

30 30 Years Leaders

Breakthrough Collaborative has a great deal to celebrate. Chief among our achievements and milestones is our 30th anniversary, which we have been celebrating this past year.

Since our founding at University High School in San Francisco in 1978, we have enjoyed dramatic growth as well as significant success. Through our summer, weekend and afterschool programs, we have excelled, over the past 30 years, in preparing tens of thousands of high-potential, underserved middle school students for the rigors of college-preparatory high schools and of higher education.

Likewise, we have inspired thousands of bright and committed high school and college students across the country to embark on rewarding careers in the field of education. So profoundly transformed have they been as Breakthrough teachers, role models and mentors to our middle school students that many have embraced the opportunity to make a positive difference as educational leaders and agents of change.

Today, alumni of our program—teachers and students alike—are in the forefront of educational reform in this nation. Classroom teachers, administrators, academics, research and policy analysts, founders of innovative public schools and not-for-profits, they carry with them their Breakthrough experiences, which continue to inform the meaningful and groundbreaking work in which they are engaged.

As we acknowledge our three decades of positive impact on the community, we salute the educational leaders whom we have touched. We are proud to highlight in this issue 30 of these individuals, who recount how Breakthrough has shaped their lives and their careers.



Veronica Alvarez

Director of Operations at High Tech High Schools, a consortium of charter schools in San Diego County. Formerly with KIPP in San Francisco and New Visions for Public Schools in New York.

Hometown: Washington, D.C.

Education: B.A., Barnard; MPA, Columbia

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in San Francisco in 1998 and program coordinator in San Francisco from 2001 to 2003

“I have chosen to work in places with objectives similar to Breakthrough’s. My own aspirations were shaped by my experiences at Breakthrough, where students’ talents, equality and commitment are truly valued. I attribute my first summer at Breakthrough to my going into urban education. The kids were smart and funny, and their parents were amazing.

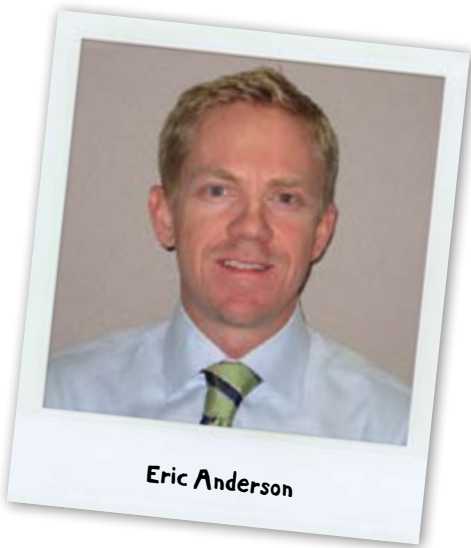
“High Tech High is project-based learning. It’s very interactive, a carryover from my Breakthrough years. Just like Breakthrough, it is a total team effort, and everyone is committed to the same end.”

Eric Anderson

Educational research analyst for the Long Beach (Calif.) Unified School District. Formerly a research and evaluation consultant with the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Hometown: San Francisco

Education: B.A., University of California, Davis; Ph.D., Stanford



Eric Anderson

Breakthrough experience: Student in San Francisco in 1978 and 1979 and teacher in San Francisco from 1980 to 1983

“Breakthrough convinced me that we need to get kids exposed to really smart teachers. For this nation to compete, we need to build from the bottom up and develop systems where mediocrity is not the default system. I would not have ended up where I am without the experience of Breakthrough. It’s a template by which great work can get done: a think-out-of-the-box program, followed up with commitment and leadership.”



Christopher Balme

Christopher Balme

Co-founder and executive director of Spark, a San Francisco-based not-for-profit that inspires middle school students to pursue their education and career interests through hands-on apprenticeships in local workplaces.

Hometown: Boston
Education: B.A., Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania

Breakthrough experience: Teacher at San Francisco in 2002

“Without a doubt, the program was my first taste for teaching—and I was hooked. I taught American government and history. My students formed cities in each of my classes, and they elected public officials. I was blown away by the ideas the students came up with, how bright and capable they were.

“Breakthrough got me into contact with urban education, and it demonstrated how much you can accomplish with a well-supported staff. Breakthrough draws to teaching people who might otherwise not go down that road. It definitely drew me.

“Like Breakthrough, Spark is geared toward middle-school students. Breakthrough Collaborative continues to be supportive of my efforts to reach my students and to provide expertise to me as we help Spark’s kids develop their own learning skills.”

Komal Bhasin

Principal of Excel Academy, a “no excuses” public charter school in Boston that prepares middle school students for college preparatory high schools. Former teacher at a KIPP school in New Orleans, former assistant principal at KIPP schools in New Orleans and Houston, and a corps member of Teach for America in New Orleans. Helped found a public school in Houston for kids displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Hometown: Palos Verdes, Calif., a suburb of Los Angeles
Education: B.A., Harvard

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in Manchester in 2000 and 2001 and member of the Cambridge leadership in 2002 and 2003

“Breakthrough was a very important first step in my decision to enter teaching. I had been on the pre-med track at Harvard as a neurobiology major.

“I saw right away that being a teacher at Breakthrough wasn’t about showmanship. Neither was it about being a camp counselor. You had to connect with the students, and they had to connect to you. It felt like we were getting our hands dirty and delivering material in a real way.

“Breakthrough got me thinking about inequality and civil rights and made me believe that success is very possible. I don’t think I’d be in education if I hadn’t had that experience.”

Rhonda Broussard

Executive Director of St. Louis Language Immersion Schools, Inc., a network of language immersion elementary charter schools in St. Louis. Formerly a public school teacher in Queens and Brooklyn, N.Y.; West Hartford, Conn.; Long Beach, Calif; and St. Louis, Mo.

Hometown: Lafayette, La.
Education: B.A., Washington University; M.A., NYU

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in New Orleans in 1992 and 1993 and in Kansas City in 1994 and 1995

“More than any of the academic work I did in college, Breakthrough prepared me for the classroom. I saw myself as a change agent. I was 17; my mentors were 19. I was so inspired by the energy and talents of the students, as well as my peers, that I knew that I wanted to be an educator after Breakthrough.



Rhonda Broussard

“There is a sense of creating new opportunities for students and a context for connecting with people. I saw first-hand the gains that all students make when they’re engaged and the importance of building celebratory cultures of learning. Breakthrough puts complete trust and faith in young people, the teachers as well as students. It says, ‘Everyone can!’”

Cynthia Brown

Nurse practitioner, Odessa Brown Children’s Clinic, Seattle.

Hometown: San Francisco
Education: B.A., Wesleyan; M.A., Yale

Breakthrough experience: Student in San Francisco in 1986 and 1987, teacher in San Francisco in 1988, 1989 and 1992, and teacher in New Haven in 1995

“Breakthrough made me love San Francisco—I was a shy little kid from North Carolina—and it made me excited about school. More than that, it created pathways and opened doors, making it okay to pursue education. The academics were tough, but they were absolutely fantastic, and I met a lot of people who became role models. I was the first in my family to graduate from college...In my practice, I get to watch a lot of kids grow up. I try to be a role model to them, encouraging them to pursue an education.”

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Aimée Eubanks Davis

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Chief People Officer at Teach for America, where formerly she served as Vice President of New Site Development and Managing Director of Regional Operations.

Hometown: Chicago
Education: B.A., Mount Holyoke

Breakthrough experience: Mentor teacher in New Orleans in 1996. Director in New Orleans from 1997 through 2000. Program officer for the national office from 2000 to 2002

“It was because of the success I had in New Orleans that I had the leadership and credibility to enter a senior-level role at Teach For America. With Breakthrough, I had an opportunity to put a program on a different trajectory. I saw that if you have a vision for your team, set ambitious yet realistic goals and relentlessly pursue these goals, you can absolutely change the lives of many children. Without a doubt, you can put kids on the path to college and inspire high school and college-aged students to consider becoming teachers.”

Angela Duckworth

Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Formerly a teacher at the Learning Project, a small charter school in New York, as well as a math teacher at Lowell High School in San Francisco. Also worked for McKinsey & Company and as Chief Operating Officer at Greatschools.net.

Hometown: Cherry Hill, N.J., a Philadelphia suburb
Education: A.B., Harvard; M.S.c., Oxford; Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in New Orleans in 1990 and co-founder and director of Cambridge program from 1990 to 1992

“It was my first real experience in the classroom as a teacher, and it was a very sustaining one. Had it not been for Breakthrough, I would not be doing what I do today. My main research interests—in young people and in the non-intellectual capacities

that determine how they achieve—began at the program. Of all the public service programs with which I’m familiar, it has been one of the few that actually works. We were successful in demonstrating that younger kids could learn from older kids. It was an unbelievable experience that brings out the best in people.”



Sarah Feldman

Sarah Feldman

Senior Research Associate at WestEd, a national not-for-profit organization promoting educational excellence. The author of six Department of Education books that focus on best practices for charter schools and effective ways to close achievement gaps. A former leadership coach and deputy director of curriculum and instruction with News Leaders for New Schools. A former assistant principal and teacher at several Bay Area public schools.

Hometown: Newton, Mass.
Education: B.A., Brown; M.A., San Francisco State; Ed.M., Harvard; Ed.D., Mills

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in San Francisco in 1988 and director in Cambridge from 1993 to 1996

“It changed the trajectory of my life. The experience was pretty amazing and somewhat magical: The program turned over a lot of autonomy and responsibility to young people. It made me realize that I wanted to have an impact on students and to become a teacher. It also helped me make the transition from teacher to principal.”

Jason Freeman

Assistant Professor of Music, Georgia Institute of Technology.

Hometown: Miami
Education: B.A., Yale; M.A., D.M.A., Columbia

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in Miami in 1993 and in Pittsburgh in 1994

“I discovered very quickly through the program that I really enjoyed teaching. I found out that I could be useful and productive. I had been quiet and studious, but I learned in the classroom setting that I could

also be dynamic and assume leadership...I still love teaching. A lot of the energy and style I bring to teaching were shaped by my experiences at Breakthrough.”

Natalie Gray

Managing Director of Learning and Development, Teach for America.

Hometown: Van Horn, Texas
Education: B.A., University of Texas, Austin; M.Ed., Harvard

Breakthrough experience: Laid the groundwork for Fort Worth site in 1992, master teacher in Cincinnati in 1993, co-director of Manchester from 1994 to 2000, program officer in national office from 2000 to 2002, program director in Austin from 2002 to 2004, strategy and development associate from 2004 to 2008

“I was a first-year teacher at Fort Worth Country Day School when my principal approached me and said, ‘I have a summer job for you that will change your life.’ That was my introduction to Breakthrough. I immediately fell in love with the program and the way it challenged and empowered young people to do what they wanted to do. It was clear to me that there was a power to the Breakthrough model. It’s about people taking the time to care about other people’s lives and to mentor them. And it’s about grooming young teachers to reach their potential. It definitely set me on a course.”

Ben Jackson

Teacher at Denver’s Bruce Randolph School, which in four years has gone from one of the lowest performing statewide to one outpacing the Denver school district’s overall gains.

Hometown: Colorado Springs, Colo.
Education: B.A., University of Colorado at Boulder

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in Denver in 2004 through 2006

“Breakthrough changed my life. I fell in love with urban education, not only from a teaching standpoint, but also from a public policy perspective. Having grown up in a low-income, single-parent home—we lived off of food stamps and in public housing—I knew that education could be a great equalizer. I saw how much I could do in six weeks with passion and high expectations. After my first Breakthrough summer, I went back to Boulder and changed my focus from business to education...I learned more about teaching through my experience at Breakthrough than I ever could have in a classroom.”

Dana Lehman

Co-Director of Roxbury Preparatory Charter School (Boston), the highest-performing urban middle school in Massachusetts that was founded by Breakthrough alumnus Evan Rudall.

Hometown: Philadelphia
Education: B.A., Swarthmore; M.Ed, Tufts

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in Fort Worth in 1996 and 1997 and director of that program from 1998 to 2001

“I fell in love with the program immediately. The level of responsibility that Breakthrough gives to high school and college students is unparalleled. Breakthrough made me really passionate about urban education, about the need to do something to equalize the opportunities for students from some of the poorest schools. Roxbury Prep’s mission parallels Breakthrough’s. Our curriculum is quite rigorous, and our students, all of whom are students of color and two-thirds of whom qualify for free lunch, do exceedingly well and are on their way to college graduation.”

Edward Liu

Assistant Professor, Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

Hometown: Seattle

Education: B.A., Yale; A.M., MBA, Stanford; Ed.D., Harvard

Breakthrough experience: Teacher and administrator in San Francisco from 1990 to 1992 and co-founder and co-director in Portland (Ore.) from 1992 to 1995

“I was a pre-med at Yale. It’s easy to get swept up with what your peers are doing and seduced by certain careers. This program showed me that education could be a challenging and rewarding experience. It was quite amazing: It drew me out of myself—I was a pretty shy kid—and showed me that learning should involve high expectations for everyone.”

Lois Loofbourrow

Middle School Academics Specialist at Breakthrough Collaborative.

Hometown: Healdsburg, Calif.

Education: B.A., University of the Pacific

Breakthrough experience: Founder and founding director of Summerbridge, now known as Breakthrough Collaborative

“My move into San Francisco so that my kids could take part in busing was the dawning of my understanding of inequality. I saw that while the freshman classes at the best high schools were diverse, there was a lot of attrition after the first year. I wanted to address that problem. My belief was—and

still is—that if you have high standards and you don’t back down from them, you can do anything. I also honestly believe that our kids can do whatever they want to do. You have to believe in the kids wholeheartedly and in a passionate way. If you don’t, they won’t achieve. During the early years of the program, we followed our kids tenaciously. If we saw a weakness in our program, we isolated and addressed it. I have the most amazing kids. I got so much from them. I absolutely believe every kid in Breakthrough is precious. I am as cranky today about mediocrity as I was 30 years ago, and I am as passionate today as I was 30 years ago. The kids say to me, ‘It’s all because of you, Lois.’ I say, ‘No, it’s all because of you.’”



Edward Liu



Lois Loofbourrow

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A Focus on Research

A recent study, *High Achieving Students in the Era of No Child Left Behind* (Tom Loveless, The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, June 2008), makes a strong case for the need for programs like Breakthrough Collaborative, which increase the numbers of high-achieving, college-bound low-income and minority students.

The Fordham study analyzed the demographic makeup of high-achieving students and found that students in the top 90th percentile on the National Assessment of Educational Progress are overwhelmingly white (82 percent) and non-poor (90 percent) and that African-American and Hispanic eighth grad-

ers make up only “one-fifth to one-fourth of the expected proportion of high achievers.” By providing rigorous academics and comprehensive support to high-potential low-income and minority students during middle school (65 percent of Breakthrough students qualify for free or reduced lunch; 92 percent are students of color; and 58 percent are the first in their family to attend college) and ensuring these students go on to college preparatory high school programs and four-year colleges, Breakthrough Collaborative remedies the huge disparities highlighted in the Fordham study.

The study also found that high-potential, low-income and minority students—Breakthrough’s target population—are the students whom teachers are most concerned about “falling through the cracks.” Sixty

percent of teachers said that “academically talented youngsters from low socioeconomic backgrounds are often overlooked—they fall through the cracks because no one advocates for them.”

Without Breakthrough, these students may indeed fall through the cracks. However, one of the most important tenets for Breakthrough staff and teachers is to know their students. Breakthrough students have committed advocates and mentors in their Breakthrough teachers and staff. Although the Fordham study presents a discouraging picture of the status of high-achieving students in general—and high-achieving, low-income and minority students in particular—the study also provides a strong rationale for Breakthrough in today’s educational landscape.

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Carolina Martín

Executive Director of DonorsChoose.org (Northwest region). Formerly Vice President of Hispanic Initiatives at Sallie Mae (California and Pacific Northwest regions), Director of Community and Scholar Relations at Hispanic Scholarship Fund, teacher at a Catholic school in San Diego and public school teacher in Los Angeles.

Hometown: San Diego
Education: B.A., M.Ed., University of San Diego

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in Manchester in 1994 and director in San Francisco from 1999 to 2003

“Breakthrough was an incredibly powerful experience. I learned a great deal about inequities in education. Beyond that, it was amazing to see middle school students committed to their futures and high school and college students inspired to make change. Breakthrough creates an energy that follows you throughout your life. It empowers you. You feel that you can be successful, that there are no obstacles that you can’t work through.”



Steve Morris

Head of School, The San Francisco School. Formerly assistant head at the school, as well as an English teacher and Dean of Multicultural Programs at San Francisco’s University High School.

Hometown: Pittsburgh
Education: B.A., College of Wooster, M.Ed., Stanford

Breakthrough experience: Founding co-director of Pittsburgh from 1994 to 1998 and program officer in national office in 1998 and 1999

“If it weren’t for Breakthrough, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I found my career path through Breakthrough. It gives young people opportunities to enter the field of education, and it gave me a good glimpse of what it takes to run a school. As the head of an independent school, I am passionate about developing educators...So much of how I

see myself as an educator has its roots in Breakthrough. I believe, as Breakthrough, that if you have high expectations that kids can succeed and give them the support they need to succeed, they will succeed—no matter their circumstances.”

Ebele Okobi-Harris

Director of Business and Human Rights at Yahoo. Previously worked for a number of not-for-profit organizations on women’s and human rights issues in the United States, Europe and West Africa; as an attorney in New York, London and Paris; and in marketing and business development for Nike.

Hometown: San Francisco
Education: B.A., University of Southern California; J.D., Columbia

Breakthrough experience: Student in San Francisco in 1985 and 1986

“Public speaking has always been a huge part of my work, and I can thank Lois Loofbourrow, the founder of Breakthrough, for giving me my voice. I was always bookish, but very shy. When I won a writing competition as a student, I didn’t want to read my essay, but Lois said, ‘You will.’ It was the first time in my childhood that someone pushed me out of my shell. So I read it. It was a seminal, pivotal moment. Lois never coddled me. She was a second mom...Of all the institutions I’ve been involved with, Breakthrough has had the most determining impact on me.”

Destiny Peery

Graduate student in Northwestern University’s JD/Ph.D. joint degree program, pursuing a Ph.D. in social psychology and a law degree. Research focuses on various aspects of multiracialism and multiculturalism, particularly perceptions of multi-racial individuals, and stereotyping and prejudice.

Hometown: Minneapolis
Education: B.A., University of Minnesota

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in Minneapolis program the summer of 2002 and in the school-year program from 2002 through 2004. Student Services Director of Minneapolis program from 2004 to 2006

“Breakthrough has made me really passionate about public education issues, particularly how class, race, gender, inequality and discrimination play out on the institutional level. It also made me want to stay involved in mentoring and teaching. I plan to go into academia, and teaching will be an important part of my career. It’s a great idea to focus, as Breakthrough does, on high-achieving, high-potential students. It’s important to grab them before they get lost and provide them with a community where being smart is acknowledged and rewarded.”

Quinn Rallins

Graduate student.

Hometown: Chicago
Education: B.A., Morehouse College

Breakthrough experience: Teacher in Miami in 2008

“I’ve had a lot of great work opportunities during my student years—at Amnesty International in Malaysia, with the RAND Corporation, in Sierra Leone—but Breakthrough is the internship I value most. Nothing has impacted me as much as Breakthrough. If I could do it over, I would have started with Breakthrough after my freshman year. I got so involved with my students and my fellow teachers, whether it was playing chess, preparing lessons or listening to their stories. These are the people I want to work with for the rest of my life. Since fall, I have been attending Oxford University. I want to dedicate part of my life to serving children and dealing with social inequalities and injustice, and I’d love to bring a program similar to Breakthrough’s to Chicago someday.”

Christine Ranney

English teacher at MATCH, a new charter middle school in Boston.

Hometown: Manchester, N.H.
Education: B.A., St. Lawrence University; M.Ed., University of Nevada

Breakthrough experience: Student in Manchester in 1996 and 1997. Teacher in Manchester from 1998 to 2001 and in 2003. Teacher in New Orleans in 2002. Breakthrough San Francisco Director 2007-2008

“Raised in a family that persevered despite poverty and lack of education, I saw early on the absolute urgency of an education. While my parents didn’t have the educational opportunities I was afforded, they encouraged me to test the bounds that inhibited their own success. As a graduate of Breakthrough Collaborative, I saw how my pursuit of education helped me transcend a culture of poverty that perpetuates a cycle of poor education for many families.

“Breakthrough has been, in many ways, a second family for me. It offered me a chance to challenge myself intellectually, to climb the academic ladder and to build lifelong relationships with my mentors. It also instilled in me a level of curiosity and creativity that I carry to this day. Breakthrough is idealism put to practice. It provides a foundation of what teachers should aspire to as mentors and role models.”

Tyler Rodriguez

Freshman at Brown University. Pursuing pre-med studies and a major in human biology.

Hometown: New York

Breakthrough experience: Student in New York in 2002 and 2003

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“Before Breakthrough, I had little confidence. I was a shy, quiet, studious kid. Breakthrough helped me break out of my shell and become the person I am today. I was encouraged to participate in a lot of activities and read my essays aloud. My interest in biology was nurtured through a human physiology class I took at Breakthrough. Breakthrough prepared me for the rigors of boarding school, particularly with time management and study skills. The friends I made through Breakthrough I will have for the rest of my life.”



Andrew Romanoff

Speaker of the Colorado House of Representatives and teacher at the Community College of Aurora.

Hometown: Columbus, Ohio
Education: B.A., Yale; M.P.P., Harvard. Completing law degree at the University of Denver

Breakthrough experience: Taught in San Francisco in 1986 and 1987

“I think it was my first time being part of an experience where every kid has a chance to fulfill his or her potential. It certainly sharpened my public policy positions and my philosophy. Because I find it agonizing and unacceptable when students are not given opportunities to realize their potential, much of the legislation I’ve sponsored and supported deals with this concern, whether it’s an early childhood education or a housing bill.

“Breakthrough also strengthened my affection for teaching, which is something I still do. Over the last 10 years, I have taught at a number of community colleges in Colorado.”

Jabali Sawicki

Founding principal of Excellence Charter School in Brooklyn, N.Y., New York State’s first all-boys and one of its highest-performing public elementary schools. Formerly a teacher at Roxbury Preparatory Charter School in Boston.

Hometown: San Francisco
Education: B.A., Oberlin; M.Ed., Columbia

Breakthrough experience: Student at Breakthrough in San Francisco from 1988 to 1991 and teacher in New Orleans in 1995 and 1996 and in Louisville (Ky.) in 1999 and 2000

“The greatest influence Breakthrough has had on me is helping me to understand the power and potential of both education and individuals to change lives. As a young African-American male, I could have gone either way. There were a lot of temptations, distractions, forces that might have pulled me in a wrong direction....The program addressed me on all these levels and bridged the gap between what I thought I wanted and needed in life and what I truly needed in life.

“What I take from Breakthrough is the belief that if you create a safe environment for all children; recruit energetic, passionate, committed teachers; and develop rigorous systems, you can get all students to achieve on the highest levels.”



Lamar Shambley

Junior at the College of William and Mary. Hispanic studies major and linguistics minor. Aspiring translator and teacher.

Hometown: Brooklyn, N.Y., and Norfolk, Va.

Breakthrough experience: Student in Norfolk from 2001 through 2003. Teacher in Miami in 2007 and 2008

“Breakthrough more than solidified my thought about going to college. It planted the seed. I loved that my teachers were only a few years older. I could talk to them about anything. I felt that I was being mentored by them. One of my teachers went to William and Mary, so that’s why I’m here today.

“I owe so much to the program that I came back as a teacher. I wanted to help kids like myself. I hadn’t thought about teaching until I went through Breakthrough...For me, Breakthrough is the epitome of a family.”

Nadja Shaw

Freshman at Bowdoin College. Will double major in Spanish and Government and Legal Studies as a pre-law student.

Hometown: New York

Breakthrough experience: Student in New York in 2002 and 2003

“Breakthrough opened me to a whole new world. I became more intellectually inclined and fully engaged. It gave me the hope that I could go farther than what I’d been told. I loved being in a small community of scholars who received recognition for our achievements. We’re all in college now—at Brown, Fordham, Connecticut College, Harvard—but we’re all still in touch with each other. We’re joined at the hip now.”

Adam Tucker

Senior Program Officer for the U.S. Program Education Initiative of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Formerly affiliated with the communications and advocacy division of Edison Schools; Learn-Now, Inc., where he served as vice president; the engagement and advocacy division of the Coalition of Essential Schools; and the research and evaluation division of Children Now.

Hometown: Hopewell, N.J.
Education: B.A., Brown University

Breakthrough experience: Directed in New Orleans in 1993 and co-directed at Concord Academy (Mass.) from 1994 through 1997

“My experience at Breakthrough was absolutely formative. It was a grounding experience. It helped me see in tangible terms what’s possible when you put smart, committed, empathetic people together. You can deploy young people in ways that most individuals wouldn’t imagine and see them serve as agents of change. A case in point: I had a student from the program who went on to Concord Academy and then to Pomona College. Her family was unable to travel with her to the campus in California to help her get settled in, so I flew out to help her. It was an incredibly poignant moment for me. I consider it a blessing. Today that student is a teacher herself.

Joel Vargas

Program Director at the Boston-based not-for-profit, Jobs for the Future.

Hometown: San Francisco
Education: B.S., Boston University, Ed.M., and Ed.D., Harvard Graduate School of Education

Breakthrough experience: Student in the San Francisco program in 1979 and 1980. Teacher in the San Francisco program from 1981 through 1984. Co-director of the Manchester program from 1991 to 1996. Advisory Board of Cambridge Program 1992-1994

“The program had an incredible effect on my academics when I was a middle school student. It showed me how much work I had to do, how inequitable my access to education had been. It was an eye-opener. But it also showed me that someone personally

“ There was a power to the Breakthrough model. It’s about people taking the time to care about other people’s lives and to mentor them. And it’s about grooming young teachers to reach their potential. ”

-Natalie Gray

took an interest in my education, saw potential in me and had a belief in my ability.

“As a teacher, I wanted to give back to a program that had given so much to me. I wouldn’t have had the opportunity to go to University High School in San Francisco without the experiences I had in the program. Throughout my career, Breakthrough has instilled in me the belief that it is possible to break through injustice and inequitable systems, and it has led me to the work I do today: looking at how we improve state policies so as to improve educational access for young people who have been underserved.”

Bryan Wagner

Assistant Professor of English, UC Berkeley. Research and teaching focus on American literature since 1900, with a concentration in African-American literature.

Hometown: New Orleans
Education: B.A., Carleton College, M.A. and Ph.D., University of Virginia

Breakthrough experience: Taught in New Orleans in 1992 and 1993 and in Cincinnati in 1994. Also served as dean of faculty in Cincinnati

“I first developed a serious interest in teaching when I was at Breakthrough. I feel very fortunate that my first experiences as a teacher occurred under such rosy conditions—smart and motivated students, small classes, engaged and engaging colleagues. Without a doubt, my teaching today is informed by lessons I learned there.”

Rhea Wong

Executive Director at Breakthrough New York

Hometown: San Francisco
Education: B.A., McGill University

Breakthrough experience: Student in San Francisco from 1990 to 1993. Teacher in Honolulu in 1996, Hong Kong in 1997 and New York in 1999. Teacher recruitment manager in the national office from 2002 to 2005

“As a student, I found this place where I could drop my armor and let my love of learning show. That was transformative for me. There was this community that was very uncynical, where there was a spirit of being vulnerable and taking risks and expressing joy and enthusiasm. This is an organization that has given a lot to me and helped me prioritize what’s important in life. At Breakthrough, there’s a sense of righting wrongs and addressing inequalities and injustice. You get to see what’s possible when people put their hearts and souls into helping each other: magic.”

