

PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS

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NEWSMAKERS

'Community Hero' challenges urban kids to succeed

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Dan Corley co-founded Community Preparatory School to give children in South Providence a chance for a better education. The school has selective admissions – all students must read at or above grade level – and 92 percent of its graduates have been accepted into college-prep high school programs; 82 percent have gone on to college. And although next year's tuition will be \$11,100, 90 percent of the students, who come from across the state, receive "substantial" financial aid.

For his work with the school, Corley was recently recognized by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island and the American Red Cross Rhode Island Chapter as a "Community Hero."



PBN PHOTO/FRANK MULLIN

DAN CORLEY started Community Prep in 1984 to offer better educational opportunities for children in his neighborhood – including his own.

PBN: What led you to start this school?

CORLEY: When I got out of Brown, I thought of the idea of renting a couple of classrooms and starting a school, but I felt I needed much more teaching experience before I did that. The last two years at Brown, I lived in the West End, on Puritan Street. ... [I] was interested in teaching in the neighborhood where I lived, but there were no public school jobs available. That's why I taught in a Catholic school for a year. Then ... I worked in a VISTA job in the Providence Public Schools; then I went to work at Ocean Tides. ... But all the while I'm still living on Puritan Street, and the neighbors and I would be talking about the educational options for our children. And the birth of my children [his daughter in 1980 and son in 1983] became a very strong motivator to start the school.

PBN: Why did you feel a school like this was needed?

CORLEY: At the time, the middle school for my neighborhood was

the lowest-performing middle school in the state, and when students got to a certain age, they started hanging out with the wrong crowd and getting in trouble. So I basically wanted to have a school that would challenge students successfully and would turn things around in terms of being bright and trying hard in school seen as a good thing. And the neighbors wanted that, too.

PBN: After 23 years, what has Community Prep accomplished?

CORLEY: In terms of our success rate [of those entering college preparatory high schools, entering and graduating from college] ... we are probably double the average. And I'm very pleased with the quality of faculty members that we have working with students and the educational leadership.

This is more than I envisioned way back when.

PBN: What makes the school so successful?

CORLEY: There is a kind of contract that happens between the parents, the teacher and the student where the child really learns how to set goals and accomplish those goals. That, I think, accounts for their later success in high school and college and, hopefully, in the work force. And [because of the selective admissions] we're working with students with very good potential and helping them really kind of set their sights high and work towards accomplishing the goals they are setting for themselves.

PBN: How can you provide so much financial aid?

CORLEY: Because many of your readers have given very important donations. The business community and the philanthropic community really want an educated population, and they come by, they visit, and they see how motivated and self-starting our students are, and they want to back that. Eighty percent of the budget is provided by sources outside of the school.

PBN: What do you see for the future of the school?

CORLEY: We're in the middle of a campus improvement plan. The board decided first that we want to deepen the education of the students who are currently here. We want to add a science lab, more arts classrooms, some after-school rooms, and we'd love to add a field and a gymnasium. Once that is done, we would also explore the number of students we serve. We're only able to accept one out of every three students who applies. Part of that is due to our admission standards, but part of it is the need for more space. The goal is for either people who are paying the \$11,100 or getting scholarships to look at us and look at any of the elite private schools in the country and say Community Prep is as good as, if not a better, education than any of those schools.

PBN: How does your school fit within the Providence educational community?

CORLEY: We're very active with the small-schools network, trying to bring educational leaders from small schools together on a regular basis to talk about the issues that we all face – and that's a mix of public and private schools. My very firm belief is that the more school choice parents have, the better off their children will be in the long run. ■

INTERVIEW

Dan Corley

POSITION: Co-founder and head of school, Community Preparatory School

BACKGROUND: Dan Corley founded Community Preparatory School in 1984 when he was 29 with his former college roommate Bob Hahn, starting with three teachers, 25 students and three rented classrooms in the John Hope Settlement House in South Providence. Today, the school, which serves grades 3 through 8, has 150 students and its own campus on Somerset Street. Corley also had taught for six years at Ocean Tides' Narragansett School, a residential program for troubled boys, and he worked for a year each at St. Thomas Regional School and Gilbert Stuart Middle School in Providence. He and his wife were also the first house managers for the Providence homeless shelter Advent House.

EDUCATION: B.A. in independent studies, 1976, Brown University, plus course work toward a teaching certificate, Rhode Island College, Providence College and Dartmouth College

RESIDENCE: Providence

AGE: 53