

A Nation at War: Reforming America's Schools

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, October 12, 2005

America's at war. And not just in the craggy mountains of Afghanistan and windswept deserts of Iraq. Here at home, we're fighting an equally fierce war against destitution, with our children on the front lines.

In 2004, almost 13 million American kids were living below the poverty line. To stop a mean cycle of need, we must create an education system that takes into account the obstacles in kids' everyday lives. We need schools that won't give up on them until they're on track to becoming full partners in the workforce.

What a price we pay. About 40% of inmates in our state and federal prisons and local jails haven't finished high school. The Community Service Society of New York, a non-profit organization tackling poverty reports that almost 50% of African-American men in the city are unemployed.

Uptown, Geoff Canada, President and CEO of Harlem Children's Zone, is convinced that our public schools have failed urban communities. "We need to approach the war on poverty with the vigor we would bring to any enemy that threatens our country," Geoff says. "The future of our homeland depends on it."

He puts his time and energy where his mouth is. Geoff is leading a movement not just to educate kids. He won't stop until he has transformed the fabric of their community life. Not bad for a poor kid from the South Bronx.

Geoff's mother raised her four boys alone, working a string of jobs and sometimes turning to welfare and food from local charities. As a teenager, Geoff drank, smoked pot, and carried a knife. Miraculously, he stayed in school and won a scholarship to Bowdoin College. Then got his Master's in education from Harvard. But he never forgot his roots. He's dedicated his life to helping kids in places like the Bronx.

Geoff has directed a private school for inner city kids, managed a truancy prevention initiative, and founded a martial arts program that teaches young people Tae Kwon Do and non-violent conflict resolution. In 1983, he joined the Harlem Children's Zone, a non-profit organization focusing on children and families in some of New York's most distressed neighborhoods. Its 15 centers serve more than 12,500 people every year, most of those kids at risk. But The Zone is far more than just a service provider.

Meet Darlene. She grew up an orphan, a ward of the state, and never escaped the brutal grip of poverty. Without a family of her own, she didn't know the first thing about raising kids. She felt overwhelmed after giving birth to her son, Richar. Not knowing what was "normal," she constantly second guessed herself—and him. At the height of Darlene's panic, an employee of Harlem Children's Zone handed her a flier for Baby College, a nine-week parenting class that's key to The Zone's early intervention approach. Darlene signed up and was relieved to learn the basics about child development. Mother and son graduated with flying colors and moved on to the Harlem Gems pre-K program. The first-grader is now thriving at Promise Academy Charter School, also part of The Zone.

When her son started coming to her for homework help, Darlene, who could barely read, feared that he would soon bring home assignments beyond her capacity. She turned to The Zone for help. Staff enrolled her in a GED course. She caught the bug and has already opened a college account for Richar—with \$250 and future matching funds from the Harlem Children's Zone. Once uncertain about the future, Darlene is now convinced Richar will be the first in his family to go to college.

For Geoff Canada and his staff, it's all about interconnectedness. They're uprooting economic and cultural patterns that limit poor families' potential. By following families like Darlene's from birth to college, the Harlem Children's Zone practices "progressive intervention," shifting according to changing needs. That means not only education, but also employment, affordable housing, and health care.

Geoff has built an organization that proves that people—no matter where they come from—can get a good education. Five years from now, he hopes there will be programs modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone in the poorest communities across America. That's a heavenly lot of Darlenes and Richar.