

BUILDING BRIDGES: AN INTERVIEW WITH LOIS LOOFBOURROW

Seizing a unique opportunity to put her lifelong beliefs into action, Lois Loofbourrow founded and developed Summerbridge. Her innovative and educational program gives inner-city children the tools to thrive.

When she was 5, Lois Loofbourrow woke up after having had her tonsils removed and found that her throat was on fire. That wasn't the way it was supposed to be. Her parents hadn't told her how painful the operation was, trying to shield her from the realities of the world. But an African American janitor at the hospital, Smith Robinson, not only explained the pain, but went out and cut some flowers for her and told her, "If you look at something pretty, you might forget the pain." Loofbourrow says, "He was the first adult I felt would always tell me the truth." Robinson, it turned out, was also a gifted student and athlete who, because of his race, was relegated to working as a janitor, and that also made a deep impression on her.

Years later, in the radical '60s, Loofbourrow, armed with a B.A. from the University of the Pacific, went to work for the San Francisco School Volunteers, an umbrella organization of the San Francisco public schools. Once there, she realized that she could make a positive impact on the lives of inner-city children, and thus remain true to her ideals. In 1972, she started a work-release program that encouraged local businesses to allow employees to spend time in public school classrooms as partners, mentors, and tutors. Loofbourrow ran Corporate Action in Public Schools (CAPS) for five years, turning it into one of the largest, ongoing corporate



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educational partnerships in the United States.

When San Francisco's University High School, a new, independent school, wanted to establish a community outreach program of its own, it logically turned to Loofbourrow, who saw a "unique opportunity to put my beliefs into action and address some of the ills of society."

That program was Summerbridge, and it began in 1978 with the clearly stated objectives of identifying entering seventh and eighth graders from inner-city public and parochial schools who could benefit from individual

attention and a rigorous academic program, and then giving them as much learning as they could handle. And with the learning came a contract borne of Loofbourrow's childhood: to deal honestly with the program's participants and give them the tools to thrive in a world they might otherwise never become a part of.

Summerbridge is a unique educational experience that starts with an intensive, six-week summer session and continues with after-school tutorials during the academic year. Hallmarks of the tuition-free program include very small classes taught by high school and college students. Beginning with the application—a challenging, multipage document that Summerbridge students refer to as a rite of passage—the program builds self-esteem as it teaches high-potential students at risk how to take control of their education. Summerbridge has been so successful at

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really going on in their lives. They'd talk more openly to them about frustrations in school, feelings that their neighborhood was dangerous, or about drug, alcohol, or sexual abuse. Yet the high school kids were not judgmental. They would listen and would push the middle schoolers to come up with their own solutions, giving the middle schoolers a chance to learn that solving problems is a normal part of life.

Q: *How did Summerbridge evolve beyond its San Francisco base?*

A: An international company based in San Francisco discovered Summerbridge because the company president and community outreach director had children at University High School. The company had a history of philanthropic giving, and they offered us the opportunity to take the program national by providing matching funds to start new programs. This summer we'll start four new Summerbridge programs in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Denver, and in Locust Valley, Long Island, New York. In 1996, programs will start up in Atlanta, Houston, and a few other cities yet to be selected.

Q: *Has Summerbridge been tried outside the United States?*

A: Yes, it has. There is a Summerbridge in Hongkong that started in 1991. There are far fewer university openings in Hongkong than here for each high school graduate, so the kids in Hongkong are under a lot of pressure to make it into the right high school to get a better chance to make it into a university. Also, there is a large Southeast Asian refugee population in Hongkong, and these kids need remedial English speaking and writing skills, as the university entrance exams are given in English.

We also ran a summer workshop in Prague in 1991. We sent high school and college kids to work with 18-year-old high school graduates in Prague for the whole summer. The goal of the workshop was to spark the idea that the Czechs could start their own programs.

Q: *What special problems have you had to overcome in order to establish international Summerbridge programs?*

A: In Prague, the teachers we were working with couldn't understand the concept of fundraising. In their society, the state provided everything. We tried to talk them into working with us on fundraising for their program, but it just wasn't the right time. Maybe we'll try again later.

I think eventually we will do more presenting [internationally]. If we can keep the Hongkong program viable, I could see us playing a major role in China. We'd be a great bridge between country and city. But we'd like to see that growth come from the Hongkong program. As it grows and becomes more sophisticated, others in Asia will go there and look at the Hongkong model.

Q: *How has the educational establishment reacted to the success of Summerbridge?*

A: Top educators all want the best for kids. They want public, parochial, and independent schools to collaborate. Summerbridge, while small, offers a great vehicle for collaboration. Also, we do the networking. If you want something to work, you have to go out and do that networking every

single year because it doesn't stay in place easily. Counselors, teachers, and principals change. Every year Summerbridge goes back into its feeder schools and reconnects. That's why we have such good relationships. We're always there.

Q: *How have you been able to attract corporate funding?*

A: As much as possible, we try to bring in the voice of our students. We have the kids talk about what it is that they give to the program and what they get back. It really has a lot to do with our philosophy that the kids are the program. For example, we sent a student to meet with AT&T executives in New York. That helps both sides. AT&T is a community-based company, and that fits well with our philosophy. At the same time, we want our kids to get to know the business world. We have every kid write a resume and spend a day in a company just to normalize that sort of experience.

Q: *Summerbridge was chosen to be part of President Clinton's AmeriCorps National Service Program. What effect has this national recognition had?*

A: It's great for us to say we're AmeriCorps and part of this



conveying the message that "it's cool to work hard and be smart" that the program, which calls itself a workshop in education, is generally inundated with applicants.

In 1991, InterPacific, a privately held, San Francisco-based investment company, provided the seed capital to make the program national in scope. There are now more than 30 Summerbridge programs across the United States and one in Hongkong. This summer, 2,400 middle schoolers are expected to attend Summerbridge classes and about 800 high school and college students will serve as teachers. About 92 percent of program graduates get into top academic high schools, and almost 100 percent go on to college. More than 60 percent of its young teaching staff ultimately pursue careers in education.

Although it has only been a national program for a few years, Summerbridge was recently awarded an AmeriCorps grant by the Corporation for National Service, an organization that was created by President Clinton in 1993 to provide a mechanism for people to work in community service while earning money toward college. However, the future of AmeriCorps is in doubt: As a low-profile government-funded project in an era of austerity, it may be an easy target for cutbacks.

Loofbourrow lives in San Francisco with her husband David, his son David, a son Eric, from her first marriage, and a former Summerbridge student, also named Eric, who has become a part of their lives. With the sound of the rain that pelted the West Coast in record amounts this past winter as a backdrop, Lois Loofbourrow talked about the innovative educational program she started and still runs.

Q: *What makes Summerbridge succeed when so many other seemingly innovative educational programs have failed?*

A: I think the power of the program is that it gives kids real responsibility for figuring out how to reach their goals. A lot of inner-city teens and middle schoolers lead tumultuous lives, without much room for reflection. Before

they can master their academic requirements, they have to learn to talk about and process what is real in their lives. That's a big part of what Summerbridge teaches them to do.

Q: *What are the goals and objectives of the program?*

A: Our goals are simple: Take middle school kids and prepare them for top academic high school programs. It doesn't make a difference if they are A students or D students. Once they are in the program, the goal is the same—prepare them for the top. Along the way, we teach them things that children

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of middle- or upper-class families already understand, such as why they need to take college prep classes in high school or why they must take standardized tests like the SATs, APs, and achievement tests.

Q: *Why choose middle schoolers?*

A: I think middle school is a forgotten time. When I had a chance to build an outreach program, it was natural for me to work with middle school youngsters because they were at an age where they could make enormous leaps in their lives.

Q: *Isn't the onset of puberty a problem?*

A: Hormones are definitely a factor. Going through adolescence is an extreme experience. But it's also the last age where kids will really be themselves. You can tap into that high energy that comes with adolescence and give kids

a program that is also high energy, that has high values and lots of choices and lets them bring in what they are feeling and experiencing and turn that into something very positive.

Q: *How do you deal with discipline or the need for remediation?*

A: We just don't have time for discipline problems. We'll take kids even if their teachers tell us that they will really be a problem. But once in the program, we tell them that there is no time for acting out. Also, I think there's a myth that every inner-city kid needs remediation. What we found was that a lot of them are just bored. Often, remediation is better achieved by acceleration. A math-deficient kid does much better taking a hard algebra class because within the world of algebra he has to revisit basic arithmetic.

Q: *Do the students who are overwhelmingly underprivileged and come from the inner cities feel uncomfortable at private schools?*

A: A lot of people in the United States feel that inner-city kids are best taught in their own environment. But what do you think these kids see on TV? What do you tell poor kids: You're really poor, let's keep you here in the projects? That's so insulting.

Q: *One unique aspect of Summerbridge is the fact that classes are taught by high school and college students. How did this come about? Why does it work so well?*

A: The first year we used adult teachers with high school assistants. When one of the teachers became sick, high school students took over her classes. Upon her return, she found that the kids were working harder. What's more, we learned that our middle schoolers trusted what these high school kids would say to them. For example, a high school kid could tell a Summerbridge student that he was behind in math and needed to do such and such to catch up and it wouldn't seem traumatic.

Early on we also realized that it was easier for our middle school youngsters to open up and tell their high school student teachers about what was

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national dialogue much the way Peace Corps generated a lot of spirit. We may be a tiny program but, because we're well managed and well run, we can handle major grants like this. Our involvement with AmeriCorps has probably been the biggest boon to us, bigger than any other funding we've ever received. It will be very sad if AmeriCorps dies.

Q: *You have opened your heart and your home to a Summerbridge student. How did this come about?*

A: Eric came to live with us when he was 16, but I'd known him since seventh grade, when he entered Summerbridge. He moved in with us because his home life wasn't good and he felt that he wasn't coping well. He's now 22 and a junior in college. So we now have two sons named Eric, one white and one African American.

Q: *How has Summerbridge changed you?*

A: Well, I now spend my days on planes when before I refused to travel. My friends are more startled by that fact than by anything I do with my work. Flying has become the great escape ... great books, time-out, meals cooked, people to observe!

Q: *Has Summerbridge helped you build any personal bridges?*

A: In the early years, I knew I had a unique opportunity to put some of my beliefs into action and address some of the ills of society. This was very exciting. Summerbridge also brought a lot of laughter into my life when I needed it badly. When my daughter Erin died in a car accident in 1986—she was almost 19—my heart did stop. Often, when you lose a child, people are afraid to talk to you because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing. In a situation where you feel the most isolated, you're unable to reach out. I don't think I could have gotten through the first few years without the kids of Summerbridge. They were the ones who understood and would talk about Erin as if she were alive. What this job has given me is a chance to move away from myself and get on with it and build something. ☼