

Millionaire turns mentor for kids;EUGENE LANG;`You must have a dream'

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Abstract

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Lang's children have made it into such prestigious colleges as Barnard, Swarthmore and Bard.

Though Lang is white and the students are Hispanic and black, there is common ground: The son of a machinist and a schoolteacher in East Harlem, Lang grew up poor in a tough neighborhood. When he was 8, he got his first switchblade; his best friend from childhood - a convicted murderer in later life - died in the electric chair.

Lang got his own lucky break at 14. While washing dishes at a Manhattan restaurant, he met a patron who happened to be a trustee of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Impressed with Lang's drive, the man urged him to apply. Lang got a scholarship, and went on to make his fortune.

Full Text

USA TODAY'S Most Valuable Person

Eugene Lang got a desperate phone call one day from a ``dreamer." Things were just ``too rotten, too terrible," the teen-ager told him. She was ready to end it all.

``I'm really not experienced in talking to young ladies who are about to jump out the window," recalls Lang, the multimillionaire businessman who, in 1981, promised 59 sixth-graders in New York's Harlem that he'd help pay their way through college. ``But I tried to reassure her that she did mean a lot to me, that I'd be devastated if she weren't around to talk to and write me letters."

Three years later, the girl's dream has been restored: now 19 years old, she's still in high school, about to get her diploma. And Lang's ``I Have a Dream" Foundation - born one summer day six years ago when he stood before a group of youngsters graduating from his

alma mater, P.S. 121 - has blossomed into a national movement helping 4,000 underprivileged students in 14 cities stay in school. By next year, Lang expects sponsors like himself to reach 8,000 children in 25 cities across the USA - from Los Angeles to Cleveland, Dallas to Atlanta.

"This is what a little bit of caring can do," says Lang, 68, who calls his adopted class "my dreamers" and "my kids." "I made a single step unwittingly in 1981 - and look at how that step has been extended. It's gotta be a snowball."

Some would call it a miracle.

The dropout rate for students in East Harlem, where Lang grew up, tops 60 percent, according to the New York State Education Department.

But out of 51 students in Lang's original class who still live in New York, 48 either have or will receive their high school diplomas by the end of January. Twenty-four of the 51 are in college now, with up to 16 more expected to enroll by next September.

Of those who have moved away, two are in college and six have lost touch with the program. Of the three who dropped out, two have jobs - and Lang says he won't give up on any of them.

It started as a simple carrot-and-stick approach: If the students stayed in school, Lang would give each \$2,000 over four years toward their college tuition.

But some students faced serious roadblocks - devastating family problems, the temptations of drugs and gangs - and the program evolved into something more intangible. Lang became father, friend, mentor and guardian angel.

"You must have a dream," he told them, "of what you want to be, the kind of life you want to build."

Counted among Lang's dreamers have been seven pregnancies and one incarceration for armed robbery. Many have dropped out, only to be coaxed back by Lang and a program coordinator recruited from the neighborhood, Johnny Rivera, 25.

Rafael Rodriguez, 18, a dreamer at Hudson Valley Community College in Albany, N.Y., says of Lang: "We understand each other. Sometimes I get discouraged. He told me just think about my mother. That's all I have to live for - how proud my mother would be when I make it to the top." Rodriguez is an aspiring architect whose father committed suicide in 1975.

Lang fills the void: "He calls me Son. I call him Pa."

The walls of the foundation's tiny East Harlem office are painted sky blue and covered with photos of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. - whose 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech inspired Lang's original promise. Here, Rivera helps students fill out application forms and find jobs. When he hears they're not attending class, he visits them at home and hounds them until they do.

Dreamers have an open invitation to visit Lang in his 10th-floor Manhattan office at Refac Technology Development Corp., a company he founded to license patents overseas.

He spends 70 percent of his time now on the program, and before he dies he intends to donate most of his fortune to charitable causes - he has parted with more than \$20 million of his \$50 million so far. "I make money to give it away," says Lang.

Program sponsors pledge at least \$280,000 to adopt a class for six years, and also agree to give their time. A project coordinator maintains close contact with each child, talking to parents and organizing tutoring and outside activities.

Local sponsors and the board of the national "I Have a Dream" Foundation - launched with an \$80,000 Department of Education grant disbursed by Secretary William Bennett - choose schools in the poorest neighborhoods. And Lang insists there be no handouts.

The key to "I Have a Dream's" success, he says, is "the fact that someone genuinely cares. We're not a millionaire's club. It isn't just a few rich people writing out checks."

When George Kettle of Falls Church, Va., first heard of Lang's idea on CBS's 60 Minutes, "the lightbulbs went on, the bells rang. I said, 'My gosh, there's the answer. There's a way to get them out.'"

A millionaire who started the first Century 21 real estate franchise in the Washington area, Kettle had been donating funds to a boxer, Calvin Woodland, who worked with inner-city kids.

Here, he saw, was a chance to lift those kids out of poverty, to push the boundaries of their dreams. He adopted a class of 60 at the Winston Educational Center in Southeast Washington.

"After you've been a success according to the world's standards, you find out people like yourself are empty - living lives of quiet desperation," says Kettle. "How long does the thrill of a new car last? Or a second home, or a trip?" Real satisfaction, he says, comes from "having one of these kids walk up and say, 'Hey, Mr. K, I'm gonna be a doctor.'"

Other sponsors - in such cities as Cleveland, Dallas, Chicago and Atlanta - have taken over where the system left off.

Dallas insurance executive William Farrell started the first "I Have a Dream" chapter outside New York, and is now one of 55 sponsors helping 1,000 kids in that city. By next May, the number of children will double.

"I'd like to just take the people of Dallas, grab them by the lapels and shake the living daylights out of them," he says. "I don't think people realize the problems we've got. This is the only program I know of that's keeping kids in school."

Not all of those following in Lang's footsteps are millionaires.

In Atlanta, Llewellyn Haden, director of strategic planning for First Wachovia Bank holding company, and Dr. Robert Hatcher, director of a family planning clinic, together adopted 47 children at the Fred A. Toomer Elementary School last June. They're still trying to raise the necessary funds.

"Hands down, it's one of the scariest things I've ever done," says Haden. "If we can't raise (the money), we're on the line." In just a few months he has been dazzled by his students' potential - and touched by their dreams.

One girl wrote that she wanted to be a cartoon artist, and to marry "somebody who's smart, not slouchy, likes to take baths, uses deodorant, is nice and intelligent."

Another had it all mapped out: "I'm going to be a doctor and get married and have one child. I hope it will be a girl. ... We are going to stay in a big house. She is going to have a room

upstairs."

"All these kids have ability," says Haden. "They surprise the dickens out of you."

Lang's children have made it into such prestigious colleges as Barnard, Swarthmore and Bard. Though Lang is white and the students are Hispanic and black, there is common ground: The son of a machinist and a schoolteacher in East Harlem, Lang grew up poor in a tough neighborhood. When he was 8, he got his first switchblade; his best friend from childhood - a convicted murderer in later life - died in the electric chair.

Evelyn Campbell, 18, calls Lang her "second father." When she became pregnant last year and dropped out, he helped her return to a school for pregnant teens. Now she'll go to college at night and care for her son, Rae, during the day.

Windskey Santiago, 18, credits Lang for bringing her out of her shell: "I was an extremely shy person," she says. After getting involved in the program, she opened up. "It changed my life."

Lang got his own lucky break at 14. While washing dishes at a Manhattan restaurant, he met a patron who happened to be a trustee of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Impressed with Lang's drive, the man urged him to apply. Lang got a scholarship, and went on to make his fortune.

But the flashy life was never for him. He and wife Theresa have been married 41 years, and they have three children. He still flies coach class, still rides the Third Avenue bus up to East Harlem, the birthplace of his dream. "I don't want to lose my edge," he says.

And if he can help it, he'll never lose a dreamer.

TEXT OF GRAPHIC: MVP USA TODAY'S MOST VALUABLE PERSON EUGENE LANG

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