

Creating the Right System



Many people see wrongs in the world but few of them have the passion, drive, and commitment to right them. David Domenici and James Forman are exceptions. As founders of the See Forever Foundation, Domenici and Forman have built a strong organization that has created alternative educational opportunities for young people who couldn't succeed in traditional school environments, many of whom drop out or end up in the juvenile justice system. Through their work, hundreds of young people have gotten a second chance at a brighter future.



ONE OF THEIR BIGGEST accomplishments has been the turnaround of the education program at the District of Columbia's long-term juvenile detention center, formerly known as Oak Hill Academy. In 2005 and 2006, Oak Hill Academy was plagued with violence, disorder, chronic student absenteeism, and lacked any functional administrative infrastructure. The See Forever Foundation took over in 2007 and completely overhauled the educational program, now called The Maya Angelou Academy at New Beginnings. A

July 2010 story in the *Washington Post* reported that with the See Forever Foundation's Maya Angelou Academy, the District of Columbia had staged a "remarkable turnaround in how it educates juveniles in long-term detention." The article described the assessment of an educational expert who had concluded that the school was "one of the best programs she has ever seen."

See Forever's ability to transform the Oak Hill Academy was possible because See Forever itself had undergone its own organizational transformation that provided the strength and capacity required to realize the vision of the founders to help and support troubled youth. See Forever has been successful because Domenici and Forman made the commitment to build a strong and sustainable organization, and garnered the support of funders like Venture Philanthropy Partners, the Gates Foundation, Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, and others.

The Investment Partner

See Forever Foundation began not as an educational organization but a pizza delivery business. Domenici, a former lawyer, and his co-founder Forman, now a professor at NYU, who spent several years as public defenders, were

frustrated by the number of young people from low-income neighborhoods who ended up in the juvenile justice system with no real options to turn their lives around.

"The system that was supposed to provide hope and help for a certain group of teenagers was broken," Domenici says. "These kids ended up in the wrong system and the city had no impetus to address this issue."

So Domenici and Forman thought that if they could provide an alternative, an opportunity for young people to work, learn skills, and receive encouragement to stay in school, these kids could build themselves a brighter future. They opened a pizza delivery business on the corner of Florida Avenue and North Capitol Street, and in order to open the business, Domenici cashed out his 401(k). Students came to work after school, but before they could start earning they had to do some learning first. School attendance was mandatory as was an hour of after-school tutoring before work began. The program initially had about six students enrolled and was successful up to a point.

"We got a small group of kids to stay off the streets," Domenici says, "but our efforts weren't integrated with academics and we couldn't force the kids to go to



school. Without control over the day before 3 p.m. we couldn't have the impact that was necessary to change lives."

So in 1997, Domenici and Forman opened the first campus of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School (MAPCS) in a townhouse on Sixth Street, later moving to their current building a few blocks away. Students came from all over the District, from some of the city's most impoverished neighborhoods. The school was serving 85 students with a cadre of passionate and committed teachers, tutors, and social workers who were successful in connecting with and engaging these youth as no one had before. But for Domenici and Forman, it wasn't enough. There were far too many youth falling through the cracks. The duo fervently believed that it is never too late to change lives and was determined to give many more youth a second chance at their future.

"You could argue that it makes more sense to invest in younger children where change is easier," says Domenici, "but we shouldn't decide to write off a certain group of kids. Despite the obstacles and risks these kids face, we can't give up on them. They can finish high school and they can go on to college and they can contribute to our social fabric."

The Challenge

At the time of the VPP investment, Domenici and Forman were actively seeking to grow beyond one school in the Shaw neighborhood and knew that they would need to build the leadership team to ensure sustainability. They had bold ambitions to expand and to possibly run other programs. After hearing about See Forever and Domenici and Forman for a while, several VPP partners met with the two leaders to learn more about them, their work, and their aspirations. Both VPP and See Forever were interested in each other and, after a lengthy courtship, entered into a five-year investment partnership in 2002 totaling \$2.43 million to help See Forever achieve its long-term goals.

The investment began with a planning process to develop a five-year plan for growth. Facilitated by an outside consultant, the planning process provided data both on their internal strengths and weaknesses and on the external environment in which they operate. Planning also catalyzed the process of thinking and operating more rigorously, matching frameworks and processes with the passion and commitment of the leaders.

"The thought process [of planning] forced us to be disciplined, forced us to

be strategic, and it forced us to plan in a way that we hadn't done before. We were very opportunistic and we still are opportunistic. But in the beginning we weren't really very strategic because we just didn't have the time, so it was all about the next opportunity. Going through a process of planning with VPP really helped us be strategic which then provided the foundation to be opportunistic in intelligent ways," Forman said.

Former VPP Partner and See Forever board member Fred Bollerer agrees. "David and James had been charging down a road to action. The planning process allowed them to stop and step back to think about where they wanted to go and to fully understand the complexity of what it would take in getting there: did they have the right people on staff? What kind of board would they need? How expensive will this be and how will we raise the money?" he recalls.

VPP investor and board member Jack Davies, who later became a board member and avid supporter of See Forever, remembers the planning process as "necessarily contentious." "You had lots of strong-minded, passionate individuals at the table," Davies recalls. "Planning is often the crucible from which the relationship between

high-engagement funder and nonprofit partner is formed. If it isn't emotional and a little stressful, it's not working."

From the business planning process, See Forever had clear goals to move quickly toward realizing Domenici and Forman's visions.

These included:

- Expanding from one school serving 85 students to three to four schools serving 500-600;
- Improving graduation rates and student outcomes;
- Becoming a national model for the creation of learning environments where teens who have not succeeded in traditional schools can achieve their potential; and
- Creating a distinctive, codified curriculum and program.

Specifically the VPP investment would support See Forever in meeting these goals by providing funding and strategic assistance so that See Forever could:

- Strengthen its management team and operations;
- Institute compelling outcome measures, backed by effective information systems;
- Achieve strong staff performance, satisfaction, and retention;
- Demonstrate a sustainable economic model including the creation of a highly effective funds development capacity; and

- Create a larger, highly engaged and effective board with extensive fund-raising capacity.

"We saw an opportunity to demonstrate a potential national model on how to work with children where a more classic education had failed them for a variety of reasons," said Bollerer.

Action Strengthening the Management Team and Operations

At the start of the VPP investment, Domenici was serving as the principal of the school's one campus and the organization's executive director. Through the planning process, it became clear that to achieve the bigger goals, his role would have to change. In addition, Domenici and Forman realized that they would need to build a team that could support the kind of growth they sought to achieve. The VPP investment supported them in hiring a Managing Director to focus on the administrative aspects of running the organization as well as a Director of Development to focus on funds development. In addition to these positions, See Forever has been successful in hiring and retaining an experienced group of educators and administrators who ensure the academics are of the highest quality.

Hiring a Managing Director allowed Domenici to get out of the details of day-to-day management and focus on other aspects of the program. Toward

the end of the investment, Domenici stepped down as Executive Director to focus on new directions for See Forever. When the opportunity to oversee the creation and opening of the Maya Angelou Academy at the New Beginnings Detention Center emerged, he was able to pursue it knowing that See Forever had a strong manager in place to take the reigns.

Board Development

At the beginning of the investment, See Forever had a small board which served in an advisory capacity and rarely met. However, as the organization grew in sophistication and size, so did the need to grow the board to support it in fundraising, policy development and other governance issues. VPP helped source board members and worked with See Forever leadership to recruit a diverse group from a variety of disciplines. A major action was to require that board members contribute to fundraising in addition to lending expertise. Former VPP Partner Fred Bollerer joined the board and remains on the board several years after the investment ended.

Jack Davies remembers, "When I first heard of the intellectual horsepower of the founders and board of See Forever and the mission and results they were achieving, I got goose bumps. It was just the ultimate testimony to the power of having faith in kids' capacity to be able to help students achieve the levels of success-

ful they were reaching despite how far behind the curve they found themselves. It's what drove my involvement and sustains me to this day.

"It was very helpful to me as a VPP board member and investor because it gave me a chance to see VPP from both sides," Davies continued. "What I saw from the board level at See Forever early on was tentativeness about the partnership and natural skepticism on the part of the management of See Forever, but after two planning meetings, VPP began demonstrating its value. The conversation changed from mistrust to asking 'We wonder what VPP would say?' I saw how rapidly any skepticism dissolved to be a fully open and trusted partnership where See Forever heavily relied on VPP's judgment."

Expansion

One of See Forever's goals at the outset of the investment was to open additional campuses, especially east of the Anacostia River, to reach more young people. To achieve this goal, Domenici and Forman realized they needed a strategy to help them with facilities costs as well as a plan to achieve the deep systems change they wanted to see around educational opportunities for all youth in the nation's capital. See Forever was able to benefit from the expertise and guidance of another VPP partner who had many years of experi-



ence in both the DC public schools and a suburban district in the region.

After 15 months of negotiation, See Forever forged a partnership with the DC Public Schools (DCPS) to open a high school in the former Evans Middle School. The partnership combined space and support from DCPS with See Forever's successfully tested model of reaching students who may not be attending or succeeding in large public high schools. The opening of the Evans campus in 2004 brought See Forever's program east of the Anacostia River, a part of the city that does not have enough resources available to the young people who need them.

The Evans campus opening represented the first partnership in the District of Columbia between the public

school system and a public charter school. This agreement has served as a model for creative alliances to benefit students. The process of working together to create this partnership deepened the experiences of both VPP and See Forever in crafting and negotiating complex public/private partnerships. Ultimately, the relationship with DCPS has saved See Forever nearly \$10M in facilities costs.

Curriculum, Program Development, and Outcomes Management

At the same time that it was growing in numbers, See Forever also worked to grow the quality of its programming. With VPP support, See Forever was able to bring in the talent both in the form of new staff and consultants



to help them rethink their curriculum design and establish a methodology to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs. See Forever hired a Director of Academics, Principal Support, and Accountability and created a program for professional development of teachers. Capital and expertise from VPP co-investor the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation helped See Forever clarify its theory of change and develop an outcomes measurement system. See Forever then created a preliminary system for tracking and measuring student performance that allowed them to continually improve the quality of its instruction and raise the bar of its educational offerings.

In May 2006, the high school programs of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School were accredited by the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Secondary Schools. The MAPCS-Middle School Campus was accredited by the Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools in May 2008.

Economic Sustainability

To achieve its goal of economic sustainability, See Forever created a development function and has been highly successful in securing funding for its growth and expansion. VPP, along with the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, provided the support that allowed See

Forever to invest in both the people and the structure it needed to be sustainable. That involved hiring the Development Director and bringing people to the board who could assist in fundraising. In addition, See Forever's ability to forge a partnership with the DC Public Schools allowed them to save money on the acquisition of facilities.

The Results

See Forever has achieved the majority of goals set out at the beginning of the investment period and is on strong footing for the future. VPP's investment provided the funding to support the growth of the organization. It also provided advice and counsel to help two talented leaders become stronger. In 2004, See Forever opened a second campus of the Maya Angelou Public Charter School on the site of the former Evans Middle School which brought the program east of the Anacostia River, a low-income area. Three years later, See Forever, recognizing that better outcomes can be achieved if they can reach young people earlier, opened the Evans Middle School to provide alternative education to middle schoolers. In 2007 See Forever, after an extremely competitive bid process, won the RFP and assumed operation of the Maya Angelou Academy at the New

Beginnings Detention Center after Oak Hill was closed. See Forever also operates The Transition Center to help young people make the transition from a juvenile detention facility back into society.

The positive impact of the See Forever charter schools, the Maya Angelou Academy, and the Transition Center represents the fulfillment of Domenici's and Forman's vision.

Specific achievements during the VPP investment period include:

- Opening additional schools, which more than doubled the number to students it served—and led to the development of a small network of schools serving 600+ students by 2010;
- Improved outcomes for students;
 - 78 percent of graduates from Maya Angelou Public Charter School go on to two- and four-year colleges, and
 - Twice as many remain in college than during the school's start-up years
- Reshaping the board from a founder-centric advisory board to an active, engaged group of diverse leaders who contribute to fundraising;
- Strengthening and building a management team for the future so that

when Domenici decided to step down to become principal of the Maya Angelou Academy the transition was smooth;

- More than doubling See Forever's operating budget to nearly \$8 million;
- Securing new sources of funding totaling \$5 million from the Gates Foundation, Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, Charity Works, and Walton Foundation, as well as government funding; and
- Successfully negotiating the contract with the Department of Youth Rehabilitation to run the Maya Angelou Academy to provide education for youth in long-term detention, as well as to run the Transition Center to assist with their transition after completing their juvenile detention.

"The success of See Forever is attributable to the tremendous talent of David and James and their ability to bring other talent to the table and to reach out and ask for advice. What VPP was able to do was to provide them the opportunity to stop and to understand the complexity of what they had undertaken. We were able to develop a relation

KEY INFORMATION

> Investment duration:
2002 to 2007

> **\$2,443,000**

> **155** more children served (182% increase)

> Revenue increased from
\$3.0 to \$7.9 million
during investment period

> **\$15,056,000** leveraged funding

> **2** new schools

ship of respect and trust and helped them look to the outside world for help. They executed and built this organization," said former VPP Partner Fred Bollerer.

"VPP started by telling us that we are investing in your organization because we believe in you as leaders," said Forman. "They encouraged us to really examine our own practices as leaders: 'Does what we are doing make sense, or are we doing it because it was what we knew how to do?' Sometimes you don't want to be told, 'Well maybe the way you've been doing it isn't the best way—or at least you should think about it.' They forced us to do that constantly. In the long term it has been rewarding."



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