



THE PLAIN DEALER

Central Harlem program combines leadership, commitment to rebuild a community

Thursday, December 13, 2007

Sam Fulwood III, Bob Paynter and Sandra Livingston
Plain Dealer Reporters

A team of fifth-grade chess players takes second place in a national competition.

Videos produced by a group of high-school students get screened at the Tribeca Film Festival and win awards at several others.

A bunch of teenagers brainstorm together after school on how to make a pile of money in the stock market.

Scenes from a suburb somewhere? Far from it.

These kids, and many others like them, are doing their thing in Harlem, the long-troubled New York City neighborhood where Geoffrey Canada is tackling decades of decline and poverty with a no-nonsense, businesslike assault.

Canada's brainchild - the Harlem Children's Zone Project - is built on some simple but stark realities: Distressed communities didn't fall apart overnight and won't be repaired in a day. Saving the next generation of poor, inner-city children requires rebuilding the communities around them. Household by household. Block by block. Child by child. In Harlem, Mount Pleasant or Hough.

The Children's Zone started in the late 1990s with a few densely populated blocks. It has spread in several-block increments under Canada's determined hand to encompass much of Central Harlem.

Today, the Zone is a network of tightly connected initiatives designed to restore hope and healthy values to the community so that every child in Harlem has the chance to grow up in a nurturing environment.

It includes a panoply of programs - from parenting and health classes, medical services and preschool, in-school and after-school activities to college-preparatory counseling. None is unique in itself.

What sets them apart is the unifying vision Canada has imposed - creating a single, womb-through-college cocoon for thousands of poor kids - and a fierce determination to achieve measurable outcomes.

Canada grew up poor and brings to his work an unwavering belief that kids anywhere can succeed.

But he also brings a CEO's devotion to hard data and results.

Clients in the Zone are "customers." Outreach is "marketing." In the Zone, good intentions aren't good enough; quick fixes are pipe dreams.

"If you're not prepared to be doing this for 15 years," Canada said bluntly, "then don't do it."

His vision - and the mounting results - are starting to turn heads a long way from Harlem.

With poverty re-emerging as an issue in presidential politics for the first time in a generation, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama paid special tribute to the Zone in summer, noting that it is "literally saving a generation of children in a neighborhood where they were never supposed to have a chance."

If elected president, the Democratic candidate has pledged to spend billions to help replicate the Children's Zone in 20 U.S. cities.

But whether Obama reaches the White House or not, there is no reason, in Canada's view, that a Zone-style program couldn't be done here - in Mount Pleasant or some other Cleveland neighborhood - or any place else in America.

As a nation, "we haven't cared enough about poor children to do it," Canada said in a recent interview in his office overlooking the bustling Harlem streetscape.

"I doubt Cleveland is very different from New York," he said. "You could absolutely pull this off, if you got a group of folk who were serious enough."

Finding a way to change the odds

Geoffrey Canada grew up on the streets of the South Bronx.

His father abandoned the family when Geoffrey was 4, leaving a determined single mother to raise four boys alone - with low-paying work when she could find it, welfare when she couldn't.

Canada landed a scholarship to Bowdoin College in Maine and earned a master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He joined the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families in Harlem in 1983, then became its president and CEO in 1990.

At the time, according to a report in the New York Times, the community was awash in "crack cocaine, cheap guns and rampant homelessness."

Canada's primary job as head of the nonprofit charity was to spend \$3 million a year to keep kids in school and out of trouble. He created after-school and anti-violence programs, all of which helped a small number of kids.

But the waiting list of kids kept growing, all facing long odds indeed. And Canada couldn't stomach that he was leaving so many to face those odds alone. Fueled by that frustration, he and a new Rheedlen board of directors took a different tack in 1996, setting out to try to change the odds - to save every single child in the neighborhood.

Starting small, Canada carved out a 24-block zone of Central Harlem, home to some of the highest poverty rates and poorest test scores in the city and to some of its most entrenched drug dealers.

Since then, his Children's Zone expanded first to 60 blocks, then to almost 100, now covering virtually the entire area known as Central Harlem.

A four-pronged attack to save a community

Stripped to its fundamentals, Canada said, the Zone is built on four pillars.

One: Rebuild the community by creating a critical mass of leaders.

The key, Canada said, is to identify and support caring individuals who already live in the neighborhood.

On the worst blocks, he said, most people see only danger and anarchy. But even in those places, a handful of residents have been there long enough to remember how good things were - and to know how good they could become again.

You don't even need a majority, Canada said. "Mostly we found that to change a block, you had to get between 10 and 20 percent of the people engaged."

As those people came out, cleaned up around their homes and watched out for one another, everyone else tended to follow along.

Hope is contagious, Canada said. As it started sprouting on blocks in the Zone, the drug dealers - who thrive on chaos - started moving elsewhere.

"People don't realize that 20 percent is a lot," he said.

Two: Start early and never let up.

Classes for new parents and caregivers, preventive health care, childhood immunizations, solid preschool training and programs that urge teens to aim high all have been shown to improve the lives of children.

But such programs are mostly unavailable to poor children, Canada said, until after they've already failed in school or found security in a street gang.

"We think that best practice has to start at birth and has to continue until those children graduate from college. Our theory is you never let the kids get behind in the first place."

Three: Think big. To succeed, the initiative has to embrace enough kids so that positive influences in the neighborhood overwhelm the negative. Many kids, facing peer pressure to mimic a thug, a gang banger or dope dealer, assume that's what's expected of them, Canada said.

"If all the kids are drinking 40s [40-ounce beers] and you've got a 14-year-old, it's just natural and normal for that kid to drink 40s," Canada said. "And no matter what you say as a parent, that kid is going to believe that is normal."

But if kids grow up in a community "where all the 15-year-olds are working, well, they just think, 'I'm 15. Everybody's working. I need to work.' And that's what kids do."

Four: Evaluate ruthlessly. Measure everything. Hold everyone accountable, no exceptions.

"You've got to be prepared that when people give you the money that you're going to deliver and not deliver excuses," Canada said.

So, somebody has to be in charge, he said. In the Zone, that somebody is clearly Canada.

He runs it like a business, not a charity. All programs operate from a 10-year business plan, with goals, targets and timetables.

All 1,300 full- and part-time employees are held accountable for predetermined results - and suffer if they fall short. "We fire probably 15 to 20 people a year," Canada said. "In the end, if you took a salary to deliver an outcome and you didn't deliver an outcome, you can't stay here in the organization."

Programs reach scores of kids, adults

This year, the Harlem Children's Zone's budget will approach \$60 million - most of it coming from wealthy board members, private foundations and other nongovernmental contributors. But it started much smaller - about \$6 million a year a decade ago - and has been able to keep growing because of its rigorous approach

to goals and results.

In its aggressive approach to "marketing," Zone recruiters go door-to-door and stop passers-by on the streets, cajoling and begging them to take advantage of free offerings.

In some cases, reluctant parents are offered sweeteners such as prizes, raffle tickets, gift cards and free groceries - anything to get them to participate and to enroll their children.

Typically, parents are offered sweeteners such as prizes, raffle tickets, gift cards and free groceries to get them to participate and to enroll their children.

This year, the Zone has touched more than 7,400 children and nearly 4,300 adults through various programs, exceeding its annual goal by 40 percent.

In October, the Zone's Baby College - a nine-week training program for expectant parents - had 170 young mothers and fathers enrolled, more than in any previous class. To date, the program has trained more than 1,500 parents or caregivers.

After a series of the sessions over the past two years, 91 percent of graduates reported reading to their youngest child at least five times a week - up from a little over half before the training.

Nearly all the graduates of another series had either brought their children's immunizations up to date or scheduled appointments to do so.

As a result of other programs, the Zone reports that:

- The number of kids missing school or visiting the emergency room because of asthma has declined dramatically.
- The number of preschoolers described as delayed or very delayed was cut in half during one program's first year in operation.
- Two fifth-grade chess teams - one all girls, the other co-ed - each won second place in national chess competitions in 2005.
- Students in grades sixth through eighth at the Zone's Promise Academy charter school easily outperformed students from the surrounding school district last year in math. And the eighth-graders outperformed their counterparts in English.
- Teens in an arts and multimedia technology program reported a much lower incidence of "at risk" behaviors than teenagers nationally. Of slightly more than 100 students surveyed, about 17 percent said they had used alcohol in the previous 30 days, compared with 43 percent nationally. And 3.8 percent had used marijuana, compared with 20 percent nationally.

Two months ago, in the fourth-floor conference room of a Harlem church, a group of teens - some wearing do-rags, baggy jeans and tattoos - convened to plot strategy.

They may have looked like street toughs, but they were really neophyte investors, studying the stock market and figuring how to maximize their investment of \$20,000 in donated money.

Last school year, the group - one of several teams participating in the Investment Camp, jointly sponsored by the Zone and Lehman Brothers - managed a 16 percent return on its investment and split up the profits. Members have vowed to do even better this year.

The Zone plan can work anywhere

Like Harlem, Cleveland has a long list of kids who desperately need help - in Mount Pleasant and many other neighborhoods.

And like the Harlem Canada describes before the Children's Zone, the anti-poverty forces here are split into dozens of well-meaning but disjointed, and sometimes competing, factions.

Activists in Mount Pleasant report that despite many programs to help poor kids, there often is little collaboration or communication among groups and sometimes open hostility and jealousy over limited funds.

If uncoordinated groups grapple among themselves over grant money, "that's going to set up, by design, some competition," said Canada admirer Valerie Hicks, whose Mount Pleasant-based KidzHealth 2020 openly borrowed some program ideas from the Harlem Children's Zone.

The challenge in starting a similar zone in Mount Pleasant or elsewhere in Cleveland is the same as it was in Harlem, Canada said: Finding the right leadership, following the four principles and marshalling the commitment.

"This won't work with a collaborative of equal partners," he said, "which is what people want to do."

The most difficult part of building a zone, Canada said, is finding a leader whom the community and contributors are going to hold accountable and giving that individual the authority to hold others accountable.

And it's not like the requisite characteristics are unique to him.

The necessary skills are learnable, Canada said, taught every day in management schools where people learn how to run a business.

"The success of the program really has to do with whether you can hire quality people, train them and supervise them," Canada said.

"We manage by outcomes, and we manage by data. And everybody knows what it is they're supposed to do.

"It's hard," Canada said. "But it's not so hard that it shouldn't be done any place in America.

"All that's truly needed is the will to make it happen."

To reach these Plain Dealer reporters:

sfulwood@plaind.com, 216-999-5250

bpaynter@plaind.com, 216-999-4820

slivings@plaind.com, 216-999-4453

© 2007 The Plain Dealer

© 2007 cleveland.com All Rights Reserved.