

Fulfilling a Dream

**An Interview with Geoffrey Canada,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Harlem Children's Zone**



EDITORS' NOTE *Geoffrey Canada received a bachelor's degree in psychology and sociology in 1974 from Bowdoin College, and entered the Harvard Graduate School of Education shortly thereafter, where he earned a master's degree. After graduation, Canada joined the faculty of the Robert White School in Boston, Massachusetts, and by 1977, he had become its Director. In 1983, Canada returned to Harlem as the program director for the Rheedlen Institute's Truancy Prevention Program. In 1990, Canada was appointed*



*Geoffrey Canada;
with students (right)*

*President of Rheedlen. He expanded the center and renamed it the Harlem Children's Zone, and it began offering tutoring, recreational programs, and community outreach. By 1997, Harlem Children's Zone had 11 sites throughout Manhattan. In 2009, U.S. President Barack Obama announced plans to replicate the HCZ model in 20 cities across the nation. Canada has written several books including *Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America* (1995) and *Reaching Up For Manhood: Transforming the Lives of Boys in America* (1998).*

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *Harlem Children's Zone (www.hcz.org) began in 1970 as Rheedlen, working with young children and their families as the city's first truancy prevention program. In the early 1990s, HCZ ran a pilot project that brought a range of support services to a single block. HCZ created a 10-year business plan, and in 1997, began a network of programs for a 24-block area: the Harlem Children's Zone Project. In 2007, the Zone Project grew to almost 100 blocks. Today, the Children's Zone® serves more than 8,800 children and 6,600 adults. Overall, the organization serves more than 10,000 children and more than 7,400 adults. Over the years, the agency introduced several groundbreaking efforts including *The Baby College®* parenting workshops; the *Harlem Gems®* preschool program; the *HCZ Asthma Initiative*; the *Promise Academy Charter Schools*; and an obesity program. All HCZ programs are offered free to the children and families of Harlem.*

How has the Harlem Children's Zone evolved since you became involved?

Initially, we believed that there was a shortcut to giving kids a better future by

concentrating on making sure they did well during the critical ages of five to 12. To end the cycle of poverty in Harlem, we thought that if we got these kids on the right track, everything would be fine. But after a decade of attempting that, we looked at the data and things were worse than ever for kids in Harlem. So we had to come up with a different strategy.

As we searched for that new strategy, we started out thinking about what we could do with an additional \$500,000 or \$1 million, but we weren't really considering what it would take

to completely fix the problem, which requires a totally different mindset.

Nancy Roob and Mike Bailin of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation pushed me for a plan based on that new mindset, and I came up with one. But they asked if that initial plan would be guaranteed to work and I said no. So I had more work to do, but it was the first time I had been liberated to think of complete solutions.

The final plan we presented had three phases that ultimately took us to where our budget is today, in the \$80-plus million range. They made their first major investment in us. George Soros was also among the first to support the plan.

It's not like there is just one thing going bad for kids, like teenage pregnancy or gang violence. In these communities, kids face hurdles that can trip them up at every age.

We realized we could not serve all the kids in Harlem, so we took responsibility for 10,000 kids. We drew boundaries and committed ourselves to do whatever it took to help those children succeed.

What have you learned that has guided you as you attempt to help the young people of Harlem?

The challenge is not just in making sure that you develop the infrastructure, but in getting the residents to buy in and take ownership of it.

You have to create pipelines that remain with kids beyond when they graduate from college. One of the top lessons we learned is that you can get kids through high school and into college, and think they're going to be fine, but sometimes they are not fine. So you have to stick with those kids all the way through.

There is also the issue of scale. To make a difference, you have to be touching 70 to 80 percent of the kids in the area that you're working in.

So there are more than 11,000 kids in our zone. We worked with 8,500 of those kids this year in our program, because kids do what their friends do. The kids who don't do that are the outliers.

In communities that are functioning well, the outlier kids are those 10 to 15 percent who fail, drop out, or cause trouble. In communities like Harlem, the outlier kids are those who go to school and get good grades. So we're trying to change the cultural norms so it's normal to do well in school and abnormal to drink, smoke, and carry guns.

The most important element is that you have to use data to evaluate how you're doing and hold people accountable for results.

Is success measured by college graduation rates or are there a broader group of measures?

Our kids have so many emotional problems that insisting on college is too narrow. We're trying to produce kids who go to college, but who will also be healthy and productive citizens whose own kids won't grow up in poverty. So promoting mental and physical health are parts of that, although college is the number one goal.

With such an emphasis from leaders on education, why can't the problem be fixed?

There is nothing sinister about it, but the teachers unions in America have become a major power over the past 30 years. Teachers are our primary weapon to improve the performance of our kids in schools. If, as a manager, you can do anything you want except change those teachers, it won't work.

But something has changed in America. For the first time, we have the public looking at this issue. Folks across the country are realizing that the jobs that are available today and in the future require high level skills and we can't find Americans qualified for those jobs. So the public is beginning to realize that this isn't a problem just affecting poor black kids; it's affecting their own kids and they want to know how to change this.

Do you take the time to appreciate what this organization has achieved?

I have marveled at how I've watched a generation of kids grow up. It is one of the most rewarding experiences you could have.

Every day, a kid smiles at me and you realize they're smiling because they realize life is going to be good for them.

Everything I dreamed about is happening right now. ●