

## AMERICA'S UNFINISHED AGENDA

The problem of the severely disadvantaged, inner-city minority child is heartbreaking and our national failure to remedy it is eating at the heart of our society. Black spokesmen and white liberals are certain that “white racism” is the overriding factor; conservatives are certain that ‘black culture’ is the cause; others cite the ‘culture of poverty,’ unequal educational opportunity, social class bias, economic deprivation, social isolation, or a changing economic climate that provides few blue-collar jobs by which unskilled workers can rise.

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued a study citing the debilitating influence of the single-parent family as a factor. Attacks on him as a ‘racist’ for “blaming the victim” ended for decades efforts by academics and social scientists to discuss their views.

Even today, in our climate of ‘political correctness,’ it is difficult to conduct a dispassionate discussion of similar topics crying out for rigorous analysis of what has worked, what has not worked, and what has been counterproductive, without becoming involved in mudslinging.

The answer, it seemed to me, was to stay out of debates and to put into practice programs that by their success would prove the soundness of their premises. That was the genesis of HEAF, the Harlem Educational Activities Fund.

Beginning in the late 1980s and incorporated by my wife and me in 1990, HEAF was designated a ‘public charity’ by the IRS in 1995. Today, it has a distinguished ‘outside’ board, a full-time staff of 12 educators and social workers, 40 part-time assistants, over 40 volun-

teers, and a budget of a million and a half dollars a year, supporting programs that take students from middle school to high school and then through college, and often to graduate school.

By September 1999, HEAF will have 78 Central Harlem students enrolled in colleges such as Harvard and Haverford, Bryn Mawr and Barnard, Columbia and Cornell. Many of these students are the first members of their families to finish high school. Over 100 students in the HEAF pipeline are enrolled in the city's competitive public high schools such as Bronx Science, Stuyvesant, and Brooklyn Tech. The HEAF-sponsored elementary school chess team, The Dark Knights, from Harlem's Mott Hall School, ranked Number One in the United States in the national chess competitions this spring, and the HEAF-sponsored junior high school chess team again ranked Number One in the United States this year, as it has for several years. The Director of HEAF's chess program, Maurice Ashley, with encouragement, leaves of absence, and financial support from HEAF, has become the first African-American player in the history of chess to be designated an International Grand Master.

Not one of HEAF's college or high school students has ever dropped out of school. Of HEAF's first three college graduates, one (a Yale alumnus) is now attending medical school, one is in ROTC, and one plans to return to graduate school after appropriate work experience.

Although HEAF gives no sex education lectures and distributes no contraceptives, only one female student has had a baby and only one of HEAF's male students has fathered a child. (Each of these students is pursuing college and determined to proceed to graduation.) The results speak for themselves.

While conventional wisdom focuses on 'teaching,' which is what takes place at the blackboard, or on the 'mechanics' of education, such as computers, curriculum, class size, etc., HEAF focuses on 'learning,' which is what takes place in the head of the student.

If a child does not want to learn, or thinks he or she cannot learn; if a child does not understand the importance of learning, or the joy

and satisfaction of learning; if a child is tired or angry or hungry; or cannot see or hear properly, HEAF believes that you could have Albert Einstein at the blackboard and Bill Gates at the computer without success. So HEAF creates an atmosphere in which a child is convinced that he or she can learn and feels proud of learning, an atmosphere of high aspiration and positive peer pressure; above all, an atmosphere in which a child focuses on long-term goals and rewards that more than repay short-term effort and sacrifice.

HEAF creates an atmosphere of personal responsibility in which parent, school, and HEAF work together to be supportive, but in which the child accepts responsibility for doing homework, taking the test, writing the book reviews or lab report, etc.

HEAF operates in an atmosphere in which excuses are irrelevant and performance is judged by high standards because our youngsters are being prepared to compete in a meritocratic world, one in which their competitors may have started to prepare earlier and may be working harder than they, or have had advantages they have not.

Our students know that we understand that everyone has defeats and failures, and that success depends on how one reacts to setbacks. Winners respond with intensified effort and determination, while losers lose self-confidence long before they lose the game.

Our students understand that we respect them, that HEAF is with them for the long haul, and that we pledge continuing attention and involvement throughout their careers.

Our students agree, as an important part of their relationship with HEAF, that HEAF will get copies of their report cards so that we can monitor their academic and social progress. They know that HEAF is on their team, but that in order to do our job, we have to be fully informed of their activities.

Our students know that, as they advance from high school to college and into the larger world, their identification with groups should be life-enhancing, not limiting; their choice of friends, roommates, dining companions, professional colleagues, and so forth will be best for them if they choose those who bring out the best in them, who

challenge them to keep growing, who encourage them to become all they are capable of being.

Our students understand that high achievement should be a source of pride, not embarrassment, and that their success will make it easier for those around them and those following them to succeed, too.

They understand HEAF's philosophy: that we want to engage them not only in 'schooling' but in 'learning' (reading, travel, music, art, the theater, and other things which bring knowledge and delight); learning which will help them not only in "getting a job" but in "pursuing a career," learning which will help them not only in making a living, but also in leading a life that is satisfying, productive and fulfilling.

Finally, our students understand that HEAF's goal is to increase their life chances, providing them with a broad choice of careers. That is the story of the Harlem Educational Activities Fund.

When making presentations to foundations for financial support, I sometimes repeat a Talmudic parable I love.

In biblical times, a traveler wandering along a mountain ridge came upon three exhausted laborers sprawled by the roadside. When he asked what they were doing, the first replied that they were carrying a heavy load on a hot day and he wished he were home. The second laborer looked at the first and said, "These are the famous Cedars of Lebanon; we are carrying down this mountain the world's finest building materials." The third laborer looked at the second and replied, "We are helping King Solomon to build his Temple." The Talmud notes that all three were carrying the same log.

At one remove, HEAF is involved in tutoring, test preparation, and other mechanics of education. At a second remove, HEAF is changing lives and demonstrating that lives can be changed. At a third remove, analogous to helping King Solomon to build his Temple, HEAF is moving the disadvantaged, inner-city minority child into the mainstream of American life, and I feel that is the most important unfinished job America faces.

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