawyer: "He had all the makings of one. He had great oratory skills, [was] always calm, and never lost his composure. He had charisma, and was extremely smart."

What made him choose a career in law is somewhat of a mystery. But his burgeoning relationship with half-sister Ella Little may have played a part. In his first meeting with Ella in Lansing, Malcolm was awed by her presence. "She was the first really proud black woman I had ever seen in my life... . I had never been so impressed with anybody." Ella was impressed with him, too, and congratulated him on his good grades and his election to class president. Most importantly, Ella encouraged him to become a lawyer in the mold of Clarence Darrow, who had died the year before.

Malcolm finished eighth grade ranked third behind Cotton and a classmate named Dewey Doan. Just before the end of the school year, however, an event occurred that Malcolm described as "the first major turning point of my life."

On that day, the teen met with the school counselor, who also happened to be a favorite teacher. "He was always giving advice about how to become something in life," noted Malcolm, "about what you ought to read, to do, or think." By all accounts, the two got along well.

The counselor began their meeting with the comment, "You ought to be thinking about a career. Have you given it any thought?" Malcolm responded, "Well, yes, sir, I've been thinking I'd like to be a lawyer."

It's impossible to know what went through the man's mind when he listened to his student speak. Perhaps he took a moment to consider what a young black man's chances of pursuing that dream in 1940s America would be. Perhaps he replied with no forethought at all. What came out, according to Malcolm X's autobiography, was this: "One of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you; you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a n - - - - -. Why don't you plan on carpentry? You'd get all kinds of work."

To make matters worse, other students less accomplished than their black classmate were encouraged to reach high with their career aspirations.

Following this exchange, Cotton tried to calm him down and reassured him he could do anything he put his mind to. But Malcolm didn't listen. "It was then that I began to change inside," he said years later.

Still simmering from the discouraging career advice, Malcolm spent the summer in Boston at Ella's home—a mesmerizing experience. "I didn't know the world contained as many Negroes as I saw thronging downtown Roxbury at night," he wrote. "Neon lights, nightclubs, pool halls, bars, the cars they drove!" He was also amazed by the interracial couples that walked the streets.

Malcolm came back to Mason in mid-August a changed person. One of the first Masonites to discover this was Lois Swerlein, supervisor of the detention center. Unable to cope with his moodiness and concerned that it would rub off on her other charges, she arranged in September for Malcolm to live with the Lyonses—one of the few black families in Mason.

Otis, who had been so impressed with Malcolm in junior high, could now see he was slacking: "When it came to schoolwork, he seemed lazy. He could have done a lot better. His grades could have been as good as he wanted them to be."

Instead of keeping order at school assemblies, he was now the one who disrupted them. Cotton noticed the change in his friend's attitude. So did social worker Maynard Allyn, who asserted, "Someday this boy is going to explode!"

The disgruntled 15-year-old then made a decision to cross

the color line and walk hand-in-hand with a local white girl named June Palmer. Word got around to school administrators about this then-unacceptable behavior, and the administrators petitioned the court to send Malcolm back to Lansing.

After the start of the winter semester, Malcolm wrote his half-sister in frustration to ask if he could join her in Roxbury. She quickly arranged to get custody of him and, in early February, he left Mason behind. Just before he departed, though, a saddened Mike Simone implored his friend, "Don't leave Mason, Malcolm. Everyone here likes you. In the big city, you're just another person."

After a youth spent in Michigan, Malcolm's life in Massachusetts took a decidedly negative turn. Instead of finishing high school and working toward his dream of becoming a lawyer, he got caught up in Boston's night life and, later, its criminal element. He became involved in prostitution rings, gambling dens, drug trafficking, and eventually house robberies.

It was this last category of crime that tripped him up; in 1946, he was sentenced to prison for larceny.

While serving his time, Malcolm renounced his illegal activities and embraced the Nation of Islam, which preached black self-reliance and separation. He also took the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (informally, Malcolm X). After his parole in 1952, he became one of the Nation's leaders and the assistant minister of its Detroit temple among other positions. For nearly a dozen years, he was the public face of the Nation of Islam, indicting white America in the strongest terms for its crimes against black Americans.

Tensions eventually arose between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad—the head of the Nation—whom the assistant minister came to overshadow in the public's eye. This led to Malcolm's departure from the organization in 1964.

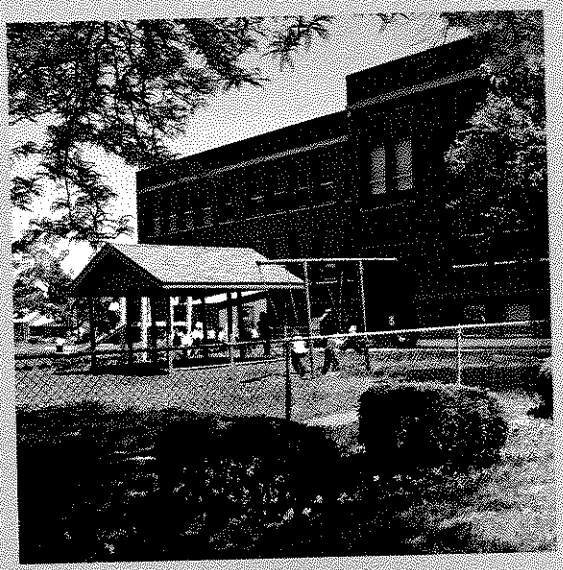
Following the split, he converted to Sunni Islam and made a pilgrimage to Mecca, after which he disavowed racism. He then traveled extensively throughout Africa to meet with the continent's leaders in an effort to connect them with blacks in America. He also founded Muslim Mosque, Inc., a religious organization, and the secular Organization of Afro-American Unity.

While he was crisscrossing the globe and energized by the new direction his life was taking, threats both public and private were being made against him at home. On February 14, 1965, his wife and children survived a firebombing of their residence. A week later, the controversial and charismatic black leader was assassinated by Nation followers while giving a speech in New York City.

Malcolm X frequently told the co-author of his autobiography, that "I am a part of all I have met." How much influence did his time in Mason have on the man he became? We'll never know; he never had the benefit of hindsight that old age brings.

But one thing is certain: Those who knew him in Mason still have fond memories of him. "Though he is a bit of a controversial figure now," asserted Belva (Otis) Cotton, "he really was a great kid and an even better friend...a leader in the making." mh

Joseph Boggs, *a Newport resident, is a graduate of the University of Toledo and begins his pursuit of a Ph.D. in history at Michigan State University this fall.* *He thanks Drs. Mary Linehan and Cynthia Ingham for their support in the writing of this article.*



MALCOLM X IS HONORED IN LANSING AND DETROIT

The site of Malcolm X's childhood home in Lansing at the corner of Vincent Court and Martin Luther King Boulevard is memorialized by a Michigan historical marker. The marker makes note of the discouraging experience that is the focus of this article.

The city is also home to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Academy, a public charter school with an Afrocentric focus. The academy is located at the corner of MLK Boulevard and Barnes Avenue, in the former Barnes School (at left).

Additionally a charter school within the Detroit public school system bears Malcom X's name.