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A Circle of Trust: The Story of the See Forever School

James Forman, Jr.,[1] and David Domenici[2]

In April 1997, we left our jobs as lawyers to start a school for court-involved kids. We had $50,000, donated office space, and lots of energy. We had no staff, site, curriculum, or other funding. But we had a mission—we wanted to create the best school in the country for kids who had been arrested. And we were in a hurry. We knew kids who needed the school—and they needed it right then—not years down the line. Five months later we opened our doors to 20 kids and a small staff, crammed into a row house in the heart of Washington, DC. This is the story of how we got started.

Back Story I: James Forman, Jr.

"Tell the judge I want a program," pleaded Eddie,[3] "tell him I don't need to be locked

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up." Eddie was 16 years old, charged with breaking into a house to steal a TV and VCR, and I, a new public defender in Washington, D.C., was representing him. Eddie wanted desperately to go home, and he promised to do everything right this time: he would go to school, attend counseling, and pass his drug tests. I believed him. But I wasn't sure the judge would.

Being a good juvenile defender requires learning a lot about your client's childhood, and the more I learned about Eddie's, the more depressed I became. At eight his stepfather began to physically abuse him. At 10 he began to act out in school, fighting with other kids, refusing to do his homework, and eventually repeating two grades in elementary school. Later he was referred to an "alternative" school, where instead of getting the best of what our school system had to offer, he got the worst. I had been to the school, and it was a place where teachers never assigned homework, nobody talked about college, and kids walked the halls afraid of being jumped.

I had become a public defender so that I could fight for kids like Eddie. My parents were active in the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and I knew that their generation had banged down doors so that I could walk through them. For me that had meant Brown University, Yale Law School, and a clerkship for Sandra Day O'Connor. At the same time, I knew that a large part of the African-American community had not reaped such rewards. More and more poor blacks were going to prison, not college. Despite the civil rights movement's victories, a black

man born in my generation who dropped out of high school was more likely to go to prison than was a black man of my father's generation.

And as much as I loved my job, I was constantly frustrated by the lack of good choices for kids like Eddie. The government's only solution was juvenile prison, at a cost of over 50k a year. But when I scoured the community for good alternatives to prison, I kept coming up empty. There were not many programs, and those that existed were often low-quality, under-resourced and poorly staffed. As a result, even when I won a case, my clients often returned to the same bad circumstances they were in before I met them. Recidivism was not inevitable, but it was too common.

In Eddie's case, I didn't convince the judge. Eddie was sent to juvenile prison, where he would be held until he was 21 or the Youth Services Agency decided to release him, whichever came first. A few months after Eddie was sent away, I got a call from a friend of a friend. His name was David Domenici, and though I had met him once or twice, I didn't know much beyond the basics: his dad was a U.S. Senator, he worked at a corporate law firm, and he did a lot of work with kids. David explained that he wanted to meet to discuss an idea: he was worried about kids who dropped out of school, hung out on the streets, and were assigned to terrible alternative schools. He was thinking about creating a program—a *good* program—for these kids.

Back Story II: David Domenici

After graduating from college in 1986, I went to work in New York for an investment bank. A friend and I invited students from Paul Robeson High School in Brooklyn to our offices one afternoon a week. We ostensibly taught them about business and finance—what we really did was get to know them and share cookies and snacks courtesy of Lehman Brothers. Our weekly visits grew into a summer program, in which four students agreed to come to Washington, DC, work part time, and experience living in a college dorm.

I then decided to attend Stanford Law School, but I didn't want to give up on our summer program. So along with a small group of my classmates, I helped create a program called DCWorks, in which rising high school seniors spent the summer preparing for college and work. DCWorks targeted low-income, minority students who were doing ok, but who needed a boost if they were to attend college. A perfect candidate would have Bs and Cs—not be a troublemaker, but also not a "star".

During my second summer of law school I interned at the Public Defender Service (PDS) in Washington, DC, and there I met a whole new set of teens—these were kids who had dropped out of and been kicked out of school, who had all Fs and Ds on their report cards; kids who weren't going to show up at the counselor's office and pick up a flyer about some summer internship program. Kids like Eddie, James's client.

After graduation I took a job as a corporate lawyer in DC, but I couldn't stop thinking about the teens I had met at PDS. At the suggestion of a mutual friend, I called James to discuss my idea of starting a student-run business and tutoring program for kids who had been arrested. I asked James if he thought his clients would sign up, and if he'd be interested in working together. He said "yes" to both. After our meeting, I cashed out my 401k plan (from a few years practicing law) and focused on finding a space out of which to run the program.

The Pizza Shop

A few weeks after that meeting, we purchased a small pizza delivery business located between a liquor store and a nail salon on a tough corner of Northwest DC. We presented teens from the court system with the following proposition: come for two hours of after-school tutoring, after which you'll get to work in the kitchen, learn how to take orders, prepare food, and manage all the finances, marketing and other operational aspects of a small business.

We had great fun and our students learned all about the pizza delivery business. Kyle, who was 16, closed out the register at night, signed all of our checks, learned Excel, and balanced our books. Students went with us to the warehouse district to pick up food supplies, ran the mixing machine, and made homemade pizza and lasagna. But we quickly realized that the Pizza Shop wasn't the solution we were looking for. The young people we were working with were still stuck in terrible

schools (or not attending school at all), and a few hours a day of tutoring and work wasn't going to alter their life trajectories.

Then we were introduced to two prominent attorneys in town, Reid Weingarten and Eric Holder. Former prosecutors, Reid and Eric had always wanted to do something to benefit the young men they had met in the juvenile system. They had formed a nonprofit—which they called the See Forever Foundation—and had raised about $50,000. But they weren't sure of their next move. In the early part of 1997, we struck a deal. We would use their money to start a school, which we'd open as soon as possible. By April, David had quit his job and James had taken a leave of absence from his.

We decided that we would open a few months later, in September. This meant that we had slightly over four months to, among other things, find a building, hire teachers, recruit students, and raise money to make it through the year—not to mention develop a curriculum that would work for our target students. But the decision seemed obvious. We were young, passionate about the mission of serving kids from the juvenile system, and (somewhat self-righteously) convinced that if we didn't do it, nobody else would.

By late August, it was clear that we were going to face some challenges at start-up. We were not sure that we had legal authority to operate a school. We were not a charter school (we would soon apply to become one the following year), and although the head of the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) had personally pledged

his support months earlier, we had yet to receive formal confirmation. (Eventually, on August 27th, the Deputy Superintendent of Alternative Education sent a fax stating that there had been a "misunderstanding" and that "DCPS would not be able to support our efforts or ensure" that our kids would earn credit.) We opened our doors anyway, as an independent, tuition-free, private school.

Finding a site for that first year was difficult. We couldn't secure an agreement with DCPS to use any of their sites, and other buildings that could work for a small school were in short supply. Over the summer we found a row house in the middle of a residential street that we thought would work; luckily for us, a Neighborhood Legal Services branch had been there before, so we were able to obtain an occupancy permit because of a DC law that allowed us to grandfather in, based on past use of the site for a nonprofit.

Our little building was homey, but its inadequacies quickly manifested themselves. The basement—where we had just installed our newly donated computers, flooded during a downpour shortly before we were scheduled to open. The building didn't have enough room for a designated cafeteria, so the social studies room would have to double as one. Other things also were troublesome—only two bathrooms, no air conditioning (ouch), sparse technology (we would have to rely on hotmail accounts), and little office space. And although we had raised $300,000, our projected budget for the year was about twice that (we counted on our ability to raise the rest once we were up and running).

Though many things were hard, finding students was easy. We had only one non-negotiable admissions criterion: a student had to have been arrested. We leafleted the courthouse, spreading the word among judges, prosecutors, probation officers and public defenders. By mid-August we had kids 20 kids who wanted to come, probation officers and parents asking us to start, and judges who said they would not consider the kids truant if they were in our care. So we opened our doors as an independent, tuition-free program—designed for court-involved kids, and funded entirely by grants and individual donations.

Our Students

We ended up with a student body that was entirely African-American, overwhelmingly low-income, performing at the 5th or 6th grade level despite being 15-17 years old, and had accumulated few high school credits. We were reminded how far behind they were when we reviewed the applications, each of which included the following math problem: "You have $10.00. You order 3 slices of pizza. Each slice costs $1.75. How much change do you have after you pay for the three slices? (Please show your work. We are interested in seeing how you try to solve the problem.)" Of the first 20 students to enroll, about ten missed this question. Our students' academic transcripts often looked like a bomb had dropped on them. Many were like that of a student named Perry (who would go on to be a star): Five Fs, one D and nearly 100 days missed last year.

Academic struggles were only part of the challenge. Most of our students had seen things that no child should have to witness—friends and relatives shot, parents on drugs, fathers lost to the prison system. As a result, many suffered from depression and exposure to trauma, for which they rarely had received treatment. And our students were not only victims. Some had caused great harm to others, including acts of violence. (Many of our students had committed crimes that are rarely prosecuted in affluent neighborhoods, including drug crimes and minor fights in school; others had done more serious things, but our position was that no offense disqualified a student from admission.)

Many of our students were angry about the hands they had been dealt. Even though they hadn't traveled much, they knew that just across the city other kids—wealthier, and often (but not always) whiter—lived on cleaner streets, with better schools, parks and libraries, and less hostile police. Working within the context of this anger was one of our central challenges. We adopted the philosophical position of the principal of an all-black school in Atlanta, about whom Sara Lawrence Lightfoot wrote in *The Good High School*, who believed: "Recognize the rigged race but run as hard as you can to win." Yes, we said, this world won't always be just; yes, the police will too often harass and disrespect you; yes, you may even have to be twice as good, or twice as respectful, or twice as prepared. All of us must work to change those conditions, because the race shouldn't be rigged. But while it is, "run as hard as you can to win."

Searching for Models

Our search for good models to emulate was depressing. When we asked people for examples of good schools serving kids who had been arrested, they typically said, "I don't know of any, that's why you should start one." At the suggestion of some colleagues, we visited the "best" alternative school in Baltimore, and left dismayed. Only a handful of kids were present; when we asked to see the math curriculum, we were told they "focused on the basics." "Job training" consisted of a computer class where students learned keyboarding. Further, the school was located on a remote site, nowhere near where students lived, and not easily accessible by public transportation. The school's hours were 9:00am to 2:30pm.

Charter schools were just beginning to take root in DC and around the country, but it seemed that few people were starting charters that would recruit the kids we wanted to serve. Some told us, "Honestly, it's too late." Others warned that these kids would bring down test scores and make it harder to create good behavioral norms.

Though we could not find specific models, there did seem to be consensus on what was needed. We talked to experts—educators, juvenile justice specialists, judges, public defenders, and social workers. What worked, we asked? For the most part, they agreed—small classes, high expectations, a rigorous curriculum, relevant coursework, and caring relationships. This lined up fairly closely with what kids from the Pizza Shop had told us. Their list had included small classes, a chance to work and

make money, counseling, and teachers who were willing to both challenge and support them. And everyone agreed that to be successful, a program would have to be comprehensive.

A Comprehensive Program

Our school day went from 9:30am until 8:00pm Monday through Thursday. On Fridays, we let out early—at 4:30pm. School included job training, counseling, after school activities, dinner and tutoring. All of our students had jobs (and got paid)—our Pizza Shop morphed into a catering operation, which our students named Untouchable Taste (this was an example of letting student autonomy go too far; our customers were perplexed by the name, which our students had chosen because, in their view, something really good was "untouchable.") In addition, we built counseling into the school schedule. Each of our students had one session of group counseling a week, and many of them had individual sessions as well, led by a Licensed Clinical Social Worker.

We ran afternoon enrichment classes, followed by dinner and an hour of tutoring. Our tutors were all volunteers; staying open so late allowed us to recruit local college students and young professionals who were busy during the day but could spare an hour a week in the evening. We had a lot of kids who really needed someone to help them complete their homework. In addition, we wanted to confront the barriers that separated low-income black students from older, more privileged

adults (many of whom—but not all—were white). By the middle of our first year we had 60 volunteer tutors (15 a night, four nights a week) coming to the school for one hour a week. Many ended up doing much more than helping kids with their homework--they built strong relationships, became mentors, and came to us with their concerns when students were faltering. A number of our tutors that first year ended up working with their students until graduation two to three years later; some even continued to support students after they left for college.

High Expectations

The importance of high expectations has become something of a cliché in education circles. Who can be against the idea? But this is an example of the chasm separating the juvenile justice and education worlds. While educators increasingly talk about what percentage of students leave high school prepared for success in college, the juvenile justice world speaks of reducing recidivism rates. The juvenile system's low bar for success influences the programs serving court-involved youth. Schools serving these kids often view their task as getting most kids to school each day, keeping fights to a minimum, and finding an occasional kid who can pass the GED test.

We sought to hold ourselves accountable for more, and we made a practice of telling kids and families the first time we met them that, "this is your first step towards college, your first step toward a job you enjoy, your first step toward the life you

want." Sometimes those meetings took place in the courthouse or the public defender's office, with kids who had recently been released from jail. We received a lot of blank looks in response. Talking about college and the future was so different from what they had been conditioned to hearing that we may as well have been speaking another language.

Of course, one conversation doesn't change anything. To take effect, the message must be repeated, tirelessly and consistently, by every member of the staff, from the principal to the receptionist to the student interns and school volunteers. More than that, the talk must be backed up by specific action.

Curriculum and Instruction

We used a modified project-based curriculum. We relied heavily on the ideas espoused by the Coalition of Essential Schools—key tenets included studying material in depth (less is more), focusing on relevance, and asking critical questions. We wanted to help students build the habits of mind they would need to be successful at college and in life. At the same time, we knew that many of our kids lacked basic skills, and we didn't think we could address them fully without specific, targeted instruction focused on building up these skills—this was the "modified" part of the curriculum.

For example, we read *Angela's Ashes* and compared African-Americans moving north to the Irish coming to America. But we also studied basic geography because

most of our students didn't know the 50 states, much less what or where Ireland was. We studied slavery, and Reconstruction, and the civil rights movement. We read the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *Beloved*, and *Selma, Lord, Selma*. And students wrote essays and gave speeches and participated in mock debates. But we also had to teach basic grammar and punctuation. For many students, we had to actually teach them to read (this meant working on basic decoding skills and expanding sight word vocabulary) through intensive tutorials, often using middle and elementary school materials.

We supplemented our curriculum with extended day classes, often taught by volunteers or community partners. These included dance, art, speech and debate, peace and nonviolence workshops, jazz appreciation, digital music production, street law, and yoga. (Although many of these classes worked out great, some were failures, as some volunteers missed class and others could not manage the students.)

Unfortunately, the quality of our curriculum and instruction varied widely during our first year. Our talented and experienced English teacher smoothly turned our broad ideas into daily lessons. But other subjects were more difficult. For example, the original math curriculum, which David wrote, included a two week project entitled "Understanding the Black-Scholes: Risk and Reward in the Stock Market." But our math teacher had just graduated from college, had never heard of Black-Scholes, and kept asking David what textbook we were going to use to teach Algebra (she eventually grew into a solid instructor and now heads the math

department at an Atlanta high school). And we didn't find a social studies teacher until just before the Labor Day weekend.

Although we suffered from spotty instructional quality, it was not because our teachers didn't care enough. Many critics of schools serving low-income students emphasize that many teachers do not believe that poor kids are capable of excelling. This is what some call the *will* problem. We all had the will (i.e., we believed that our kids could achieve at the highest level and that it was our duty as a school to get them there), but we did not—with the same consistency—have the *skill* (i.e., we did all have sufficient mastery of the incredibly complex craft of teaching, especially teaching adolescents who were many years behind grade level). In order to get better we needed a strategy for professional development (we had little PD beyond our 10 days of training in August). As leaders of a start-up school we had too much on our plate and we did not offer sufficient teacher observation and support. Passion and willingness to work late into the night carried us far that first year, but we were hurt by the lack of a plan to assess and support teachers, and an inability to evaluate and revamp curriculum and instruction based on student performance.

School Climate

We opened our doors during a time when the nation was panicking over a rise in juvenile crime, school shootings dominated the news, and zero tolerance policies were in vogue. Especially given the students we served, not a day went by without

somebody asking us how we were dealing with school safety. Our students cared about this as much as anyone. On the school's application, we asked students to tell us the best and worst parts of their last school. We were shocked by how many described lack of safety as the thing they liked least about their schools ("too many fights" was the most common single answer). We knew that school safety was a big deal, but the kids we served were typically thought of as the trouble-makers. Their applications were a good reminder of how even the "tough" kids crave safety and security.

Yet we had no metal detectors or security officers. We felt that our kids were constantly being reminded that society sees them as threats; our school needed to be one place where they were viewed as scholars. So we tried to create a community based on trust, mutual respect and nonviolence. We started the year with a week-long, overnight retreat at Trinity University, a local college. (Overnight retreats have remained important to us; we take one in the fall and one in the late spring—but they now are for two days, not seven). One of our first exercises was to break up into small teams and create a school constitution—using magic markers, butcher-block paper and masking tape, we created the school we all wanted. It would be a school where teachers would "respect students," come "prepared to teach," and "help students for real." A school where students "do their work" and "ask for help if they don't understand something." A school where everyone was responsible for "keeping See Forever a safe and fun place to learn and work together." And that meant "no

fighting" and "no weapons." We chose these rules as a group (though we had some non-negotiables—we rejected the student demand for "no homework on Fridays"), and the Rights and Responsibilities we created adorned the school hallways throughout the year.

It was hard to keep up the spirit of that first week (and like all constitutions, ours was broken almost as soon as we created it). But we tried, and school climate and culture was probably the area we got most consistently right in our first year. Students and staff ate meals together. Teachers often stood outside and greeted students when they came in the morning and left in the evening. We stood up for each other. When the police came around after school questioning kids about why they were on the street at 8:00pm, the adults reminded the police that our school had just let out, that our kids had had a long day, and that they were headed home. We went to court with kids—and told it straight to their judges. We took their report cards to the hearings and reported directly on student progress (and problems). We drove kids to the doctor's office and got them glasses when they needed them. If students needed a place to stay, staff opened up their own homes and took them in for short periods of time (and eventually we opened up residential homes).

We finished each week with a full school "circle-up." We talked a lot about the civil rights movement that first year, and we told students we wanted to create "a circle of trust," a phrase used by SNCC in the 1960s. All staff and students gathered in one room, made a big circle, and gave each other shout-outs. The rules were

simple. Nothing negative; say something nice, say something sincere, or don't say anything. Kids thanked staff for helping them and congratulated each other for improving their reading or for coming on time every day; staff would shout out kids for working extra hard on an essay or helping to defuse an argument.

Families

The relationship between schools and families can be complicated, and this was especially true for us. After all, the parents of our students had typically been underserved by the same terrible school system. They lived in neighborhoods that the rest of society had largely abandoned—areas that had been denied economic and infrastructure investment. It was so tempting to give up on them—to think, "Well, if they cared more, this kid would not be so far behind, or so messed up."

Fortunately, we also were reminded of the opposite—of how most of our students had somebody in their lives pulling and praying for them, hoping that they would have a future that is brighter than the odds suggest it will be. One night, more than any other, drove this point home. One of our rituals was a quarterly Family Night, at which students shared their work and received awards. We defined family broadly; we invited parents, grandparents, siblings, probation officers, lawyers, tutors, pretty much anybody who played a role in our students' lives.

About halfway through the year one mother—Perry's mom, Mrs. Randolph—came to us to suggest that at our final family night parents should be given the opportunity to speak on behalf of their child. The theme would be "you made me proud, when . . . ." Her reasoning was compelling. She explained that she and Perry had a good relationship when he was young and through elementary school. But in about the 8th grade Perry had begun a prolonged downward spiral, including skipping school, using marijuana, withdrawing from her, hanging out with kids who were up to no good, and eventually getting arrested. What she summarized in a few minutes was two years of agony for her, as she suffered the parental nightmare of feeling like she was losing her child to the streets. During these years, she reflected, she did nothing but yell at Perry. Every day brought another disappointment followed by an interrogation or accusation. ("The school called me again, saying you haven't been going!").

More than anything else, Ms. Randolph said, she was just so tired. Tired of yelling, tired of crying, tired of being mad at her son. And now, for the first time in years, things were different. He was going to school, and he said he liked it. Because the hours were so long he had less time to get into trouble. Now she got calls from the school just to let her know that Perry had written an excellent essay, or intervened when two students began arguing and helped keep it from turning into a fight. (One of our rules was that a student's advisor needed to call every parent in the first week

to inform them of something good the student had done.) Perry had even stopped smoking marijuana. (Mostly.) But Ms. Randolph realized that during the bad years she had almost forgotten how to compliment him—she was stuck in a criticism rut and needed help getting out. And she wanted to do it publicly, and encourage other parents and guardians to do the same. And so the parent-led "you made me proud when . . . ." Family Night was born. Ms. Randolph went first, other parents followed, and there was not a dry eye in the house.

Progress is Slow and Unsteady

In Hollywood, the school savior story always goes something like this: kid has all sorts of problems; kid meets caring teacher or is admitted to a good school; kid works hard, loves learning, and turns his or her life around. In the Hollywood version, learning gains are quick and dramatic, and kids rarely stumble on their road to success (and when they do falter it is slightly, and for dramatic effect, as the audience knows they will recover). Our experience was rather different.

We had many disappointments that first year, and losing kids was, by far, the hardest part of the job. We wanted to believe that if we worked hard enough, put enough structures in place, loved the kids enough, held them to high enough standards, that they would all make it. But it wasn't to be. We had kids who came to school for awhile, said they wanted to change (and, we think, believed it when they said it), but ended up not making it. Their problems were too deep-set, the external

forces pushing against them too powerful. Shawn, for example, got arrested for carjacking one weekend, and we lost him for good. Barry dropped out, saying he just couldn't take the hours. Cynthia was arrested and expelled after trying to steal $2,000 by changing the amount of a See Forever check from $20.00 to $2,000.00.

Even the kids who ended up succeeding stumbled along the way. For example, Darren had dropped out of school in the 7th grade, when he was 13 years old. He showed up at our school at the age of 17. Incredibly talented—in math, with poetry and spoken word, with computers—he took to the school immediately, and after a few months was a top student, and a staff favorite. But one day he just stopped coming. His family's phone was disconnected, his friends didn't hear from him, his probation officer couldn't find him, and we went by his house repeatedly and found no one. Two weeks later he showed up at school as if nothing had happened. It turns out his mom had been hospitalized and he and his brother had moved in with an aunt in Maryland. After his mom was released they returned home and he was ready to get back to school. He said this happened regularly (his mom suffered from a degenerative heart disease). Why hadn't he called us? Because this didn't seem like a very big deal to him—he had been drifting in and out of school for years—and he didn't think we'd really care if he took a two-week break. After all, he pointed out, he had returned to school eventually.

Darren got back on track, but as summer approached, he started coming late, often high. We talked about it with him, we sent him home when he showed up high,

we tried to get him to go to counseling or treatment. He refused. After he missed much of the summer, we offered him a deal. To stay in the school he had to move into one of the residential houses, and come to school on time and not high. He agreed. And although we had plenty of other bumps he graduated and went on to college.

He did well his first semester. In mid-winter he called from the local jail and said he had been arrested for possession of marijuana—he got caught smoking in his dorm room. He ended up on probation, and finished the year. He eventually earned his BA. A remarkable accomplishment given where he was when we met him—but not quite the Hollywood script.

Selecting a School Name

In the fall of our first year, we applied to become a public charter school starting the following year—September 1998. As part of this process, we decided to change the name of the school. We wanted our students to be able to go to a school with a more standard name—one that wouldn't raise questions on a transcript, or college application. Our kids faced enough scrutiny already, and going to the See Forever School just added to that. In addition, we thought that giving our kids a role in selecting the name of the school would be empowering. So, we decided to have an essay and speech contest. Students were given a list of 20 people; they had to chose one and write an essay about why the school should be named after him or her, and

then read their essay aloud at a family night. The prize was straightforward—the winner got to name the school.

In the spring of 2008, 10 students presented their essays to a packed house at the little church next to our school—we used it as a gathering place for family nights and other events our first year. Students, family members, and staff got to vote. Two students tied for the best essay and speech—one recommending that the school be named after Malcolm X, and the other after Maya Angelou. We had not thought about what would happen in the case of a tie. We had been fervently—and secretly—hoping that Maya Angelou would be the winner, because she is a close friend of James' family and had agreed to have the school named after her if she prevailed in the contest. After deliberating overnight, we (in this case, James and David) chose Maya Angelou.

A few months later, Sharon, who wrote in favor of Maya Angelou, gave her speech a second time—this time in front of over 350 people, including Dr. Angelou, at our first annual fundraiser. In making her case for the name, Sharon pointed out that Dr. Angelou "grew up as a poor little girl. She had only her family and her mind. She went through racism as she grew up. Her stepfather raped her. Her mother and father sent her and her brother away when they were young. She had a baby at a young age." She then compared herself and her classmates to Maya Angelou: "Like Dr. Angelou did when she was a child, See Forever students have had a lot of problems, too. We have problems in our neighborhoods, our homes, and inside of

ourselves. But like Dr. Angelou, the students of See Forever are using hard work and education to create a new future." She concluded: "We know, and Dr. Angelou knows, that there are people who say we are criminals, drug dealers and kids who want to make the society a living hell. We know that we will prove those people wrong. The Dr. Maya Angelou Charter School will treat people by the way they carry themselves and not by their history."

Sharon, and many of her classmates from that first year, did prove people wrong. They've grown up to be caring, productive adults who contribute to their community (two of them actually work at one of our schools), and have jobs and livelihoods that they enjoy. Others have struggled—some are marginally employed, others are locked up in adult facilities, and at least one lost his life to violence. This chapter is dedicated to each of them--the original class of the See Forever, our original circle of trust.

Epilogue

In the fall of 1998, we opened up as the Maya Angelou Public Charter School, with 50 students. James returned to the Public Defender Service and David stayed on as the school's principal. We moved out of our row house and into a DCPS building. The following year, we purchased and renovated a new site and grew to 70 students. A few years later we opened a second high school, and then a middle school. And in the spring of 2007—10 years after we quit our jobs to start a school primarily for kids coming out of Oak Hill—we were asked to run the school inside

Oak Hill (the District's long-term secure facility for adjudicated youth), which we call the Maya Angelou Academy.[4] *Over 600 students now attend our schools.*

As a part of becoming a public charter school, we could no longer have our special admissions criteria: that all students had to have been arrested. The Maya Angelou Public Charter School campuses are now open to all comers, but remain committed to serving the City's most underserved students. Our public charter high schools are designated as 'alternative schools' by the District, meaning that more than 50% of our students are either involved in the juvenile delinquency system, foster care system, have dropped out of school, or were expelled from their previous school.

We've remained best friends. David is the Director of the Center for Education Excellence in Alternative Settings at the University of Maryland and James is now a Clinical Professor of Law at Yale Law School. Memories of that first year working and learning with Sharon and her classmates continue to sustain us and remind us why this work is valuable and meaningful.

[4] We describe this effort in *What it Takes: The Story of the Maya Angelou Academy*, in Justice for Kids: Keeping Kids Out of the Juvenile Justice System (Nancy Dowd, ed. NYU Press forthcoming 2011).