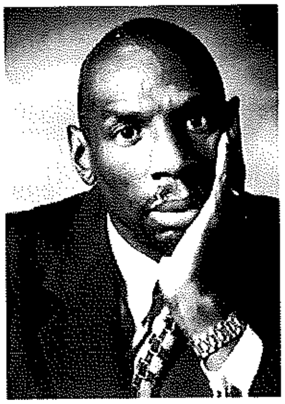
Geoffrey Canada

President and Chief Executive Officer
for Harlem Children's Zone, Inc.

Nominated by:

Cathy Burden

2009 Brock International Prize in Education
Recommended Candidate



Brief Biographical Sketch of Geoffrey Canada

Geoffrey Canada is making heroic innovations in the field of educational theory and practice by a massive undertaking to deal with our nation's greatest social injustice – poverty. Under Canada's leadership the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) has committed to doing "whatever it takes" to build an infrastructure of support and structure around the children who live in this most blighted area so they can profit from a quality education.

Geoffrey Canada knows first-hand how hard it is to succeed in a world of poverty. He was born poor and was raised by a single mother in the tenements of New York's South Bronx. As one of the rare individuals to escape the devastating circumstances of his birth, Canada now has unique credibility and compassion for the problems that undermine success for America's urban poor.

The web of comprehensive educational initiatives orchestrated by Geoffrey Canada is intended to support the families and the children and take away any excuses. His programs combine educational, social and medical services that begin at birth and continue support through college graduation.

The experiment that has driven the career of Geoffrey Canada has the potential to make a difference in the almost 10,000 children in Harlem and even more importantly in our overall approach to education in urban areas. The now popular Community School initiative that is quickly spreading around the country has adopted the philosophy and practices of Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone and is helping other communities accept responsibility for ensuring educational success.

Geoffrey Canada's live and career have intertwined to bring new insights and possibilities surrounding effective education in areas of urban poverty in America. As an educator, he has identified way to compensate for the barriers that torpedo student success. As an entrepreneur, he has captured the enthusiasm of those who are looking for a way to invest in something that has great potential to ameliorate poverty. Geoffrey Canada brings hope for the future.

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Letter of Nomination

Dear Brock Prize Jurors,

Particularly for those of us who are professional educators, it is axiomatic that education is the key to changing the world. However, in the violent and complicated world of inner city youth, education is only part of the culture change necessary to provide a ladder to success. The fact is that children born into poverty rarely escape - leaving generation after generation mired in perpetual hopelessness, tragedy and despair. The positive impact of academic learning is too often minimized by the overriding pressure to survive.

The traditional American model of thirty hours of school weekly on a nine-month agrarian calendar that only needs to reinforces time spent in an in-tact two-parent family is inadequate for poor children who live in fear and chaos.

Geoffrey Canada is an educator first and foremost. His graduate education degree from Harvard and his work as a teacher, counselor and administrator have all been geared to help students make it through college graduation. But Geoffrey Canada knows that it takes more than a good teacher, a solid curriculum and a well organized school to make a difference in learners who live in poverty. Instead, he has taken a systems approach to education and has assumed the responsibility for providing comprehensive support for children and their families in one of America's most historically poor community – Harlem – to guarantee their opportunity to learn.

Geoffrey Canada is an educational innovator and entrepreneur who is reinventing educational accountability when it comes to really making a difference in the lives of children of poverty. As president/CEO of a non-profit organization called The Harlem Children's Zone, Canada is taking responsibility for more than classroom instruction. The Harlem Children's Zone's programs directly address those barriers to learning that children of poverty cannot control – safety, health care, extended time for learning, enrichment, parenting, early childhood intervention, mental health services, financial counseling, fitness and wellness. Canada works with public and the HCZ's own charter schools to add structure and academic focus to the lives of Harlem's children.

The work of the Harlem Children's Zone is an amazing social experiment impacting the lives of ten thousand children and their families. And it is contributing to a growing national effort to build Community Schools throughout the country. The National Coalition of Community Schools has adopted the tenants that are hallmarks of Geoffrey Canada's pioneering work. The emphasis on neighborhood development, parent-school collaboration, extended learning time through after-school and summer programs, using the school as the hub for the neighborhood for health, dental and social services, parenting education and empowering students through community service are HCZ initiatives that are now recognized as imperatives in changing the trajectory of urban schools.

Geoffrey Canada has unique credibility when it comes to understanding the devastating plight of children and families who are born into poverty. He lived it. He is much more than an outsider with an academic interest. His personal story is encouraging to those of us who want to see someone escape the chains of poverty through education but his experiences have proven more beneficial as a blueprint to know what supports need to be added to balance the scales for the actual children who live in poverty.

Canada is a savvy, charismatic, African American teacher who is a unique role model for the children he works with. His martial arts acumen and theatrical flair give him super-hero status with youngsters. However, it is his dedication to building a sustainable, highly accountable social and educational support system in the most difficult environment imaginable that makes him a remarkable role model for educators.

The work at the HCZ is not an academic study in an ivory tower. It is positive social engineering that is building a safer community and maximizing the promise of thousands of children that were previously society's outcasts. Geoffrey Canada is leading an educational reform initiative that gives hope for the future of the children involved and for a plan that can be replicated in urban areas throughout the country. This remarkable initiative has caught the attention of philanthropic and political entities as a working example of a public-private success story. President Barack Obama has championed the HCZ and has dedicated federal dollars to cities that will follow its lead.

The Brock Prize is intended to champion and reward outstanding educators who have changed the face of education by adding value. Certainly, Geoffrey Canada is a worthy candidate for this recognition. He is putting his theories to the test and influencing the way we as educators should hold ourselves accountable for outcomes. This Community Schools approach is one of the most powerful educational innovations of our generation and the proving ground has been plowed by Geoffrey Canada.

It is my pleasure to recommend Geoffrey Canada for your consideration for the Brock International Prize in Education.

Sincerely,

Cathy Burden

Cathy Burden, Ph.D.
Superintendent
Union Public Schools
Tulsa, Oklahoma

Bio

In his 20-plus years with Harlem Children's Zone, Inc., Geoffrey Canada has become nationally recognized for his pioneering work helping children and families in Harlem and as a passionate advocate for education reform.

Since 1990, Mr. Canada has been the President and Chief Executive Officer for Harlem Children's Zone, which The New York Times Magazine called "one of the most ambitious social experiments of our time." In October 2005, Mr. Canada was named one of "America's Best Leaders" by U.S. News and World Report.

In 1997, the agency launched the Harlem Children's Zone Project, which targets a specific geographic area in Central Harlem with a comprehensive range of services. The Zone Project today covers 100 blocks and aims to serve over 10,000 children by 2011.

The New York Times Magazine said the Zone Project "combines educational, social and medical services. It starts at birth and follows children to college. It meshes those services into an interlocking web, and then it drops that web over an entire neighborhood....The objective is to create a safety net woven so tightly that children in the neighborhood just can't slip through."

In September 2008, Houghton-Mifflin published "Whatever It Takes," by Paul Tough, a detailed look at the work of Mr. Canada and the Harlem Children's Zone.

The work of Mr. Canada and HCZ has become a national model and has been the subject of many profiles in the media. Their work has been featured on "60 Minutes," "The Oprah Winfrey Show," "The Today Show," "Good Morning America," "Nightline," "CBS This Morning," "The Charlie Rose Show," National Public Radio's "On Point," as well in articles in The New York Times, The New York Daily News, USA Today and Newsday.

Mr. Canada grew up in the South Bronx in a poor, sometimes-violent neighborhood. Despite his troubled surroundings, Mr. Canada was able to succeed academically, receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree from Bowdoin College and a master's degree in education from the Harvard School of Education. After graduating from Harvard, Mr. Canada decided to work to help children who, like himself, were disadvantaged by their lives in poor, embattled neighborhoods.

Drawing upon his own childhood experiences and at the Harlem Children's Zone, Mr. Canada has written two books: "Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America," published in 1995 by Beacon Press, and "Reaching Up for Manhood: Transforming the Lives of Boys in America," published in 1998 by Beacon Press. In its review of "Fist Stick Knife Gun," Publishers Weekly, "a more powerful depiction of the tragic life of urban children and a more compelling plea to end 'America's war against itself' cannot be imagined."

For his years of work advocating for children and families in some of America's most devastated communities, Mr. Canada was a recipient of the first Heinz Award in 1994. In 2004, he was given the Harold W. McGraw Jr. Prize in Education and Child Magazine's Children's Champion Award.

He has also received the Heroes of the Year Award from the Robin Hood Foundation, The Jefferson Award for Public Service, the Spirit of the City Award from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the Brennan Legacy Award from New York University and the Common Good Award from Bowdoin College. He has received honorary degrees from Harvard University, Bowdoin College, Williams College, John Jay College, Bank Street College and Meadville Lombard Theological Seminary.

A third-degree black belt, Mr. Canada is also the founder (in 1983) of the Chang Moo Kwan Martial Arts School. Despite his busy schedule as head of HCZ, he continues to teach the principles of Tae Kwon Do to community youth along with anti-violence and conflict-resolution techniques.

In 2006, Mr. Canada was selected by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg as co-chair of The Commission on Economic Opportunity, which was asked to formulate a plan to significantly reduce poverty. In 2007, he was appointed co-chair of New York State Governor's Children's Cabinet Advisory Board.

Mr. Canada is also the East Coast Regional Coordinator for the Black Community Crusade for Children. The Crusade is a nationwide effort to make saving black children the top priority in the black community. This initiative is coordinated by Marian Wright Edelman and the Children's Defense Fund.

Mr. Canada joined Harlem Children's Zone, Inc. (then called the Rheedlen Foundation) in 1983, as Education Director. Prior to that, he worked as Director of the Robert White School, a private day school for troubled inner-city youth in Boston.

The National Book Award-winning author Jonathan Kozol called Mr. Canada, "One of the few authentic heroes of New York and one of the best friends children have, or ever will have, in our nation."

Geoffrey Canada's Personal Mission to Eliminate Generational Poverty through Education

Geoffrey Canada knows first-hand what it is like to grow up impoverished and scared in a world dominated by violence. However, rather than seeking to escape from his past, Canada has returned to the streets of his childhood. He has become passionately committed to helping the youth of today grow up in a happier and safer world.

Canada was born in the South Bronx of New York City in 1954. His father, McAlister, suffered from chronic alcoholism. His mother, Mary, eventually left her husband, believing that it would be easier to raise Geoffrey and his three brothers on her own. Mary was hard-working and dedicated to her sons, but life was nonetheless difficult, and Canada's youth was marked by poverty. As he explained to Michelle Green of *People Weekly*, "We were too poor to dress properly. I had thin socks, thin pants, no sweaters and no boots. It wasn't until years later that I found out you could remain warm in the winter if you had the right clothes."

In a life filled with hardships, Canada was fortunate to have a loving mother who instilled in him strong values, a deep sense of responsibility, and a belief in the importance of education. She tutored her sons, restricted the amount of television they were permitted to watch, taught them how to read, and took them to museums and civil rights marches. An ambitious woman, she eventually earned a master's degree from Harvard University.

Canada's maternal grandparents also greatly impacted his childhood. Both of them were ordained Baptist ministers, and his grandfather became pastor of the Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church in New York. Although Canada found this honesty and morality out of sync with the reality of his life, it was his grandmother who ultimately helped to restore the faith that had been so heavily distorted on the streets. As Canada recounted in his book, *Reaching Up for Manhood,* she was "older, wiser and ...willing to fight for as long as it takes for (my) soul."

A bright child who excelled at school, Canada concurrently was educated on the streets of the South Bronx. He loved to read, and thus his studies came easily, but he quickly learned that he needed a street reputation even more than an academic one – or perhaps in spite of one – so that he would be left unharmed. By the time he was in sixth grade, he sought to balance being in the "smart" class with an equal adeptness at fighting on the street.

Despite the strong presence of his mother, Canada did not escape the pressures of the world outside of his home. The police, he quickly came to believe, did not care and certainly were not the answer in times of trouble. He learned that it was better to fight than to suffer the ramifications of being labeled a coward. As a youngster, he armed himself with a knife, which he always kept in his pocket. Once, while playing with the knife, Canada badly injured his finger. He never had the permanently bent finger repaired, so that it would serve as a constant reminder of a lesson he learned in the Bronx:

do not ever become a victim. As he discussed in his memoir, *fist stick knife gun,* "the finger keeps the urgency of the work my colleagues and I do with children at the forefront of my mind. The slight deformity is such a small price to have paid for growing up in the South Bronx. So many others have paid with their lives."

After completing high school, Canada enrolled to Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine in 1970. At Bowdoin, he found himself in what was then an all-male environment, in a city with a very small African American population. For the first time in his life, Canada lived and worked with white students on a daily basis.

Canada completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology and sociology at Bowdoin in 1974, and went on to pursue a master of arts in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He also served as a supervisor at Camp Freedom in Center Ossipe, New Hampshire. At Camp Freedom, he taught others how to instruct children with severe emotional disabilities. After finishing his masters' degree, Canada joined the faculty of the Robert White School, a private school for troubled inner city youth in Boston. While the overall tenor of the Robert White School closely resembled that of the South Bronx – poor, angry students estranged from society and preoccupied with violence – the composition of the student body was strikingly different; predominately white pupils in whom racism was deeply ingrained. Canada quickly found that, by drawing upon his own childhood experiences, he could reach these children, and he was often assigned responsibility for the most troublesome, violent students. By 1977, Canada was appointed director of the school. He worked to change the very culture of the school, and established violence reduction programs.

In 1983, Canada left the Robert White School and returned to New York. Motivated by a desire to save young people whose lives might be brutally cut short by bullets or smothered by hopelessness, he decided to work and live in Harlem and to provide children with a role model. "I want to be a children's hero," Canada remarked in *fist stick knife gun,* "Children need heroes because heroes give hope; without hope they have no future." He found employment with the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families as a program director for the Rheedlen Institute's Truancy Prevention Program.

The Rheedlen Centers were initially founded in 1970 by Richard Murphy as a truancy prevention program for children ages five to 12. Their mission evolved as the needs of their constituency - poor children and families – expanded, first growing to address issues of the complete family unit and then incorporating those of entire neighborhoods. At the core of Rheedlen's mission is providing a safe environment for children among adults who will give them a sense of security and protection. Through the Truancy Prevention Program, Canada specifically worked with children whose parents had abused or neglected them. He also counseled at risk and other neighborhood children who needed an after-school destination.

Canada's personal background, professional and academic experience, and core belief system fit well with Rheedlen's philosophy. Patricia Smith aptly described Canada in the *Boston Globe* as "the brother who never left the hood because he keeps looking into the faces of the children and seeing himself there." For Canada, the enemies that need to be defeated include poverty, drugs, gangs, broken homes, abusive parents, poorly funded school, unsafe playgrounds, and hopelessness. He had witnessed first-hand how violence becomes ingrained in underprivileged youths, and how a culture of helplessness breeds one of destruction, often in the name of self-defense. Canada recounted his type of scenario in *fist stick knife gun:* "The child coming home scared, scarred, looking to (the parents) for protection that they could not provide. The parents feeling as if they had no alternative. Accept it, this is a violent world, so teach them to cope by acting more violently than the others." The solution to this problem, Canada believes, is for educated men and women to live and work with these children to show them a more productive way to live.

When Canada first arrived at the Rheedlen Centers, he was determined to teach martial arts to his students as a continuation of the violence reduction programs he had initiated in Boston. A third-degree black belt, Canada firmly believed that this was the only way to reach some of the youths. He envisioned the martial arts, particularly the discipline of Tai Kwon Do, as an integral part of his violence prevention programs. In September of 1983, with the support of Rheedlen founder Richard Murphy, Canada first opened his martial arts school, the Chang Moo Kwon Tai Kwon Do Club, in the basement of Junior High School 54 in Manhattan Valley.

Through the martial arts, Canada has taught strong conflict resolution skills to his students. As he remarked in *fist stick knife gun*, Tai Kwon Do has provided the ideal forum to talk with students "about values, about violence, about hope. I try to build within each one a reservoir of strength that they can draw from as they face the countless tribulations small and large that poor children face every day. And I try to convince each one that I know their true value, their worth as human beings, their special gift that God gave to them."

In 1990, Canada was appointed president and CEO of the Rheedlen Centers. Housed primarily in public schools, the Centers have expanded to offer homework help, tutoring, and recreational program to 2,000 students. Canada's preventative, constructive approach actively blends education, social services, and community rebuilding as a distinct contrast to expanded police forces and jails. Social workers provide drug counseling and advice to parents, and emergency food and clothing are given to families in distress. Canada has also designed programs to train participants in such basic life skills as job expectations, punctuality, attendance, reliability, appearance, attitude and respect. By 1997, the Centers had 11 sites throughout Manhattan. Particularly concerned with the plight of young boys, Canada ensures that Rheedlen programs are led by caring, nurturing men who exemplify the ideal that males play an important role in raising children.

Manhood is a subject which preoccupies Canada. In *Reaching Up for Manhood*, he emphatically stated that boys receive a highly skewed message of what it means to be a man. They quickly learn that manhood entails giving and receiving pain, doing anything to avoid being labeled a coward, and creating an emotional distance between oneself and the rest of the world. The streets, in essence, comprise a culture that mistakes violence for manliness. "The greatest risk of being a poor black boy in the ghetto," Canada wrote, "was that you would be robbed of the most sacred thing that you had, your manhood." Compassion for others is viewed as a weakness, a weakness that can cost a boy his life. Strong father-son bonds are essential for helping a boy reach manhood safely. As Canada noted in an interview with Andrea Bernstein of *Mother Jones*, "The real problem is not single women, its men who walk away from their families and leave them without support emotionally and financially."

Despite the enormous obstacles he faces daily, Canada remains energized. Not only has he further developed the traditional programming,offered by Rheedlen, but he has also instigated many key initiatives during his tenure as president. For instance, he has been active in the establishment and implementation of Rheedlen's Beacon School program. Housed in the Countee Cullen Community Center, the Beacon School provides a multitude of support services, safe shelters, and constructive activities to children and families in central Harlem.

Under Canada's leadership, the Rheedlen Centers have also initiated the Harlem Peacemakers Program, a community-wide effort to reduce violence in central Harlem by teaching negotiation skills. Concerned with the media's promotion of violence as a way of settling disputes, Canada has attempted to develop an alternative plan of action, one centered on communications as a means of conflict resolution. The Peacemakers work with Rheedlen staff members to design anti-violence programs and conflict resolution, mediation, and safety plans. Each year, the program trains an additional 50 Peacemakers. Concurrently, Canada has created the Community Pride Initiative to work with tenants in central Harlem to help them reclaim their apartments and, ultimately, their neighborhoods.

In addition to his efforts with the Rheedlen Centers, Canada has begun to tackle similar issues on a national level. He has partnered with Marion Wright Edelman and the Children's Defense Fund on behalf of the Black Community Crusade for Children, a nationwide effort to make saving African American children the number one priority within the African American community. Such efforts reinforce Canada's dedication to addressing and solving the problems that confront African Americans.

Despite the horrors which he has experienced and witnessed, Canada remains a man of hope. Through his writings and actions, he embodies the role model he once desired for himself. Canada strives to be a man of love and peace, the "visible hero" fighting to save children from the often brutally dangerous world that they have inherited.

The Life and Work of Geoffrey Canada

Public Broadcast System, September 4, 2008: America's Schools in the 21st Century, Where We Stand - Geoffrey Canada & the Harlem Children's Zone

"This is about millions of American Children who have no job, who have no possibility of getting a job, and what to do with them. There is no plan. This is a national crisis that we've got to get serious about, and we need some real leadership in this nation on that issue. The truth of it is, this is neither a Democratic nor a Republican issue. This is an American issue."

Geoffrey Canada,
Founder and President of the Harlem Children's Zone

Block by block. Child by child. That's how Geoffrey Canada set out to save at-risk children in some of the most devastated neighborhoods of Central Harlem.

In 1990, he founded the Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) – a non-profit organization that's been called one of the most ambitious social experiments of the century. Canada, 56 says his goal is to offer these children all they need to succeed in an ever-changing, competitive world. It's a lofty dream, but one Canada has devoted his life to – and one he says the public school system has so far been unable to accomplish.

"We should not have a system where, if you're born in one place, simply because people there are poor, you get an inferior education," he says. "That's not the kind of America I think that the framers of our Constitution envisioned."

Canada himself could have been a victim of this kind of America. He grew up in a poor, violent neighborhood of the South Bronx, living in a tenement home with his single mother and three siblings. His mother worked several jobs to put food on the table. She also impressed upon her kids the importance of education.

Canada listened. He was a driven student, and worked his way through Bowdoin College, then the Harvard School of Education. When he came home to the Bronx, he says he was stunned to see that in all the years of his absence, little had changed.

"If you happen to grow up like I did, and you went to a school that failed 70 to 80 percent of its kids, and you go back 50 years later, and see the same failure rate, you say to yourself, how could this be?" he says.

That's when his work as a child advocate began. In 1983 he joined a nonprofit in Harlem called the Rheedlen Centers, and in 1998 he became its President. Instead of targeting the Center's work on a handful of specific issues, Canada decided to cast its net wider to several blocks of Central Harlem, an area in which he promised to offer services to every child.

Today, the Harlem Children's Zone operates on a fiscal budget of approximately $58 million – some of it donated by private sources, some corporations and a small portion from the Federal Government. True to Canada's goal, the organization services more than 10,000 at-risk kids – providing them with a network of social services and a high-quality education – all at no cost.

What's more, Canada says, the Harlem Children's Zone has diminished the societal costs of failing to provide these kids with sufficient education and healthcare.

"When you send a kid to jail for ten years, they do not come out prepared to get a job, to pay their taxes, to raise their families. You have created a crippled citizen, who is going to be on the public payroll for almost the rest of his or her life," he explains. "The antidote to having kids in jail is to get them into college."

Canada also believes in intervening early through what's called the Baby College. The workshop invites new parents to learn how to raise their kids to ensure a good education. To minimize the chances that his kids will fall victim to street crime, he keeps them off the streets – requiring after-school activities and longer school years.

So far, it seems, the formula is working – with approximately 95 percent of the kids who attend going to college. And other cities, including Baltimore, are taking note – deliberating copycat programs in their own at-risk neighborhoods.

What will it take for more of America's schools to produce these kinds of results? According to Canada, success depends on accountability.

"No one has taken real accountability and said, I'm going to fix this problem. I'm going to put politics aside, and I'm going to do what's right for America's children," he says. "That's the kind of leadership I think this nation needs."

Harlem Program Singled Out as Model
Robin Shulman
Washington Post
Sunday, August 2, 2009

On a recent Saturday morning in Harlem, a few dozen pregnant women in a parenting class made resolutions for life after the baby's birth. Avoid cursing. Provide healthy foods. Develop a sleeping routine for the infant.

"I want my son to be perfect," said Naquell Williams, 22 who is unemployed and pregnant with a child who father is in prison.

This is the starting point for the Harlem Children's Zone: the womb. Geoffrey Canada's nonprofit has created a web of programs that begins before birth, end with college graduation and reach almost every child growing up in 97 blocks carved out of the struggling central Harlem neighborhood.

Canada was raised poor in the South Bronx and went on to earn a graduate education degree from Harvard. Years ago, he grew frustrated that his successful after-school program was not decreasing Harlem's number of high school dropouts, juvenile arrests and unemployed youths. He set out to devise an encompassing program to "move the needle" and improve the lives of poor children in a mass, standardized, reproducible way.

Now the Obama administration seeks to replicate Canada's model in 20 cities in a program called Promise Neighborhoods and as set aside $10 million in the 2010 budget for planning. President Obama has frequently singled out the Harlem Children's Zone, and first lady Michelle Obama recently called Canada "one of my heroes."

The charismatic Canada often talks about using a "conveyor belt" of programs to nurture a child through each state of development. The goal is more than just to steer individual children toward success; it is also to create a neighborhood "tipping point," where the programs affect the community environment to benefit even children not involved with the Children's Zone.

There are asthma prevention plans and fresh produce deliveries; dental, medical and psychiatric care; after-school arts and music; tenant-ownership schemes and early childhood education; tae kwan do and dance, weight training and sports; and foster care prevention and charter schools. It adds up to about 20 programs using more than 1,500 staff members and reaching about 8,200 young people out of the 11,300 in the zone. The cost is about $5,000 per child, and Canada raises much of this $70 million budget privately; it has been difficult during the economic downturn – he was forced to lay off 10 percent of his staff.

The conveyor belt begins with Baby College, a nine-week prenatal and early childhood parenting class with sections of brain development, discipline and parent-child bonding.

Outreach workers, such as Hallie Rouse, canvass the housing projects in the zone, knocking on every door in every building, and stroll up and down Madison Avenue, Fifth, Lenox, Seventh, Eighth, stopping everyone – "You never know who might have children at home," Rouse said – and pressing fliers into hands.

"If they look interested, we start talking," Rouse said.

The next step, for 3-year-olds, is the Children's Zone preschool, then the Promise Academy, one of the well-funded, successful charter schools that are the centerpiece of Canada's efforts.

At the Harlem Gems all-day preschool of 117th Street, about 57 children ages 3 to 5 singe, play, draw and write.

"Feliz y triste," sang the Spanish teacher with one small group. *Happy and sad.*

All children learn Spanish and French in classrooms with names such as Columbia and Harvard (to plant aspiration early). Classes are tiny, with a student-teacher ratio of 4 to 1. About 10 percent of children are in foster care or homeless shelters, and a social worker is assigned to each family.

Meanwhile, at the new, glass-walled $43 million building of the Promise Academy at 125th Street and Madison Avenue, students arrive as early as 7:30 a.m. for a healthy breakfast (no syrup allowed on pancakes) and stay as late as 7 p.m. for an after-school roster of academics, arts and athletics.

"I feel like a pioneer," said Kelly Downing, an English teacher who worked in the public schools before switching to the Promise Academy. Small class sizes, teachers' aides and other supports shift the focus to teaching, he said. "It's really on you to find the most effective way to reach the kids."

In Downing's book-lined ninth-grade English and study techniques class, a few students are giggling.

"Keep it academic," Downing intoned, and the room hushed.

"Everybody feel confident about tomorrow and the test?" he asked.

"Yup."

"You bet."

Jason LeGrand, a 14-year-old in Downing's class, later said he has been at the Promise Academy since sixth grade, when he transferred from public school.

"My old school, we didn't really do anything. Sometimes we had free time all the time," Jason said. "Here, there's more work All the teachers want you to go to college. They'll help you even on their lunch break."

Harlem is a hard place. About 73 percent of children are born into poor families, according to city statistics. The area has the highest rate of foster care placement in the city. Its unemployment rate is about twice that of the city as a whole.

But the Children's Zone has already achieved significant results. Math test scores of the typical sixth-grader entering the charter school lead 35 percentage points in a few years. In middle school, Promise Academy students, who are largely African American, score as high as white students in the city in math. In a neighborhood with low high school graduation rates, about 550 alumni of the after-school program will be in college come fall.

The authors of a recent Harvard study called the Children's Zone "arguably the most ambitious social experiment to alleviate poverty of our time."

But critics say that although the research indicates that the Children's Zone helps the individual children in the charter school succeed, no study has measured the program's ability to achieve its core goal: to reach a neighborhood tipping point.

"The way to figure out if that's working is not to look just at the kids who take part, but to look at outcomes of the community as a whole," said Patrick Sharkey, an assistant sociology professor at New York University. He said that in the future, it could be important to compare neighborhoods that receive the Promise grants with those that do not.

"There are still questions to be answered," said Jim Shelton, the Education's assistant deputy secretary for innovation and improvement. "But the kinds of results we've seen from the school and children and families are worthy of note. If every school produced those kinds of outcomes, you'd have a lot less problems in many neighborhoods."

He said the department would offer applications for planning grants for Promise Neighborhoods in 2010 and could eventually expand the program nationally.

Canada said it is too early to gauge community impact, which will begin to show most readily when the first group of children to start the Children's Zone in kindergarten – now in fifth grade – graduates from college.

"We're trying to get enough kids in college so that you end intergenerational poverty, and we're well on the way to doing that," Canada said. The impact will be clear, he said. "We'll see the impact five or six years from now, when these are working adults and no longer going to prison."

Profile: Harlem Children's Zone
Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, November, 2007

It is difficult, often impossible, to raise healthy children in a disintegrated community. Without local institutions that draw families and young people together around common interests and activities – religious, social, and recreational organizations, effective schools, safe and well-used public spaces – even the most heroic child-rearing is likely to fail. *Harlem Children's Zone business plan, 2001*

In January 2007, the Harlem Children's Zone Project launched Phase 3 of its growth plan, expanding its catchment area from 60 blocks in Central Harlem to 100 blocks. This project operated by the Harlem Children's Zone, Inc. (HCZ), will expand services and programs to children and families by increasing the number of children served agency-wide to from 6,000 in 2000 to over 15,000 in 2011. This change is one of a series of actions the organization is implementing as part of its long-term strategy to ultimately serve more children and families better.

Although the geography is new, the Harlem Children's Zone has focused its work on "rebuilding the very fabric of community life in Harlem for over 35 years," says Geoffrey Canada, President/CEO of HCZ. "Our goal has always been to improve the lives of poor children living in one of the most devastated communities in America."

The organization began in 1970 with just a handful of staff working to reduce truancy among Harlem's youth. Since that time, Harlem Children's Zone has grown to include 20 sites serving more than 10,500 children and adults. Today, HCZ and its staff of over 1,300 have gained recognition as one of America's most effective and innovative community-building and youth development organizations.

Early on in its history, HCZ realized it took more than just a strong family structure to build successful families and create opportunities for poor children in the community. The poverty and social ills facing Harlem residents – from high rates of unemployment to abysmally low rates of student achievement and one of the highest rates of children in foster placement in the state – have long posed challenges and obstacles for parents trying to raise healthy children in their neighborhood.

Addressing and combating this landscape took a community-wise, grass-roots effort in building safer, more constructive neighborhoods. Stated Canada, "We needed residents in Harlem to organize and gather around common interests, especially the healthy development of children, to combat and reverse the effects of poverty and social neglect."

"Our children," continued Canada, "especially ones from troubled communities like ours, are far more likely to grow to healthy, satisfying adulthood – and to help build a better community – if a critical mass of the adults around them are well-versed in the techniques of effective parenting, and are engaged in local, education, social, and religious activities with their kids." Thus, Canada and HCZ believed that the earlier children receive the necessary "health care, intellectual and social stimulation, and consistent guidance from loving, attentive adults," the more likely these children would be to become responsible and contributing members of their neighborhoods.

These two principles – a critical mass of engaged, effective families, and early and progressive intervention in children's development – are now at the core of HCZ's programs, which work to build a stronger community. These principles are the basis of the agency's long-term plans to expand and serve greater numbers of residents in Harlem and beyond.

Stepping Stones for the Future

Harlem Children's Zone, Inc. established the Harlem Children's Zone Project in 1997 as a localized, multi-faceted approach to empower and provide the necessary support to parents, residents, teachers, and other key neighborhood stakeholders seeking to create significant, positive opportunities for their children to become healthy, productive adults. The project began its efforts by focusing on a 24-block area in Harlem, a community where 61% of all children live below the poverty line and 98% of the community is African American or Latino.

By 2000, the HCZ Project emerged as one of its most promising and effective initiatives within the organization. The same year, HCZ, Inc. began a deliberate, intensive look at all its various programs and operations as it began to develop a plan for the organization's future. With the support of the Eda McConnell Clark Foundation and the consulting firm Bridgespan Group, the Harlem Children's Zone went through a process of self-discovery and learning that uncovered its strengths – and weaknesses. The result: an ambitious, long-term business plan that would help guide the organization in becoming stronger and more self-sufficient.

During this effort, the organization "reaffirmed its emphasis on assisting youth and families," says Canada. Thus, part of this planning process included many difficult decisions, including the decision to transfer the responsibility of administering popular programs (such as a local senior center) that were not directly aligned with its core mission of helping children and families and that diverted resources from HCZ's organizational strengths. Most radical of the changes, the agency decided to realize the organization and its efforts around the Harlem Children's Zone Project.

While the process was often difficult and arduous, says Canada, the time and effort it took to create the business plan has helped improve the organization. "Programs that we felt took away from the mission have been eliminated while our other programs have been reorganized. We've now staffed the organization with the necessary "intellectual firepower" to accomplish our goals. Most importantly, we've added a thousand more children served by our programs within the last year.

In the first phase of growth, HCZ decided that, rather than immediately expanding the geographic boundaries of neighborhoods served, the organization needed to stay within the original 24 blocks while it devoted its resources and energy to strengthening the organization's capacity to serve greater numbers of youth, such as deepening its management capacity and creating an internal process to evaluate its impact on the community. During the second phase of growth, which began in 2004, HCZ expanded its boundaries, launching the HCZ Promise Academy Charter Schools, and establishing the Practitioners Institute, a program for HCZ staff to share knowledge and lessons learned with practitioners and policymakers interested in the Children's Zone from around the globe.

Although challenging and very ambitious, said Canada, "HCZ's plan for growth excites me." By the end of the final phase in 2000, Harlem Children's Zone Project aims to cover 100 blocks in Central Harlem bring HCZ, Inc.'s services to more than 16,000 children and adults. "All of us at the Harlem Children's Zone are very excited about the opportunity to help thousands more youth in the years to come."

Harlem Children's Zone Project Programs

The *Baby College* teaches and provides expectant and new parents the necessary skills, information, and support they need to raise healthy, happy children. The curriculum was designed in collaboration with Dr. T. Berry Brazelton and his *Touchpoints* program. The Baby College addresses the needs of children from birth to the age of 3, and is an integral part of the organization's early intervention work. Through the nine-week series of workshops, parents are trained in issues of health, safety, discipline, child development, parental stress and child-parent bonding. Following the series of interactive classes, outreach workers organize monthly get-togethers to help graduates form relationships with other parents in the community.

HCZ's Harlem Gems portfolio includes 3 sites, Harlem Gems Head Start, Harlem Gems Universal Pre-kindergarten (UPK) and Uptown Gems UPK that prepare young children for kindergarten. Each site features an extended year and extended day program that students attend from 8:00 a.m. to 5:45 p.m. from September – August. The rich curriculum is based on High Scope, Creative Curriculum and Life Skills Learning Approach. Students also learn numbers, days of the week and other basic vocabulary words in Spanish, French and English.

Harlem Peacemakers identifies and trains young people ages 18-24 who are interested in making the public schools stronger and safer for children and families by working with teachers in elementary school classrooms and running after-school and summer programs. Peacemakers strive to enrich the lives of neighborhood youth by teaching and encouraging techniques of violence prevention and providing academic support.

Harlem Children's Zone's Promise Academies include two charter elementary schools and one charter middle school. Ultimately, HCZ plans to develop these into two K-12 charter schools. Promise Academy Charter Schools offer a high-quality, extended-day, extended-year education. All classrooms are staffed with one lead teacher and a Peacemaker or paraprofessional. The schools also have reading and math coaches, social workers, a psychologist, and healthy, local food prepared by HCZ's chef and kitchen staff. In addition, all schools offer after-school programs from 4-6 p.m. and all students are encouraged to attend Saturday school. The after school programs offer academic support, recreation and clubs such as cooking class, media arts, and fitness classes. Middle school students can stay until 7 p.m. for homework help with tutors and receive a hot dinner meal.

HCZ Promise Academy Charter School students also receive support from the Harlem Children's Health Project, a comprehensive health program that provides medical, dental and mental health services.

The HCZ Community Center is a year-round comprehensive program for teens and adults. The Center offers programs 6-7 days a week. Activities include academic enrichment, sports, recreation, fitness, health and wellness, fine arts, rites of passage and community service. The Center also provides a forum for the neighborhood such as community meetings, health fairs, book fairs, parent meetings, conferences, performances, graduations, and youth leadership initiatives.

Through creative use of the arts, media literacy, health and multimedia technology, the TRUCE (The Renaissance University for Community Education) Program offers high school students opportunities to further their academic pursuits and develop job skills to prepare them for college and future careers. TRUCE provides adolescents with the opportunity to learn video production while producing their own cable television program, the Read Deal, or research and write stories for the youth-run newspaper Harlem Overhead, which has a circulation of more than 25,000. Complementing these programs, TRUCE's Insight Center provides academic support, including SAT preparation and tutoring, to help youth navigate and manage high school and the college application process. Student Advocates at TRUCE collaborate with students and their school staff to ensure that students maintain their test grades, understand and complete their homework, and do college prep work.

TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center offers a free exercise facility to youth. The Employment and Technology Center focuses on high school youth at risk of dropping out of school. The College Success Office provides academic, personal and financial counseling as well as civic engagement opportunities to students in high school and college. A walk-in storefront, Family Support Center provides families in crisis with immediate access to professional social services. Community Pride works with residents to promote local revitalization projects. HCZ's Asthma Initiative serves families whose children are diagnosed with asthma.

Beacon Centers were created to provide youth with a safe haven from street violence and drug use. Situated in areas with high rates of drug trafficking and gang activity, these community centers provide youth with often the only positive alternative to street life. Two Beacon Schools – Countee Cullen Community Center and Booker T. Washington – offer a comprehensive range of after-school youth development programs, academic tutoring, counseling, drug and teen-pregnancy initiatives, education classes, and social and recreational activities.

Report of Comprehensive High School Reform and Extended Learning in New York City, by the American Youth Policy Forum, 2002

The goal of the Countee Cullen Beacon is to provide young people between the ages of five and 21 with a safe, structured educational and recreational center, quality youth development programming, and services for families. Countee Cullen is a year-round, comprehensive program. HCZ opened another Beacon in 1998 at the Booker T. Washington Junior High School. As with the other Beacons, these Beacons tailor services to the surrounding community. Also, many of the Beacons staff members are hired from the schools in which they are housed. One of the goals is to more closely tie the school community and the wider neighborhood community. Many of the young participants eventually become staff as well. They may begin as participants when they are seven and become staff members around age 17.

The Harlem Children's Zone, Inc., formerly Rheedlen, was established in 1970. It was the first non-profit organization in NYC to focus exclusive attention on the problem of truancy among young people and to work on issues related to foster care and the need for after-school activities. After 1977, HCZ started organizing block associations to go door-to-door in a specified geographic area. Using schools as a community resource, HCZ has developed a network of school-based prevention programs in Central Harlem, Manhattan's Upper West Side and the Hell's Kitchen area of Manhattan. These programs offer an array of services that keep young people in school while enhancing their intellectual, social, and emotional development.

In 1997, HCZ launched a multi-year comprehensive community building initiative designed to revitalize a 24-block neighborhood in Central Harlem. The approach encompasses housing, community organizing, employment, technology, early childhood, public safety, public schools, community parks and playgrounds, after-school and summer programs for young people, feeding programs for the young and elderly, and emergency food and clothing for their clients.

Other Harlem Children's Zone programs include Baby College which brings parents into HCZ programs early on and introduces them to Head Start. They then continue to participate in HCZ programs when children are in pre-K and K-3 schooling.

Shaping minds around reading and technology is another HCZ project. The organization operates a technology center with the latest computer equipment that is open six days a week for children and adults. It offers Internet access and a walk-in computer lab.

HCZ has a community advisory board and actively seeks community input in program design and delivery

Geoffrey Canada: A Children's Conveyor Belt
eJournal USA
Nonviolent Paths to Social Change
March, 2009

Geoffrey Canada is one of the lucky ones: an African-American kid growing up in a grim New York City neighborhood who escaped its violence, poverty, and derelict schools to earn a master's degree in education from Harvard University. But Canada didn't forget his roots; he immediately went to work in New York's Harlem neighborhood as an educator and child advocate.

Canada has not only made it out himself, but also was not helping hundreds of other poor, at-risk, inner-city children. Yet that wasn't enough, he decided.

A Chicago Public Radio program called *This American Life* describes how, by the 1980s, Canada realized that saving just a few children wasn't going to end generational poverty in Harlem or anywhere else; his organization needed to try and save just about everyone.

"In order to truly make a difference," he said, "we were going to have to think really big. We were going to have to work with children in the thousands going to ten thousands. And we were going to have to work with these children from birth right on through until they graduated from college."

His vision was both unprecedented and expensive. But Canada, 58, an intense charismatic man, is successfully implementing it through the Harlem's Children Zone (HCZ) which now covers more than 10,000 children with comprehensive education, medical, and social services in central Harlem with an annual budget estimated at $40 million for 2009.

Canada's accomplishments are drawing widespread attention from leaders as a model for how to break poverty's iron grip through an absolute commitment to children and their welfare – a commitment, summed up in the title of a new book about Canada's work: *Whatever It Takes*, by Paul Tough, an editor at the *New York Times Magazine*. Among them is President Barack Obama, who during the 2008 presidential campaign praised the Harlem Children's Zone as "an all-encompassing, all-hands-on-deck antipoverty effort that is literally saving a generation of children in a neighborhood where they were never supposed to have a chance."

Observers are impressed not only with Canada's vision, but also with his results. Last year, almost 100 percent of all HCZ third-graders tested at or above grade level on state tests, an unprecedented result for an inner-city New York school.

One element that Canada emphasizes is early exposure to language, building on research showing that a key difference between poor and professional families is neither race nor income, but, as author Tough says, "the sheer number of words your parents spoke to you as a child."

Researchers found that in middle-class families, children from birth to three years old – a period of maximum brain development – heard as many as 20 million more words (often the same words repeated) than poor children. In other words, something as simple as reading to a child every single night, which HCZ urges of all its parents, can produce enormous, positive results in the child's life.

But reading is only one key to Canada's revolutionary approach, which he terms "the conveyor belt," meaning that HCZ doesn't just intervene with children at certain times, but provides a full range of services, all free, "from cradle to college." The conveyor belt begins is HCZ's celebrated Baby College of pregnant and new mothers, followed by the Harlem Gems pre-school program and Promise Academy charter schools – all supplemented by free medical and dental care, after-school programs, and such special services as fitness programs to combat obesity and treat rampant childhood asthma. And then, as this first generation grows, HCZ will remain with them through secondary school and college.

"They get what middle-class and upper-middle-class kids get," Canada told the television newsmagazine *60 Minutes*. "They get safety. They get structure. They get academic enrichment. They get cultural activity. They get adults who love them and are prepared to do anything. And, I mean, I'm prepared to do anything to keep these kids on the right track."

The New York Times

June 20, 2004

The Harlem Project

By Paul Tough

Back in 1990, Geoffrey Canada was just your average do-gooder. That year, he became the president of a nonprofit charitable organization based in Harlem called the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families, and he set out trying to improve the world, one poor child at a time. It was a bad moment to be poor in New York City. Harlem, especially, was suffering under the simultaneous plagues of crack cocaine, cheap guns and rampant homelessness, and Canada's main goal at Rheedlen, in those years, was to keep the children in his programs alive. The organization had an annual budget of $3 million, which it spent on a predictable array of services in Upper Manhattan: after-school programs, truancy prevention, anti-violence training for teenagers. The programs seemed to do a lot of good for the children who were enrolled in them, at least in part because of Canada's own level of devotion. He was obsessed with his job, personally invested in the lives of the children he was helping and devastated when they ended up in prison or on drugs or shot dead on the street.

But after he ran these programs for a few years, day in and day out, his ideas about poverty started to change. The catalyst was surprisingly simple: a waiting list. One Rheedlen after-school program had more children who wanted to enroll than it was able to admit. So Canada chose the obvious remedy: he drew up a waiting list, and it quickly filled with the names of children who needed his help and couldn't get it. That bothered him, and it kept bothering him, and before long it had him thinking differently about his entire organization. Sure, the 500 children who were lucky enough to be participating in one of his programs were getting help, but why those 500 and not the 500 on the waiting list? Or why not another 500 altogether? For that matter, why 500 and not 5,000? If all he was doing was picking some kids to save and letting the rest fail, what was the point?

At around the same time, he was invited by Marian Wright Edelman, the president of the Children's Defense Fund, to join a group she had recently founded called the Black Community Crusade for Children. Once a year, she brought together two dozen leaders from across the country who were trying to solve the problems of poor black children. They met down at a farm in Tennessee that had once been owned by Alex Haley, the author of "Roots," and they spent a few days comparing notes on the crisis in America's poor neighborhoods. For Canada, the good news at these discussions was that he wasn't alone -- but that was the bad news, too. All across the country, in big cities and in small towns, well-meaning nonprofits were finding the same thing: they were helping a few kids, getting them out of the ghettos and off the streets and sometimes even into college, but for the masses of poor children, and especially those who were black, nothing was changing; those children were still falling behind in school, scoring below average on reading tests and staying poor.

Most of the men and women who were meeting in Tennessee were from Canada's generation -- he is 52 -- and they had come of age in the hopeful period following the passage of the Civil Rights Act, when things seemed as if they were about to improve for poor black Americans. But as Edelman convened her group, life in the ghettos was getting worse, not better. To Canada, it felt as if he and his peers were losing more children more quickly than they had ever lost before. For the first time, he felt a sense of hopelessness, and he found himself thinking that the kids he was seeing in kindergarten in Harlem were already doomed, destined to spend the rest of their lives stuck at the bottom.

Canada knew there were success stories out there. There were always reports in the newspapers about "special" kids who "overcame the odds." Some brilliant teacher or charity or millionaire went into the ghetto and found 100 kids and educated them and turned their lives around. But those stories seemed counterproductive to Canada. Instead of helping some kids beat the odds, he thought, why don't we just change the odds? When he looked around, though, he couldn't find anyone who knew how to do that. Experts in his field had figured out how to educate one disadvantaged child, or one classroom full of kids, but the benefits were localized, and usually temporary. And no one had any idea how to change a whole school system or a whole housing project, or for that matter a whole neighborhood. So, in the middle of the 1990's, that's what Geoffrey Canada decided he would do. And now, 10 years later, he has become a very different kind of do-gooder, one with a mission both radically ambitious and startlingly simple. He wants to prove that poor children, and especially poor black children, can succeed -- that is, achieve good reading scores, good grades and good graduation rates -- and not just the smartest or the most motivated or the ones with the most attentive parents, but all of them, in big numbers. Three years ago, he chose as his laboratory a 24-block zone of central Harlem, now expanded to 60 blocks -- an area with about 6,500 children, more than 60 percent of whom live below the poverty line and three-quarters of whom score below grade level on statewide reading and math tests -- and he named it the Harlem Children's Zone.

After welfare reform passed in 1996, the national debate on poverty seemed simply to shut down. Most conservatives explain poverty by looking to culture and behavior: bad parenting, high out-of-wedlock birth rates, teenagers who don't know the value of an honest day's work. To most liberals, the real problems are economic: underfinanced public schools and a dearth of well-paying semiskilled jobs, which make it nearly impossible for families to pull themselves out of poverty. Canada says he believes that both assumptions are true. He agrees that the economy is stacked against poor people no matter how hard they work, but he also thinks that poor parents aren't doing a good enough job of rearing their children. What makes Canada's project unique is that it addresses both problems at once. He keeps the liberals happy by pouring money into schools and day-care centers and after-school programs, and he satisfies the conservatives by directly taking on the problems of inadequate parenting and the cultural disadvantages of a ghetto home life. It's not just that he's trying to work both sides of the ideological street. It's that Canada has concluded that neither approach has a chance of working alone. Fix the schools without fixing the families and the community, and children will fail; but they will also fail if you improve the surrounding community without fixing the schools.

Canada's new program combines educational, social and medical services. It starts at birth and follows children to college. It meshes those services into an interlocking web, and then it drops that web over an entire neighborhood. It operates on the principle that each child will do better if all the children around him are doing better. So instead of waiting for residents to find out about the services on their own, the organization's recruiters go door-to-door to find participants, sometimes offering prizes and raffles and free groceries to parents who enroll their children in the group's programs. What results is a remarkable level of "market penetration," as the organization describes it. Eighty-eight percent of the roughly 3,400 children under 18 in the 24-block core neighborhood are already served by at least one program, and this year Canada began to extend his programs to the larger 60-block zone. The objective is to create a safety net woven so tightly that children in the neighborhood just can't slip through.

At a moment when each new attempt to solve the problem of poverty seems to fall apart, one after the next, what is going on in central Harlem is one of the biggest social experiments of our time. Social scientists and poverty advocates are watching carefully to see if Canada can pull it off. Many are skeptical; they have seen too many ambitious anti-poverty programs collapse because of budget overruns or administrative hubris, and Canada acknowledges that his work has just begun. But the sheer scale of Canada's project has created a palpable excitement among foundation officials, poverty scholars and business leaders. Marian Wright Edelman said that though there are a few other good neighborhood-based programs around the country, "none are as comprehensive as the Harlem Children's Zone, and none of them hold as much promise."

David Saltzman, executive director of the Robin Hood Foundation, concurred: "If it works, it'll be the best thing that's happened in a long time. Man, if Geoff can make this thing work, it's huge."

The programs that the Harlem Children's Zone offers all seem carefully planned and well run, but none of them, on their own, are particularly revolutionary. It is only when they are considered together, as a network, that they seem so new. The organization employs more than 650 people in more than 20 programs; on a recent afternoon, I spent some time walking around Harlem, dropping in on one program after another. At Harlem Gems, a program for 40 prekindergarten students at a public school on 118th Street, Keith, who had just turned 5 and was missing a front tooth, sat at a computer working away at "Hooked on Phonics," while Luis, a 19-year-old tutor, gave him one-on-one instruction. A few blocks up Lenox Avenue, at the Employment and Technology Center, 30 teenagers in T-shirts and basketball jerseys, all part of the organization's new investment club, were gathered around a conference table, listening to an executive from Lehman Brothers explain the difference between the Dow Jones and the Nasdaq. At P.S. 76 on West 121st Street, fifth-grade students in an after-school program were standing in front of their peers, reading aloud the autobiographies they had written that afternoon. And over at Truce, the after-school center for teenagers, a tutor named Carl was helping Trevis, a student in the eighth grade, with a research project for his social studies class, an eight-page paper on the life of Frederick Douglass. In a nearby housing project, a counselor from the Family Support Center was paying a home visit to a woman who had just been granted legal custody of her two grandchildren; in other apartments in the neighborhood, outreach workers from Baby College, a class for new parents, were making home visits of their own, helping teach better parenting techniques. A few blocks away, at the corner of Madison Avenue and 125th Street, construction was under way on the organization's new headquarters, a six-story, $44 million building that will also house the Promise Academy, a new charter school that Canada is opening in the fall.

While the new building is going up, Canada works on Park Avenue between 130th Street and 131st Street, in a small office in a six-story building that always seems to be under renovation. When I visited him on an icy afternoon in February, the radiator in his office was hissing constantly; when the room got too hot, Canada propped his window open with a book about community revitalization. That cooled things off, but it also created a new distraction. Directly outside Canada's second-floor window, no more than 20 feet away, are the elevated tracks that carry every Metro-North train heading out of Grand Central Terminal toward Connecticut and Westchester County. Each time a train passed, full of commuters on their way back to the suburbs, a rumbling filled the room, and Canada leaned a little closer so that I could make out what he was saying.

He is a tall, lean, athletic man with rounded shoulders and long limbs, and on this afternoon he was wearing a dark suit and a light blue shirt with his monogram sewn over the breast pocket. His graying hair was cropped close to his scalp. His office is spare -- a desk with a phone and a computer and a few piles of mail. There's a coat rack for his suit jacket, a bookshelf and a small round table with four chairs where he holds meetings. On his desk is a big picture of his 5-year-old son, Geoffrey Jr., from his second marriage. On the wall behind his desk are photographs -- Canada with President Clinton, Canada with Mayor Bloomberg -- as well as a portrait of a dozen or so of the young people he has trained in tae kwon do, which he has been teaching two nights a week for 21 years. A framed citation on the opposite wall certifies him as a third-degree black belt.

Although Canada likes to say that he is sick of against-the-odds success stories, he is one himself. He grew up on Union Avenue in the South Bronx. His father left when he was 4, and his mother reared him and his three brothers herself, sometimes supporting them with wages from menial jobs and sometimes relying on welfare and food from local charities. In his memoir "Fist Stick Knife Gun," Canada describes the rituals and codes of violence that governed life for children like him, growing up in the inner city in the 50's and 60's. As a teenager, he drank and fought and smoked pot and carried a knife, but he also stayed in school, worked in a factory in the evenings and won a scholarship to Bowdoin College in Maine, and from there went on to earn a degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Bowdoin doesn't have many black alumni, and so when a promising black high-school senior is applying to the college from New York, the admissions office often sends the student to Canada for an alumni interview. When I arrived at his office, Canada was firing questions at Julian, a 17-year-old from Brooklyn who attends a magnet school. Canada made notes on a clipboard as Julian talked, answered a few of his questions about Bowdoin and Maine and then shook his hand and showed him out.

"He's a good kid, and I think he'll be terrific at Bowdoin," Canada said as he sat back down. "But he's not my kid." Not a Harlem Children's Zone kid, he meant. "He comes from a family, they've got it together, his parents are both educators. That's not us. We want those other kids, the ones who don't have two parents, whose parents haven't gone to college, who haven't got a chance statistically of making it."

This distinction -- between children who are "his kids" and children who aren't -- is one that Canada draws all the time, and it goes back a long way in his own personal history. In "Fist Stick Knife Gun," published in 1995, he describes a summer night when he was 14. He and half a dozen friends were sitting on someone's stoop drinking Rheingold when a car came screeching up and a man they didn't know got out and challenged one of them to a fight. The fight started, and at first it went according to the rules of Union Avenue, meaning no weapons and no one else gets involved. But then the stranger pulled out a gun, which was almost unheard of in 1966. Canada was ready to run, but instead he and his friends slowly converged on the older, bigger, better-armed man and scared him off the block through the strength of their numbers. What he learned that day, he wrote, was that he and his friends "loved one another enough to be willing to die."

When Canada talks about "my kids" now, he means the 6,500 children who live in the Harlem Children's Zone. But even more than that, he means the least successful children in the neighborhood. When he talks about them, it feels personal, as if his real objective is to work with children just like the cold, tough, frustrated boys he grew up with on Union Avenue, most of whom are now dead or in prison -- to make amends for the past by saving Harlem's children today.

Still, Canada's approach to poverty is not sentimental. When he considers any given poor family living in the Harlem Children's Zone, he divides their problems up in his mind into the ones he needs to solve and the ones he doesn't need to solve. The ones he needs to solve are the ones that are keeping the child from succeeding in school. Everything else, he has decided, he can leave alone. "Do we think that it would be better for our parents to be married?" he said, tilting back in his chair. "Absolutely. Why? Because two-parent families have more income. Children tend to do better when they have two parents in the house." In fact, he knows that the great majority of births in Harlem are to single mothers and that most of the parents whose children he serves are unmarried. "But what ability do we have to make an impact on that?" he asked. "None. Right? If we tried to do that, we'd spend all our time just doing that."

Canada admitted that he is engaged in a kind of triage. He described for me an imaginary Harlem parent. "You can be 20 years old, with a job that doesn't pay you enough money to survive on," he said. "You're underemployed. You've got a kid. The kid's not doing well in school. You've got no place for the kid to be after school. Well, we'll provide services for that child. But we're not going to solve the problem of you being underemployed. That's not going to go away."

He is, in other words, sidestepping the macroeconomic solutions that some advocates insist are the only way to solve the problem of poverty -- better wages, a national jobs program, a bigger earned-income tax credit -- in favor of programs that in one way or another directly affect the performance of the neighborhood's poor children.

Canada's educational philosophy emphasizes accountability and testing, and in that way it is similar to the dominant idea in public education today. The doctrine of accountability -- the idea that if students do poorly on standardized tests, schools should lose their financing and teachers should lose their jobs -- first emerged in the late 80's and early 90's in the Houston public schools. It then moved to the White House as the basis of the No Child Left Behind law when Rod Paige, the superintendent of the Houston schools, became the education secretary under George W. Bush. In the past year, though, news reports and lawsuits have revealed that when schools are compelled to meet certain numbers -- graduation rates, standardized-test scores -- their administrators often succumb to the urge to cheat. In Houston and New York, principals have shoved troubled students out of school, often under an administrative sleight of hand, in order to keep their schools' numbers artificially high. Canada has set the same rigorous goals for his own organization, but for him, the urge is the opposite: not to push the worst kids aside, but to recruit them even harder.

On this afternoon, Canada was worried about a set of internal statistics he had just uncovered: some of his students seemed to be doing too well. Last fall, his organization started a new program in four Harlem public schools called the Fifth Grade Institute, an after-school program for 160 fifth-grade students designed to begin catching them up to grade level before the charter school opens in September. Canada wanted to calculate how much the program was improving the reading ability of these students, so he asked to see their scores on the previous year's citywide fourth-grade reading test for comparison. Reading scores in New York City public schools are delivered in four categories, the higher the better. A 4 means the child is reading above grade level; a 3 means the child is reading at grade level; a 2 means below grade level; and a 1 means significantly below grade level. In most of the city, 2's and 3's predominate, with some 4's thrown in. In schools in Harlem, though, about three-quarters of the students score either a 1 or a 2; there are a few 3's, and 4's are rare.

But when Canada looked at the scores for the children in the Fifth Grade Institute, he found a lot of 3's -- more than a random sampling of Harlem students would have drawn. And on the day I visited, he was worried that the process of recruiting students for the Fifth Grade Institute had somehow been selective. He was sure it wasn't conscious on the part of his administrators, and, in fact, when he later received more detailed scores, they seemed more in line with the neighborhood patterns. Still, it was only natural, he knew, that parents who would bother to sign their children up for an ambitious after-school program would tend to be the better-organized, better-educated ones, and so it wouldn't be surprising if their children were better readers. Maybe his kids, the 1's and 2's, hadn't heard about the program, or maybe their parents hadn't managed to get it together in time to sign them up.

So what do you do? If you offer a new program, the best students will naturally enroll first, but you want the worst students. How do you get those parents to apply? Sometimes, in Canada's experience, it happens by accident. In 2001, the first year the Harlem Children's Zone offered Harlem Gems, its Head Start-like program for 4-year-olds, the organizers were behind schedule and didn't manage to send out fliers and start recruiting until August, just a few weeks before the program began. All the well-organized parents had already made their child-care plans for the year, and the last-minute, overburdened parents were the ones who signed up. That gave Canada the demographic he wanted, and he was able to get concrete results. When the 4-year-olds started Harlem Gems in 2001, 53 percent were scoring "delayed" or "very delayed" on the Bracken Basic Concept Scale for school readiness. At the end of the yearlong program, 26 percent were delayed.

In that case, the search for the most delayed kids worked because the organizers got lucky. Usually, though, it involves a lot of knocking on doors. I went out one morning with two outreach workers, Francesca Silfa and Mark Frazier, as they searched through central Harlem for new parents to enroll in Baby College. They knocked on the door of every apartment in a 21-story building on 118th Street, looking for parents with children under 4, leaving fliers under the doors if no one answered. They didn't meet with any resistance or hostility, although they did get a few skeptical looks. Mostly the process seemed slow and painstaking. Whenever they ran into Baby College graduates in the halls, they stopped to chat, prodding them for suggestions of good candidates in the building or elsewhere on the block. In addition to the door-to-door approach, recruiters visit laundromats, supermarkets and check-cashing outlets to look for new mothers. On the day I was with them, Silfa approached one woman pushing a stroller down 118th Street and managed to sign her and her daughter up on the spot.

For most parents, the attractions of a program like Baby College are obvious: useful information, the relief of spending Saturday morning getting to know other mothers instead of being stuck in a cramped apartment and free child care during class time. But if those aren't enough of a pull, there are raffles at the end of each class for $50 Old Navy gift certificates and a big drawing at the end of the course in which one parent wins a month's rent.

This combination of door-knocking, cajoling and offering incentives seems to work, and each nine-week session of Baby College draws a class of more than 100 parents, all of whom receive weekly follow-up visits at home. More than 95 percent of the parents -- 677 so far -- have successfully completed the course. The real test of this approach, Canada said when we spoke in February, will come when the Promise Academy opens its doors. By law, the charter school will be open to students from anywhere in the city's five boroughs, which means a lottery to choose the incoming classes from a broader pool of applicants. But the only students Canada really wants in his school are the ones from central Harlem, and especially the lowest-performing ones, exactly those whose parents, he said, are least inclined to apply to send their children to a special school.

"I will make sure that every single poor-performing school and parent in Harlem knows about this program," Canada said back in February. "And if we don't get more 1's and 2's than 3's, then we haven't done our job properly." What that will require, Canada said, is persistent recruiting. "We're going to have to go and force some of these parents to come and fill out the application," he said. Even once he finds the 1's and 2's, he added, "their parents may say no, which means we have to go back and figure out a way to bribe them and get them to say yes. And I hate to put it like that, but that's what we'll end up doing. We'll end up saying, 'If you get your kid to apply, you'll get free movie passes.'"

The point of all of this intensive recruiting is to amass evidence -- indisputable data that show exactly what it will take to level the playing field and get poor children performing on the same level as the city's middle-class children. "If we just end up saving a bunch of kids in Harlem, that will be good for them, but it won't mean an awful lot to me in the long run," Canada said. "We want to be able to say that thousands of poor children can learn at high levels and perform at rates that are the same as middle-class children if they are given the opportunity to do so. But I want to be clear when I say we've got an answer that we really have an answer."

The answer that Canada wants to provide is in fact very much in demand. There are plenty of examples of programs that didn't work: in 2000, for example, the Heinz Endowments abandoned as a failure a $59 million, five-year program to provide early-childhood care and education for 7,600 low-income children in and around Pittsburgh. The program's costs soared, and four years in, when Heinz pulled the plug, only 680 children were being served. What is most startling about the current study of poverty is how little conclusive evidence there is about which cures do work. There are no more than a dozen studies in the field that track how successful various interventions are over the long term, and the evidence from those studies tends to be spotty and subject to debate.

To William Julius Wilson, the Harvard sociologist who is one of the country's leading thinkers on urban poverty, this is precisely the significance of the Harlem Children's Zone. "It is very, very important for policy makers to be able to cite examples of how you can improve the life chances of disadvantaged kids," he said. "There are so many people who feel that whatever you do, it's not going to work. They want to say, 'Well, there's just a culture of poverty out there, and you can't really change it.'" If Canada's project is successful, though, Wilson said, it will "provide the ammunition to policy makers who want to do something to address the problems of poverty." It will allow them to say: "Here are kids who would ordinarily end up as permanent economic proletarians, and here is a program that has been able to overcome the cumulative disadvantages of chronic subordination. So why not commit ourselves across the nation to try to duplicate what he's done?"

Canada has a vivid picture in his mind of a judgment day to come -- 8, 10, 12 years down the road. Children who are now entering the system as infants will be taking their third-grade citywide math and reading tests, and they'll be scoring at or above grade level. Children who entered the system as Harlem Gems will be graduating from high school -- he expects that 90 percent of his students will graduate on time. It is only at that point, he explained, that he will be able to say to the rest of the country: "This isn't an abstract conversation anymore. If you want poor children to do as well as middle-class children" -- not necessarily to be superachievers but to become what he calls "typical Americans," able to compete for jobs -- "we now know how to do it." If he's right, the services he will provide will cost about $1,400 a year per student, on top of existing public-school funds. The country will finally know, he said, what the real price tag is for poor children to succeed.

Canada first came up with the idea for the Harlem Children's Zone in the mid-90's, but it wasn't until a few years later that he was ready to propose it officially to the board of the Rheedlen Centers (as the organization was then known). Crime had dropped sharply in Harlem, as it had everywhere in New York City, and Canada was no longer overwhelmed by the daily anxiety of trying to prevent the children in his programs from being killed. The national economy was booming, housing prices in the neighborhood were climbing and the first signs of gentrification were appearing, but for children in Harlem, the situation hadn't improved much. The unemployment rate there was still very high. (Even now, after the arrival of new middle-class residents, it stands at 18.5 percent.) It was in this context that Canada went before the Rheedlen board in 1998 and said that he wanted to remake the organization completely, to set up a kind of project that had never been tried before.

Canada had recently brought on a new board member, a fellow Bowdoin alumnus named Stan Druckenmiller, who, while running George Soros's Quantum Fund, became one of the most successful hedge-fund managers in the history of the stock market, amassing a personal fortune estimated at more than $1 billion. After Canada laid out his proposal to the board, Druckenmiller took him aside and told him that in his opinion he had the right plan but the wrong board. Canada agreed, and the two men politely deposed the chairman and replaced him with Druckenmiller, who set about raising money and recruiting new board members from the higher echelons of Wall Street.

The organization now has a lot more money than it did a few years ago. Druckenmiller paid for about a third of the cost of the new headquarters himself, and board members contribute about a third of the annual operating budget. (The rest comes from foundations, the government and private donors.) In April, the organization held a glittering fund-raising dinner at Cipriani

42nd Street, a cavernous former bank building converted into a restaurant, and raised $2.8 million in a single night, mostly from bankers and stockbrokers. (The 2003 fund-raiser, by comparison, pulled in $1.5 million.)

Financiers and C.E.O.'s are drawn to the Harlem Children's Zone not just because of its mission but also because of the way it is run. In fact, the relationship the organization has with its donors is as unusual, arguably, as the program itself. In the late 90's, Allen Grossman, then the president of Outward Bound U.S.A. and now a management professor at the Harvard Business School, began studying the nonprofit sector from a business perspective. It was a mess, he concluded: in an article in The Harvard Business Review in 1997, he described a hopelessly dysfunctional relationship between foundations and nonprofit organizations, in which foundations made short-term grants to pet projects, nonprofits spent all their time chasing money and each side had a vested interest in maintaining the reassuring fiction that failing programs were actually succeeding. Grossman proposed that philanthropists start thinking more like venture capitalists: searching out nonprofits with innovative long-term ideas, financing them early, insisting on transparency and frequent evaluation and nurturing them along the way with expert advice and continuing infusions of capital.

One of the first foundations to take Grossman's ideas seriously was the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, which had been financing Rheedlen for years. In 1999, Nancy Roob, the foundation's grant manager, approached Canada and offered him $250,000, plus the dedicated services of a new management consultancy for nonprofits called the Bridgespan Group, to write a new business plan. This was unheard of: when philanthropists give away a quarter of a million dollars, they generally want the money to go directly to poor people, with as little overhead as possible. Clark, by contrast, was inviting Canada to spend the foundation's money -- first the $250,000, and eventually another $1 million -- entirely on overhead: on developing the business plan; creating a new, more hierarchical management structure; buying new technology for an internal communication system; and constructing a rigorous and continuing process of self-evaluation.

The business plan that Canada's team came up with proposed a steady increase in the annual budget over nine years, from $6 million to $10 million to $46 million. (This year, four years in, it is $24 million.) The plan reads more like a corporate strategy document than a charity prospectus. It refers to "market-penetration targets" and "new information technology applications," including a "performance-tracking system." In practice, too, the organization feels more like a business than a nonprofit, which offers comforting visuals to donors: everyone at the headquarters wears a suit, every meeting starts on time and there is a constant flow of evaluations, reports and budgets. "Geoff could be a C.E.O. at any S.&P. 500 company," Druckenmiller said, and he meant it as a compliment.

During the months I spent visiting Canada, the issue of education took up more and more of his time and attention. When we first spoke, almost a year ago, he described all of the organization's programs -- an initiative to combat asthma, an organizing campaign for tenants -- as equally important. But as the months wore on, it seemed, all he could think about were the problems in the schools. He was pouring more and more resources into Harlem's public schools, paying for in-class tutors and after-school reading programs, and scores had barely budged. He was beginning to see it as a systemic problem, he said, something that couldn't be solved by the kind of supplementary services he was offering. "We've got to really do something radically different if we're going to save these kids," he told me in the fall. "If we keep fooling around on the fringes, I know 10 years will go by, and instead of 75 percent of the kids in Harlem scoring below grade level on their reading scores, maybe it will be 70 percent, or maybe it will be 65 percent. People will say, 'Oh, we're making progress.' But that to me is not progress. This is much more urgent than that."

So at the same time that he has been working inside the school system with a greater intensity than before, he has also begun to try to opt out of it, by establishing charter schools. Beginning in September, the Harlem Children's Zone plans to start educating its own students at two locations. The Promise Academy, which will eventually be a kindergarten-through-12th-grade charter school, will start with a kindergarten and sixth-grade class in September. The sixth grade will be housed in the organization's new headquarters on 125th Street; the kindergarten is expected to open inside an existing public school. The academy will expand over the course of seven years into a school of 1,300 students. The curriculum will be intense: classes will run from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., five days a week -- an hour and a half longer than regular city schools. After-school programs will run until 6 p.m., and the school year will continue well into July.

Although charter schools are regulated by the state, and are outside the city's control, Joel I. Klein, the city's schools chancellor, has supported Canada's charter-school efforts. Canada said he sees Bloomberg and Klein as his allies, which is a strange feeling, he said, because for so long he felt as if he were at war with the school system. Soon after Klein was appointed, in the fall of 2002, he called Canada and set up a meeting. Canada said that the proposals Klein laid out for the entire school system -- greater accountability, more charter schools, more involvement for outside groups -- were exactly what Canada had been waiting to hear. In the summer of 2003, Klein appointed Lucille Swarns to be the regional superintendent for Upper Manhattan, and when Canada met her, he was once again pleasantly surprised.

"When I first came here in the early 1980's," Canada said, "we felt that District 3" -- which stretches from the Upper West Side into central Harlem -- "ran a system almost of apartheid, where below 96th Street, the schools were doing great, and the schools we cared about were doing lousy." Even after his organization began spending a million dollars a year in the district's schools, he said, he never once got a call from the district superintendent. With Swarns things were different right away.

The most surprising aspect of the new collaboration between Klein and Canada is that the chancellor is encouraging the Harlem Children's Zone's plans to convert existing public schools in Harlem into charter schools. Canada has received conditional approval from Klein to start a slowly expanding charter school, beginning this fall with the Promise Academy's kindergarten class. As those children move through the school, the organization will take over control of an additional grade each year, sharing the building with the public school while gradually supplanting it. In six years, Canada explained, "we're going to put the existing school out of business" -- and he said he hopes that that school is only the beginning.

All of which makes skeptics, especially those in the teachers' union, wonder about Canada's motivation. Randi Weingarten, the president of the United Federation of Teachers, said that she used to be friendly with Canada, even attending his fund-raisers, until Bloomberg and Klein came into office and started making threatening noises toward her union. "Since the mayor became mayor, Geoff Canada has stopped having any relationship with us," she said.

In her opinion, Canada's new attitude comes down to politics: "I think what's happened is that they've decided that they'll work with the mayor, and that they won't work with the public-school system except through the mayor and the chancellor" -- meaning that they won't work with the teachers' union. Canada often speaks of the opposition that his charter-school plan is going to face from the teachers' union and what he calls the educational establishment, but to Weingarten, it's the other way around: it's Canada who is picking this fight, demonizing the teachers' union in order to score political points with the mayor. "They are working very secretly with the Board of Education and the Bloomberg administration" on the charter-school plan, she said, a strategy that she said was shortsighted, not least because it is far from certain that Bloomberg will be re-elected. "If you truly want schools to succeed," she said, "you work with the people who represent the teachers."

The battle between the teachers' union and City Hall has been going on for decades, but it has reached an unusually high pitch under Bloomberg. Canada clearly feels a genuine ideological kinship with the mayor, and with Klein, but there's also an immediate advantage to his alliance with them: his charter schools will use nonunion teachers; they will be paid more than public-school teachers, he said, but they will also work longer days, and for 12 months a year. Canada also wanted a free hand to fire teachers who weren't performing up to his expectations -- authority Canada said he felt sure the union would not give him. At his new school, he will have it.

In the days and weeks leading up to the charter-school lottery, the organization's outreach workers did exactly what Geoffrey Canada said they would do: they went door-to-door in housing projects, they tracked down recalcitrant mothers and fathers, they solicited applications from the parents of children in every one of their programs. And by the evening of the lottery, a rainy Tuesday in April, they had received 359 applications for just 180 slots -- 90 in the kindergarten class and 90 in the sixth grade. Legally, they could have held the lottery behind closed doors and simply mailed out acceptance letters, but Canada wanted it to be a real event, so he arranged to hold the lottery in public, in the auditorium of P.S. 242 on West 122nd Street.

By the time the lottery began, the place was packed. Every seat was filled with a hopeful parent or a prospective student or a patient sibling, and late arrivals were standing in the aisles or cramming themselves into the back of the room. Multicolored helium balloons were tied to the end of each row of seats, which gave the room a festive air, but more than anything the place felt nervous.

Canada took the stage. On a long table next to him, a gold drum held a jumble of index cards, each one printed with the name of a child. "We are calling our school Promise Academy because we are making a promise to all of our parents," Canada said from behind a lectern. "If your child is in our school, we will guarantee that child succeeds. There will be no excuses. We're not going to say, 'The child failed because they came from a home with only one parent.' We're not going to say, 'The child failed because they're new immigrants into the country.' If your child gets into our school, that child is going to succeed. If you work with us as parents, we are going to do everything -- and I mean everything -- to see that your child gets a good education."

And then the drawing began, starting with the kindergarten class. Doreen Land, the charter schools' newly hired superintendent, read the first name into a microphone: "Dijon Brinnard." A whoop went up from the back of the auditorium, and a jubilant mother started edging her way out of her row, proudly clutching the hand of her 4-year-old son. Land smiled and took the next card: "Kasim-Seann Cisse." Another whoop, some applause and then another name.

At the front of the auditorium, Canada greeted each mother (or, occasionally, father) and child. Proud parents shook his hand and introduced their children, beaming on their way back to their seats. In the second row, a woman in her 40's, wearing an "I Love New York" T-shirt and a red nylon jacket, sat with her head bowed and her eyes shut tight, her lips moving in an anxious prayer. And then Land called the name "Jaylene Fonseca," and the woman's eyes flew open. She made her way to the front, shook Canada's hand and then told me that her name was Wilma Jure and that Jaylene was her niece, a 4-year-old already enrolled in Harlem Gems. As her eyes filled with tears, she explained that Jaylene's mother, Jure's sister, was living in the city's shelter system for homeless families. Most nights, Jaylene slept with her mother in a shelter on 41st Street, then spent the day in Harlem Gems. "It's an amazing program for people like us who really don't have the means to send our kids to get such a good education," Jure said. "I mean, she's learning French," she added, a little incredulous. Now Jaylene was guaranteed a spot in the Promise Academy from kindergarten through the end of high school. It was hard not to feel that her life had just changed for the better, with the draw of a card.

As the evening wore on, though, the mood in the auditorium started to shift. The kindergarten lottery ended, the chosen students trooped out to the cafeteria for a group photo and the sixth-grade lottery began. In the front row, Virainia Utley sat with her daughter Janiqua, listening to the names being called. Utley is something of a model parent in the Harlem Children's Zone. Janiqua is in the Fifth Grade Institute at P.S. 242, and her three younger siblings -- Jaquan, Janisha and John -- are all enrolled in the computer-assisted after-school reading program. Utley is the vice president of her tenants' association, which was organized by Community Pride, the community-organizing division, and she is a regular presence at Zone events. When I first met her, months earlier, she was already talking about Janiqua going to the Promise Academy. But now the lottery numbers were rising -- 54, 55, 56 -- and her name hadn't yet been called.

After Land read out the 90th name, Canada took the stage again and explained to the remaining parents that it wasn't likely that there would be room for their children in the sixth grade. Land would read out the rest of the names and put them on a waiting list, he said, but this part wouldn't be much fun. He encouraged everyone to go home. Land went back to reading names, and Utley and Janiqua sat and listened, still in their seats, as the waiting list grew and the number of cards in the drum dwindled. By the time Land got to the 80th place on the waiting list, Utley told me, she and Janiqua were just waiting to make sure her name was called. Maybe her card got lost, she said, or stuck to another card. The room was thinning out, and the only remaining parents were angry ones. One by one they were letting Canada know how they felt. A line of parents came up to him to find out what could be done to get their children into the school, and he had to tell each one the same thing: nothing could be done. One woman, who was too angry to give me her name, spat out her complaint. "It's not fair," she shouted. "And I don't like it." Why drag everyone out on a rainy night, she wanted to know, just to sit in a public-school auditorium and feel like losers?

Finally, at No. 111 on the waiting list, Janiqua Utley's name was called, and her mother rose, took her by the hand and started up the aisle to the backdoor. As workers began sweeping up coffee cups and popped balloons, I sat down next to Canada. He looked exhausted, overwhelmed not only by the evening but also by the enormity of the task ahead of him. His eyes were watery, and as we talked, he dabbed periodically at his nose with his folded-up handkerchief. "I was trying to get folks to leave and not to hang around to be the last kid called," he said. "This is very hard for me to see. It's very, very sad. These parents feel, Well, there go my child's chances."

It was a waiting list, I reminded him, that had started him on the path toward the Harlem Children's Zone more than a decade ago -- and now, despite all the millions of dollars, and the staff of 650 and the backing of the mayor, he is still setting up waiting lists. He nodded. "We've got to do more," he said. "We've got to do better." He sighed and looked up at the stage, where Land had just reached No. 150.

Photos: Geoffrey Canada in the zone, his Zone -- 60 blocks of Harlem.; On the Air: Teenagers in Truce, an after-school program, learn video-production skills.; On the Floor: Preschoolers in Harlem Gems are taught music and movement, French and reading. (Photographs by Jeff Riedel for The New York Times)

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Speeches, Statements and Poems by Geoffrey Canada

This profile is excerpted from the commemorative brochure published for the Heinz Award in the Human Condition, 1995.

Geoffrey Canada receives the Heinz Award in the Human Condition in recognition of his battle against what he calls the "monsters" preying on the children of the depressed inner city. As President and CEO of the New York-based Rheedlen Center of Children and Families, he has not only created model programs, he also sets an example for all adults wanting to protect children from crime, drugs, lawlessness, and despair.

Geoffrey Canada knows life in the inner city first hand. It's where he grew up, and he remembers what it's like to be a child there. "I haven't forgotten about the monsters," he says. "I remember being small, vulnerable, and scared."

Geoffrey Canada was one of those rare and fortunate young men and women who are able to rise above and move beyond the inner city. But, unlike the many who leave and never return, Canada did come back, motivated by a desire to save young people who lives might otherwise be snuffed out by bullets or smothered by hopelessness. He settled in Harlem in order to provide the role model he so wished for his own youth. He is optimistic in seeking practical answers to what others view as intractable problems and, as many have observed, the fact that he has no illusions is the very thing that makes him so effective.

Geoffrey Canada grew up on welfare, in a household headed by a single woman in the blighted tenements of New York's South Bronx. Despite the many things he did not have, he realized what he did have. Canada's childhood was blessed by a hard-working and loving mother who gave him a strong set of values, a deep sense of responsibility, a belief in the importance of education, and an almost ardent commitment to make things better --- not only for himself, but for those around him.

In 1963, having completed his graduate education, he joined the staff of the New York-based Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families and was eventually named its President/CEO in 1990. At Rheedlen, he was instrumental in creating or developing programs such as Rheedlen's Beacon School, Community Pride, the Harlem Freedom Schools, and Peacemakers.

The Beacon School program used public school buildings to provide inner-city families with safe shelters and constructive activities 17 hours a day, 365 days a year. There are now 37 Beacon Schools in New York. The program has been replicated in Connecticut, Chicago, and California.

To combat the culture of violence in the inner city, Canada conceived the Peacemakers program. Concerned by the media's easy promotion of violence as a way of settling disputes, he set out to develop a program to teach children how to use communication to resolve conflicts. His Peacemakers curriculum trains young people in conflict resolution, mediation, and violence prevention and reduction techniques. He is the author of *fist stick knife gun*, a book on conflict resolution.

Geoffrey Canada believes that if today's urban youth are to be convinced that a disadvantaged background does not demand despair or dictate defeat, they must have real role models and real heroes. And they need them on the spot---successful, educated men and woman who continue to live alongside them in their communities, shop at their stores, play in their parks, and ride the buses and subways just as they do. Geoffrey Canada's life teaches by example.

Heinz Award Acceptance Speech by Geoffrey Canada, January 26, 1995

I want to thank the Heinz Family Foundation, and especially Ms. Teresa Heinz for giving me this wonderful honor.

I am so very proud to represent the category of the Human Condition in 1995. I think this will be a pivotal year for humankind as America consolidates its position as the last great super power. We have won a great victory as the Soviet Union has turned toward democracy, and turned its missiles away from our shores. But we have shown little of the grace and compassion at home that this victory should have produced. We have turned from a cold war with the Soviet Union to a cold war with poor Americans, mostly poor women and children.

I have heard much debate about the poor, much of it threatening and angry. There is so much this country needs to know and to understand about poverty. I grew up poor. My mother raised me and my three brothers by herself. When my mother couldn't find work we went on welfare. When she could find work, they paid women, especially black women at that time so little money that we couldn't tell the difference between welfare and work. She used to cut our hair. She used to make toys for us to play with out of cereal boxes.

All her life she sacrificed for us. She put off getting her college degree, and later, her Master's degree, until we were grown and on our own. And you know what? We hated being poor. We loved our mother, but we ruined her Christmases with tears of disappointment at not getting what we wanted. And I couldn't help but be angry when my shoes had holes in them and we didn't have money to buy new ones. And I couldn't help but start angrily when I needed money to go on a school trip and there was not money to be had.

And though there was much love in our family, being poor stained our loving bonds. We had to blame someone for our condition, and our mother was our only target. And here she was giving all she had for us. Going without lunch, walking ten blocks to catch the train because she didn't have an extra token for the bus. She couldn't afford to go out evenings or enjoy a movie. And she would come home to us four boys after working all day and there we would be, angry, with our hands out, angry because we wanted something, we needed something that she could not afford to give us.

There may be some in this country who think being poor is a matter of lack of values and determination. But I know it to be something different. You can work hard all of your life, have impeccable values and still be poor.

My grandfather was the pastor of a church in Harlem. My grandmother was a Christian woman. They were hard working moral people. They were poor. I lived with my grandparents during my high school years. My grandmother worked all of her life minding other people's children, selling baked goods, or Avon, or anything she could get her ands on to make enough money to support the house. She was a beautiful woman; kind and intelligent, and she was determined to save my soul. And I was a wild and reckless adolescent and I must admit, my soul was in some peril. And I fell in love with my grandmother, a deep, personal love that any of us would have if suddenly an angel came into our lives. And the more time I spent with her the more I loved her. She cooled my hot temper and anger over being poor and showed me there was dignity, even in poverty.

And all the years I knew her, she was never able to afford material things that others took for granted. She worked so hard and never could afford anything of luxury. She taught me how one could have a deep, spiritual love of life that was not tied to material things. This is a tough lesson to learn in a country that places so much value on materialism.

Each summer my grandmother and I would indulge in her one vice: Cherries. She loved cherries. Two or three times a week, when my grandfather was at work I would walk the mile to the supermarket and I would buy a half a pound of cherries. And my grandmother and I would secretly eat those cherries. Because they were so extravagantly expensive, they were all that much more delicious. And my grandfather, we knew, would have a fit if he knew that we were spending an extra dollar a week on these cherries. And my summers with my grandmother were measured by how good the cherries were that year. It was our little secret. And I was amazed at how much she loved cherries. And I was amazed at how expensive cherries were.

Later, when I went off to college, I would sit in my room and I would think about how much my mother and my grandmother had sacrificed for me to be there. And I would fantasize about how when I graduated and got a good job, the first thing I would do when I got my first check, in August, I would buy a crate of cherries. And it would have to be August, because our cherry summers taught us that the sweetest cherries were in August. And I would wrap the crate up in gift paper, and put a bow on it and present to my grandma. And many a night I would go to sleep in the cold winters of Brunswick, Maine, warmed by the vision of my grandmother's look of excitement when I brought her this small treasure.

Grandma dies my sophomore year in college. I never got to give her all the cherries she could ever eat. And if you want my opinion, the summer of 1971, the last summer she was alive – well, that was really the last great summer for cherries.

Poverty is tough on families in so many ways. It is not quite as simple to get out of poverty as people make out. We must be careful to make sure we build ladders so children and families can climb out of poverty. It's not an easy climb. You can climb all your life and never make it out.

And so, in thanking you for this honor, I want to dedicate my work to my mother who is here with us today in the audience. And I want to say to her – thank you. I know how hard it was for you. I understand better your sacrifices. And to grandma who sacrificed so much for all of us, I just want to say that I know, in all I've been acknowledged for that I still haven't reached the level of love and compassion that you tried to teach me. I think you accomplished your goal, you saved my soul. And I hope they let us bring gifts to Heaven; you'll know what's in the box.

Thank you very much.

Geoffrey Canada Reflects of Working Toward Peace
The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics
Santa Clara University
Architects of Peace

I stand in front of (my martial arts class), looking unhappy and displeased. Everyone wonders who is out of place and not standing up straight. This is part of my act. Finally I begin class and then I'm lost in the teaching. I'm trying to bring magic into the lives of these kids. To bring a sense or wonder and amazement. I can feel the students losing themselves and focusing on me. They are finally mine. I have them all to myself. I have crowded all the bad things out of their minds. The test they failed, the father who won't come to see them, the dinner that won't be on the stove when they get home. I've pushed it all away by force of will and magic.

This is my time and I know all the tricks. I yell, I scream, I fly through the air with the greatest of ease. I take my black belt student and I slam them on the floor and they pop up like those weighted weeble dolls that can't stay down. I throw them through the air as if they were feathers, and they land and roll and are back up unhurt and unafraid. The new students can't believe their eyes. And they begin to believe in magic again.

And by the time the class is ending their eyes are wide with amazement and respect, and they look at me differently. And I line them up and I talk to them. I talk to them about values, about violence, about hope. I try to build within each one a reservoir of strength that they can draw from as they face the countless tribulations small and large that poor children face every day. And I try to convince each one that I know their true value, their worth as human beings, their special gift that God gave to them. And I hope they will make it to the next class with something left in the reservoir for me to add to week by week. It is from that reservoir that they will draw the strength to resist the drugs, the guns, the violence.

When class ends I dress, and now things are different. I speak to everyone. Students come up to shake hands and we bow in greeting. I am back to being Geoff to them, their friend. As a group of us walk up 108th Street together I scan the street for signs of danger. This, after all, is a neighborhood where more than ten adolescents have been killed by guns this year alone. I call one of the youngest students over to me. He is only five and comes to class with his older brother. I see that this jacket is open and I stoop down to zip it up.

The jacket is old and beat up, probably belonged to his brother last year. The zipper is broken. He believes I can fix it. Why not? After watching me in class he believes that I can do anything. His face is filled with anticipation. It's cold outside and the long blocks he has to walk in the cold will seem shorter if I fix his jacket. I try to fix the zipper. I can't. Instead, I show him how to use one hand to hold his jacket closed close around his neck. I readjust his hand several times so he understands that there is a certain way to do it that meets with my approval. This is also part of the act - all of the attention to detail keeps him from feeling ashamed. I notice his nose is running and take out the package of tissues that I keep in my pocket for just this purpose and wipe his nose. He doesn't object like most five-year-olds. He loves the care and concern.

As I watch him cross the street with his brothers and friends, holding his jacket closed with his hand, the spell is broken for me. No more magic. Just little five-year-olds in raggedy jackets that won't close, trying to stay warm on a cold night. I scribble a note to myself to remember to find a way to get some jackets. Winter is coming.

My two black belts usually walk with me after class and stay with me until I catch a cab. I tell them it's not necessary, but they are there to make sure I get home all right. What a world. So dangerous that children feel that a third-degree black belt needs an escort to get home safely. The sad thing is, with all the guns and drugs in this community, they know I'm no safer than anyone else.

This community, like many across this country, is not safe for children and they usually walk home at night filled with fear and apprehension. But when I walk with them after class they are carefree, like children ought to be. They have no fear. They believe that if anything happens they'll be safe because I'm there. I'll fly through the air and with my magic karate I'll dispatch whatever evil threatens them. When these children see me standing on the corner watching them walk into their buildings they believe what children used to believe, that there are adults who can protect them. And because of that belief they see me as larger than life, like Superman or Batman. And I let them believe this even if my older black belts and I know different. Because in a world that is so cold and so harsh, children need heroes. Heroes give hope, and if these children have no hope they will have no future. And so I play the role of hero for them even if I have to resort to cheap tricks and theatrics.

And if I could get the mayors, and the governors, and the president to look into the eyes of the five-year-olds of this nation, dressed in old raggedy clothes, whose zippers are broken but whose dreams are still alive, they would know what I know – that children need people to fight for them. To stand with them on the most dangerous streets, in the dirtiest hallways, in their darkest hours. We as a country have been too willing to take from our weakest when times get hard. People who allow this to happen must be educated, must be challenged, must be turned around.

If we are to save our children then we must become people they will look up to. Children need heroes now more than ever because the poor children of this nation live with monsters every. Monsters deprive them of heat in the winter, they don't fix their sinks and toilets, they let garbage pile up in their halls, they kick them out of their homes, they beat them, shoot them, stab them – sometimes to death – they rape their bodies and their minds. Sometimes they lurk under the stairs. They scuttle around in the dark; you hear them in the walls gnawing, squeaking, occasionally biting a little finger.

We have failed our children. They live in a world where danger lurks all around them and their playgrounds are filled with broken glass, crack vials, and sudden death. And the stuff of our nightmares when we were children is the common reality for children today. Monsters are out there and claiming children in record numbers. And so we must stand up and be visible heroes, fighting for our children. I want people to understand the crisis that our children face and I want people to act.

A SMALL ARMY OF LOVE

Heard the news yesterday,
And today, mothers cried.
Our children by tens of thousands
Have died.
And for what?

What will stop this madness?
The eternal sadness
Of small little caskets
Filled with dreams never had.
Are we mad?

We need a small army of love.
And no thanks
We don't need any rifles,
No guns, and no tanks.
Just love, and help from above.

Our army will be small,
Diverse, and unique.
Little soldiers in braids,
And some with sneakered feet.
All marching for peace,
And an end to the war,
That has claimed little soldiers
As they open their doors
And romp in playgrounds.
Can we stand anymore?

We need a small army of Love.
Start today.
Sentries on guard,
Keeping danger away.
While our young go to school
And play on our streets,
A small army of us
Standing guard while they sleep.
Can it be done?

And the love of our army
Will always sustain us.
When others disdain us with laughs, ridicule,
Our love keeps us fighting.
Yeah, we're fighting fools.

So I know what's been whispered
And what some said aloud.
Those fools with their pipe dreams,
Their heads in the clouds.

But when you love all the children,
There's nothing to do,
But start a small army of Love,
Me and You.

Geoffrey Canada

TAKE A STAND

Maybe before we didn't know,
That Corey is afraid to go
To school, the store, to roller skate.
He cries a lot for a boy of eight.
But now we know each day it's true
That other girls and boys cry too.
They cry for us to lend a hand.
Time for us to take a stand.

And little Maria's window screens
Keeps out flies and other things.
But she knows to duck her head,
When she prays each night 'fore bed.
Because in the window comes some things
That shatter little children-dreams.
For some, the hourglass is out of sand.
Time for us to take a stand.

And Charlie's deepest, secret wishes,
Is someone to smother him with kisses
And squeeze and hug him tight, so tight,
While he pretends to put up a fight.
Or at least someone to be at home,
Who misses him, he's so alone.
Who allowed this child-forsaken land?
Look in the mirror and take a stand.

And on the Sabbath, when we pray,
To our God we often say,
"Oh Jesus, Mohammed, Abraham,

I come to better understand,
How to learn to love and give,
And live the life you taught to live."
In faith we must join hand in hand.
Suffer the children? Take the stand!

And tonight, some child will go to bed,
No food, no place to lay their head.
No hand to hold, no lap to sit,
To give slobbery kisses, from slobbery lips.
So you and I we must succeed
In this crusade, this holy deed.
To say to the children in this land:
Have hope. We're here. We take a stand!

Geoffrey Canada
February 14, 1996

DON'T BLAME ME

The girl's mother said, "Don't blame me.
Her father left when she was three.
I know she don't know her ABCs, her 1,2,3s,
But I am poor and work hard you see."
You know the story, it's don't blame me.

The teacher shook her head and said,
Don't blame me, I know it's sad.
He's ten, but if the truth be told,
He reads like he was six years old.
And math, don't ask.
It's sad you see.
Wish I could do more, but it's after three.
Blame the mom, blame society, blame the system.
Just don't blame me."

The judge was angry, his expression cold.
He scowled and said, "Son you've been told.
Break the law again and you'll do time.
You've robbed with a gun.
Have you lost your mind?"
The young man opened his mouth to beg.
"Save your breath," he heard instead.
"Your daddy left when you were two.

Your momma didn't take care of you.
Your school prepared you for this fall.
Can't read, can't write, can't spell at all.
But you did the crime for all to see.
You're going to jail, son.
Don't blame me."

If there is a God or a person supreme,
A final reckoning, for the kind and the mean,
And judgment is rendered on who passed the buck,
Who blamed the victim or proudly stood up,
You'll say to the world, "While I couldn't save all,
I did not let these children fall.
By the thousands I helped all I could see.
No excuses, I took full responsibility.
No matter if they were black and white,
Were cursed, ignored, were wrong or right.
Were shunned, pre-judged, were short or tall,
I did my best to save them all."
And I will bear witness for eternity
That you can state proudly,
"Don't blame me."

Geoffrey Canada
February, 2007

Books Authored by Geoffrey Canada

Fist stick knife gun: A Personal History of Violence in America, Beacon Press, 1995

Reaching Up for Manhood: Transforming the Lives of Boys in America, Beacon Press, 1997

Book About Geoffrey Canada

Whatever It Takes: Geoffrey Canada's Quest to Change Harlem and America, by Paul Tough, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, NY, 2008

Selected Awards and Recognition

Awarded Honorary Degrees from Harvard University, Bowdoin College, Williams College, John Jay College, Bank Street College and Meadville Lombard Theological Seminary.

Named Hero of the Year, Robin Hood Foundation, 1992

Received Common Good Award, Bowdoin College, 1993

Received the first Heinz Family Foundation Award for Contributions to the Human Condition, 1994

Received "Children's Champion Award" from *Child* Magazine, November, 2004

Awarded a $25,000 Prize in Education, for "individuals dedicated to improving education in the United States", from the McGraw-Hill Companies, October, 2004

Received Liberty Medal by *The New York Post,* September, 2005

Named one of "America's Best Black Leaders," in the *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, October, 2005

Named one of "America's Best Leaders" in *U.S. News and World Report*, October, 2005

Named by *New York Magazine* as one affecting real change in education, May, 2006

Winner of the John Gardner Leadership Award by the *Independent Sector*, 2009

The work of Geoffrey Canada and The Harlem Children's Zone has become a national model and has been the subject of many profiles in the media including:

The New York Times,
The New York Daily News
USA Today
Newsday
60 Minutes
The Oprah Winfrey Show
The Today Show
Good Morning America
Nightline
CBS This Morning
The Charlie Rose Show
National Public Radio's *On Point*