

Preface

Today's educators seem to face almost insurmountable odds. Parents demand more, but they are not always in the forefront of participating in the schools their children attend. Vast amounts of legislation from the government, often specifying the details of what constitutes "a good education," are mounting, but educators still remain the resource to implement and follow through. Student behavior in some instances has become a menace to both the teaching and the learning processes. And as new Americans arrive from every corner of the world, our schools face a growing range of social and cultural issues, along with those created by persistent inequities in our national fabric. The educational landscape is changing at a blistering rate—almost as fast as knowledge itself is growing.

Despite all of these challenges, our nation still has high expectations for education—and I'm talking about the expectations of children, parents, caring neighbors, and the communities in which they live. We have a historical memory of educational excellence, a recollection of the historical partnership of educator, parent, and community that propelled America into a place of world prominence. But alongside this, we have a sense that the foundations of American education are disintegrating and in need of repair.

As educators become concerned about their livelihood—cost-of-living increases outpace income—and personal well-being, some are reexamining their career choice. Shortages exist in the ranks of educators, and this is especially true among men. Only in remote areas of the country where education still remains a major employer are we likely to find equal numbers of men and women in teaching jobs. Education

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was once considered a high and noble calling; today, many see teaching and related work as “just a job,” something to bring in money while they look for a more rewarding profession. As president of the Building Community Institute and a lecturer and workshop leader for educators throughout America and around the world, I see and hear firsthand the conversations of frustration among many of our educators. We all know something is missing.

It’s not just that education has gotten tougher. Being a good educator has always been tough. I went to school in Glen Allan, Mississippi, a small community of field hands, maids, and tractor drivers, the folks I’ve come to call “the porch people.” Living in the Mississippi Delta during the era of legal segregation, the teachers and the adults I met every day faced daunting challenges, but somehow, they were able to look beyond the challenges brought on by the system of separate-but-equal. Legal segregation lost much of its momentum within our classrooms, and it was educators who made this so, instilling within us a sense of pride and promising us a future that was still being defined. Our families, standing on their front porches, sent us out to face the future; our teachers, standing at the doors of our schools, welcomed us inside and helped prepare us for that future. Without their unselfish hearts and hands helping me along in my life, this book would not be possible. In many ways, they helped to prepare me for this day.

In some respects, however, this book was born not in the Glen Allan of my youth but decades later and up the road a ways in Tupelo, Mississippi, where I was invited to speak at an annual fundraiser for a social and educational club serving the community’s boys and girls. I remember the night vividly. When we arrived, the place was already packed with ordinary people of both races and a good number of representatives from the business community. The young people who would benefit from the evening’s charitable effort were looking their best, uniformed in matching T-shirts and southern smiles.

Before dinner, I spent some time talking to the guests, many of whom were in leadership positions, as they shared with me the various

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backgrounds, social behavior problems, and living environments of each child, offering detailed data and demographics on each and every one. I got a clear picture of where these youngsters had come from, and I saw that though many years had passed, their young lives were not that different from my own childhood. What troubled me is that everyone was so busy telling me where these kids *came from* no one bothered to talk about *who they could become*, or who they really were in the scheme of life.

Although the circumstances of my life had been far worse than what many of those youth experienced, no one in my environment had focused on the demographics and hardships of my situation as a description of me. Instead, the people around me offered an entirely different picture of who I was; they made up a community that had my future at its center. At that moment, I had an epiphany: My relatives, teachers, and others saw all my potential and all that I could become. They kept before me the positive picture that still drives my life today.

Although I was a grown man standing in Tupelo, Mississippi, I was emotionally in the first grade again, standing in the presence of my teacher, whom we all called Miss Mary Maxey, following southern usage, even though she was married to Mr. Joe. She paid no attention to our living and social conditions. Rather, she welcomed us into her first-grade classroom as if we were the sons and daughters of kings and presidents. Miss Maxey and all the others I met in that school wanted us—the children of field hands, maids, and tractor drivers—to have a different and positive view of ourselves. One night, she gathered a few of us in a clearing outside the wooden frame building that was her first schoolhouse and pointed to the starlit heavens. Miss Maxey told us to remember that we were among the stars—bright, gifted, and shining—even in the daylight when the sun's brightness overshadowed the light from the stars. She said the stars were constantly shining, and she expected no less from us. Learning was to be our constant pursuit wherever we were.

As I remembered those old days, I understood that the success of the Tupelo social club would depend not just on our ability to raise

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money or assess demographic data but on our success in getting educators and supporting adults to make a commitment to this positive view of their youngsters' potential and to building a community where their students could thrive. A good school community required more than bricks and mortar when I was growing up, and today, it still does.

Once I had this new emotionally charged picture of the Tupelo youngsters etched in my mind, the notes I had prepared were no longer of value. I crumpled them up and threw them away. When the dinner was over and it was time for me to speak, I walked to the front of the room, but not to the podium. I stood very close to the first row of tables, looking closely into the eyes of each child present, and the children's eyes met mine. I hesitated, but only for a moment, and then I began by inviting the youngsters to stand. I asked the audience if they had a clear picture of just who these young people were. I could hear them repeating what they had told me earlier: "These are the children from the other side of town, children from broken homes or children from our projects." That was all true, but there was a greater truth—one that I had experienced as a child.

"Tonight, these youth are much more than children we have rescued," I told the group. "We are privileged to be with them. I know clearly who they are. They are the future trustees of our communities. How we view them and what we expect from them will make all the difference in how they view themselves and how they welcome and meet the awesome tasks ahead of them. It will make all the difference in the future of our nation."

It seems to me that this is what's missing from our schools today: a positive vision of our students to drive our efforts and the courage to build the kind of community that will make the most of their potential. I left Tupelo determined to use my voice to make sure that we do not, through our conversations, perspectives, and loads of social data, negatively brand our children. Rather, we must view all of our students as the future trustees of our communities and of our country. I have challenged adults I've met throughout America—parents, caretakers,

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and educators—to adopt this vision and never to underestimate our responsibility to the youngsters who pass through our care. This is especially important for many of our inner-city students, who may be in great need of emotional support.

In this book, I extend that challenge to my readers, to teachers and others involved in educating our youngsters. Looking around at your students' home lives, you may wonder if they're up to the task of being our community's trustees, but I challenge you to set their sights on a future only they can create, a future beyond peeling plaster and police sirens. Students in places that share the poverty and disadvantage, even discrimination, of the rural Mississippi town where I grew up must embrace their humanity and discover the gifts that live within them.

Just as Miss Maxey and my other teachers had this positive "inside" picture of me, educators throughout America—from the highest levels of our government to the last staff person hired at the elementary school in Douglas, Arizona—can do enormous good if they have the same kind of picture of the students in their schools. I now fully understand that I was fortunate to have grown up in that time and place, in a community of porch people. And because of committed educators, today's youth will be able to say that their educational experience was enriched. Educators, thank you for continuing this honorable tradition of keeping students focused on a future that includes them.

This book is for you, my educator benefactor and friend. It's about your long-standing unique role in the life of young people. It's about building solid relationships among your peers for the benefit of students. It's about leadership and what it means to set out purposely to bring others along, placing a high value on collaboration. This book is about the heartbeat of education, building community. School communities provide the necessary infrastructure of relationships at all levels, a foundational place where all educational initiatives can take root and grow.

Chapter 1 focuses on what community looks like in schools and how educators can go about the building process, establishing this very necessary foundation of relationships to support important initiatives

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such as civic education, character education, and of course service learning—all of these can flourish in the presence of good community. In Chapter 2, I describe “the human touch,” the acts of unselfishness that meant so much to me during my school years. In these two chapters, readers will see how they can lay a foundation for academic excellence by creating a community in which personal unselfishness and commitment to students drive the educational agenda. In Chapter 3, I describe how I distilled from my youthful experiences the Eight Habits of the Heart, and the following chapters discuss each in turn. By embracing these eight principles, which I now know to be timeless and universal, educators can develop personal operational strategies for building and sustaining the community *they* envision as critical to the teaching and learning process.

Please keep in mind that the intention of this book is not to provide detailed instructions, to-do lists, and activity handouts that can be used to replicate particular outcomes. In Chapters 3 through 10, you will find some questions to prompt your reflection or provoke group discussion. The chapters also include some “opportunities” to implement the Eight Habits in your own school situation, some strategies other educators have proposed, and vignettes of educators I’ve met who embodied one of these habits in a particular time and place. The idea, however, is not to direct your activity but to fire your imagination. I hope each of you will consider the possibilities.

The community my teachers and elders built and the timeless and universal principles they practiced are a guiding star, not a template. Think about the Eight Habits of the Heart—Nurturing Attitude, Responsibility, Dependability, Friendship, Brotherhood, High Expectations, Courage, and Hope—and make them your very own as you set out to expand upon this noble tradition of excellence: building a community in which students can become the best and brightest people their skills and talents permit.

After all, they are the future trustees of their communities and our country.