



SPECIAL REPORT: HELPING YOUTH TO GROW



A Message from Gabrielle L. Kurlander, President

In mid-September 2006, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the City of New York approved \$12.5 million dollars in tax-exempt bond financing for the All Stars Project. This is the largest investment we have received in our 25-year history. It establishes a firm foundation for the continued growth of our programs in New York City, in New Jersey and for our new national expansion effort.

It also represents a next step in an ongoing collaboration between our out-of-the-box organization and Mayor Bloomberg, who is himself recognized as a major innovator.

In taking on our city's failed education system during his first term, Mayor Bloomberg was able to draw support from the success of our programs. Youth development and social and cultural enrichment have become central themes in his overhaul of after-school programs. The mayor's ambitious, new anti-poverty initiative will also benefit from our conceptual breakthroughs and continuing on-the-ground work.

Over 25 years, we have discerned that *development* is what is needed to move our young people and our communities from chronic poverty and all of its effects. To create this development, we built a *new kind of community* in our city that includes tens of thousands of young people, donors, volunteers, parents, artists, performers and business professionals. Our approach is innovative from its foundation on up and is a fundamental transition to a new model of how effective anti-poverty work is done.

Being the grassroots outsiders in our city's social reform networks has meant facing some hard challenges and going up against some serious competition (see "The Story Behind the Headlines," page 5). We are very proud that against these odds Mayor Bloomberg has recognized the All Stars as one of his community partners. We take this "seal of approval" to mean that we have increased responsibility to work in concert with him — doing more to bring development programs to young people in our poorest communities and continuing to win acceptance throughout the city for new approaches to ending poverty.

In that spirit, we have created this special report to share our latest thinking about the current crisis in education and the seemingly intractable academic achievement gap — one of the most debilitating consequences of chronic poverty. We also reflect further on the community-building and performatory character of our innovative, development model. We look to build on our successes and renew our commitment to help our youth to grow.

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THE ALL STARS PROJECT: HELPING YOUTH TO GROW

I. CREATING A NEW STORY ABOUT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

For many generations, millions of Americans — and millions of America’s youth — have shared a basic understanding, or underlying “story”, about learning. The story goes that learning, specifically school learning, is the avenue by which people gain openness and access to ideas, opportunities and the broader world. And, in many ways, and for millions of people, this underlying story (or, as they say these days, meta-narrative) worked.



Charles Dutton (c) with All Stars performers

But these are new times, with a new generation made up of millions of young people in our poorest communities with their own story about learning. Their story is about educational inequality and about a growing achievement gap between poor minority children and their middle-class and affluent white counterparts. Their story is about *failing to learn* and being locked outside the doors to opportunity in ever greater degrees, with no way into the mainstream of American life.

Policymakers, taxpayers and educators have spent significant amounts of money and effort on trying to improve these young people’s level of achievement by fixing their schools. But this has had little impact.

How do we create a new story of learning for these young people? Do we need a new Civil Rights movement? Do we need new legislation? More money for government programs? Better teaching and testing methods?

All of the above and more. We must start by reconsidering some of our most fundamental assumptions, specifically the relationship between learning and development. We must adopt a new understanding of that relationship: that many of our youth today must be helped to develop — socially, culturally and in terms of seeing themselves as participants in a broader, more sophisticated world — so that education and learning is even of interest to them.

II. WHERE TO LEARN TO GROW

“School never provided the environment where I felt like doing something. All Stars really taught me to do what I wanted to do, and that I could change things for myself.”

—Franceli Chapman, 18 years old

“If we wait for school reform our people are doomed because there’s not going to be school reform; it’s just not going to happen anytime soon. And I’m an optimist. So why don’t we go around the school system? Why don’t we supplement it in the way that [All Stars] has done, with a comprehensive after-school program.”

—Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.,
Director of the W.E.B.
DuBois Institute for African
and African American
Research at Harvard
University, All Stars Project
Board of Directors



Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.



Matthew Mabry

Nowhere do some of our “failing” inner-city young people experience themselves more as outsiders with no way in than *inside* our public school system.

The traditional educational model (learning without social development) is based on the acquisition of information, and the linear, step-by-step accumulation of knowledge — knowledge measurable by standardized, supposedly objective tests.

Schools for the learning “failures” are therefore not, as Franceli says, environments where they feel like doing something. Every day young people experience hopelessness and boredom in their classrooms and in their communities.

All Stars has created development programs *outside of school*: programs that give inner-city youth a place to be and something to do; programs that value what they produce; programs that help them to develop and become motivated to learn.

III. HOW TO LEARN TO GROW

“I’ve recruited kids into All Stars from my neighborhood and all over Brooklyn, working with girls and boys, a lot of whom were troubled kids. You can say I became a mentor and saved a lot of them from being caught up in the negative surroundings where we live. I wanted to teach them that there is more out there.”

—Matthew Mabry, 21 years old

“If you are looking for an organization that accepts all people — regardless of religion, ideology, or race — and that is focused not just on helping underprivileged kids but on bringing all members of a community together to build a healthier American society, this is an outstanding organization.”

—Hunter L. Hunt, Hunt Oil,
All Stars Project Board of Directors

In creating the All Stars programs, we have also had to answer a critically important theoretical-practical question: can we teach a significant portion of our youth *how* to develop? And, if so, how do we do it?

We address these fundamental questions in the most practical terms. Our school for growth (actually, our out-of-school for growth) is not about the acquisition of knowledge, but about the acquisition of development tools which might make knowledge of interest. In this work, community, performance and creativity are all important.

A New Kind of Community

The context for the All Stars Project’s programs is a *new kind of community*: individuals from all walks of life, including from the corporate sector, coming together in full support of inner-city youth.

The seeds of this new community were sown twenty-five years ago. Then, All Stars was a grassroots community organizing initiative to end youth violence, launched at a time when cutbacks in government funding and the failure of Great Society social service programs had led to widespread devastation and dissatisfaction in America’s inner cities.

The All Stars founders — even then a diverse group made up of volunteers, community organizers, progressive educators, visual and performing artists and helping professionals — believed that, in order to make a difference for many poor and minority youth, something new had to be created. This “something new” had to avoid the two obvious causes of the Great Society’s failure: first, the implicit top-down welfare model that appears to relate to poor people as outsiders and relegates them to the role of passive recipients rather than contributors to and builders of society; second, the bureaucratic government-funding model that thwarts innovation.



Hunter Hunt (l) with All Stars youth

It also had to fill what numerous studies described as the “socialization void,” created by the erosion of the social fabric of the inner cities. Loss of blue-collar jobs, the poor condition of schools, the closing down of



Emerald Knox with All Stars performers

local businesses, and cutbacks in community programs had intensified young peoples' social isolation.

So the All Stars began building independently and from the bottom up. Dedicated, unpaid volunteers went door-to-door in New York City's middle-class neighborhoods, and stood on street corners, talking to ordinary people about the impact of violence on inner-city youth, and asking for their financial support for a grassroots program that might address these problems.

This fundraising model established a bridge between poor and minority youth and more well-to-do New Yorkers. Some were corporate executives who championed the kids and brought their companies on board. The result is the creation of a privately funded partnership with the business community; an environment for taking thousands of inner-city youth out of social isolation and marginalization.

"I come from a place where watching a fight is the most common form of raw entertainment. I love it when I get up on a Saturday and have somewhere to go. It's a positive experience. It's refreshing. I thank All Stars for making my dreams come true."

—Emerald Knox, 16 years old

"I live in kind of a rough neighborhood and there aren't a lot of places that I can take my daughter and feel secure. She started dancing with All Stars and the doors just opened for her."

—Pamela Gordon, parent

Being "Radically Inclusive"

In building this new kind of community for inner-city young people, the All Stars Project also established the importance of being radically inclusive. Traditional programs for underprivileged youth typically look to ensure opportunities for the top 10% in the community: kids who are not getting into trouble; good students, or talented athletes who are college-bound, and from there headed for a better future outside of the communities from which they came. Or they look to "save" the bottom percentage of those so-called "at risk" youth falling through the fragile safety net: school dropouts, juvenile offenders, drug and alcohol abusers who are heading for America's ever-expanding prison system.

Programs geared to the "best" or the "worst" do not reach the broad majority of ordinary young people "in the middle" and therefore do not challenge the failing communities from which they all come. The All Stars programs and our "new community" are designed to include young people of all ages and at all development levels, from honor students to ordinary kids to gang members.

Now, every day, All Stars Project programs — the All Stars Talent Show Network, the Development School for Youth, Youth Onstage!, and the Production of Youth by Youth, Castillo Theatre, and Talented Volunteers — bring diverse people together — young and old, rich and poor, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, new immigrants and ethnic whites — to create a culturally integrated environment: mixed (working class and middle class) talent show



James Turley with DSU student at Ernst & Young



Lynn DeLeo-Totaro (2nd from right) with Ernst & Young executive Frank Hertz and DSY youth

audiences in poor neighborhoods; performance workshops with people from all of our city's neighborhoods at our 31,000 square foot development center on West 42nd Street in Manhattan; and the corporate offices and boardrooms of DSY's business supporters filled with 17-year-olds from Bedford-Stuyvesant and the South Bronx, dressed up like young executives.

What happens when we bring oil executive Hunter Hunt, hip-hop dancer Matthew Mabry, and thousands of others like them together to create new kinds of communities? New kinds of conversations, new relationships and new performances occur.

Our programs send the message to inner-city young people: "Your new community (unlike your old community) is more like New York City or the world as a whole. You don't just live in your socially over-determined, parochial neighborhood. You live in the world. And your participation in the new community can develop you to be a builder of the world, a more cosmopolitan citizen."

"It's not about me, me, me. It's not about being the best, but about putting on a great show with everyone. It's an ensemble. That takes a lot of discipline and creative development. We show kids how to take a bow, how to make their performance sharp, and if they miss a dance step, how to keep going instead of getting upset."

—**Antoine Joyce, All Stars producer and emcee**

"We had a long discussion in our Dress for Success workshop. The young people were saying it wasn't fair to be judged by what you wear, or your hairstyle or jewelry. We're not saying it's fair or unfair. We're saying it's just the

way it is, and we ask them if they are ready to deal with the consequences of their choices. Having more choices is essential for creative growth, and we are teaching kids how to create new and different performances of themselves."

—**Lynn DeLeo-Totaro, volunteer teacher**

Performance and Possibility

The All Stars Project is not a remedial learning program, or an alternative program with a standardized set of objectives and learning techniques. In fact, All Stars programs don't teach young people anything in the traditional sense. So what exactly do we do?

All Stars programs focus on the social, cultural and creative development of young people. Performatory approaches — play, improvisation and performance — methods that are increasingly utilized in corporate America for training in communication, leadership, teamwork and diversity, are also used in the All Stars as the critical tools for youth development.

Performance allows young people to do new things. It lets them stretch beyond what they already know how to do. They can be both "who they are," and "who they are becoming" at the same time. Performance supports young people to actively create new ways of how to be in the world.

Young people in our programs try out a new dance routine by performing on an All Stars stage; they perform as young professionals at a mock job interview; or as "becoming" business professionals at paid summer internships. They break out of their ghettoized social roles and identities to try something new: a new dance move or rap; a new conversation with a white, middle-class adult volunteer; a new friendship with a



Antoine Joyce (2nd from r)



Jermin Pieters (r)

multi-millionaire Wall Street executive; a new way to deal with anger; a new way to get along with their peers.

All Stars draws people from the toughest communities, so that young people must perform in new ways, here, in their new community. They can come together with business partners like Lynn DeLeo-Totaro, dancers like Susan Jaffe, law partners like David Gordon, CEOs like James Turley of Ernst & Young, and actors like Charles Dutton, and thousands more who are all dedicated to development, their own and others’.

IV. A PLACE TO DEVELOP IN THE WORLD

The All Stars programs allow young people to see the larger world outside their parochial neighborhoods. Our programs, in our new kinds of communities — development communities — allow inner-city young people to be seen, heard and powerful. We bring the poorest young people out of the forgotten margins and into a zone of development, on the way to the mainstream.

Giving inner-city young people a stage and a place to perform is giving them a place to develop in the world.

“I’m grateful to be an All Star because of the friends I’ve made, the confidence I’ve gained, and the All Stars’ ability to reach out to communities where youth only dream about seeing more than they do.”

—Jermin Pieters, 21 years old

“The environment has been very rewarding to me. It has allowed me a safety net to make mistakes and learn from them. I don’t think of All Stars as a program. Programs usually deal with students only in certain categories. But All Stars accepts all who are looking for the same thing — they are striving to develop.”

—Aliya Harris, 19 years old

The New York Times

NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2006

Critics Fail to Stop City Panel From Voting to Aid Arts Group

THE STORY BEHIND THE HEADLINES

In mid-September 2006, New York City’s Industrial Development Agency (IDA) voted its approval of an All Stars Project request for a tax-exempt bond package to make needed improvements to our 31,000 square foot youth development and performance center on West 42nd Street. The IDA approval was a \$12.5 million investment by the City in the All Stars Project’s innovative and successful model for addressing the poverty and underdevelopment of the inner city, and a vote of confidence from Mayor Bloomberg for the All Stars as a leading, privately funded innovative provider, part of the City’s new anti-poverty initiative.

Just days before the vote to authorize the bond package, a small group of West Side “reform” politicians, led by a Manhattan elected official known for “press conference politics” rather than public service, went to the media with a host of unrelated “issues” and “concerns” in an attempt to surround the IDA decision in controversy.

This last-ditch effort to derail IDA approval did not come as a surprise to us. Over the last 25 years, All Stars has periodically been the object of similar (unsubstantiated and irrelevant) attacks. We understood that the City’s impending vote of confidence in the success of our programs would shine a light on the failure of others, in particular the traditional reformers, to solve the problem of poverty.

Theirs is not a small failure. The “reformers turned All Stars critics” have deep ties to the 1960s Great Society policy and programs. They promised that their programs, their approaches and their philosophy — top-down, government-funded remedial efforts — would close the economic, educational and cultural gaps afflicting the poor. After forty years and literally trillions of dollars of investment, they have failed to deliver on that promise.

Because of our remarkable success with the All Stars’ innovative experiment in new forms of learning and development for poor, inner-city children, we have fought hard in the name of our young people. In this latest round we have scored a major victory for our kids receiving a \$12.5 million endorsement from Mayor Bloomberg and the City of New York.

