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Erasing Education INEQUALITY

LOCAL INITIATIVES AIM TO GIVE ALL STUDENTS AN EQUAL SHOT

By Eric Barton

In the summer of 2020, Seth Cohen got a call that would challenge him to again live up to the things he had been saying for years.

Cohen was at the time the newly installed president of Jupiter Christian School. With more than 900 students on two campuses, it's the kind of place where families send their kids in the hopes they'll end up in the Ivy League.

On the other end of Cohen's call were the folks from Urban Youth Impact, a program that helps underserved kids in West Palm Beach. Jupiter Christian had been working with the program for years, offering volunteers here and there to help with projects. This time, though, Urban Youth Impact needed something big. They had started a new school of their own, and they hoped Jupiter Christian might help run it.

Cohen thought about his favorite biblical story, the one about the good Samaritan who stops to help a man beaten and left for dead. So many other travelers had passed the man, but the Samaritan treated his wounds and bought a room for him at an inn. It's a story Cohen had been telling for years, and he knew this was his chance to be like the Samaritan.

"So I said, 'What if we just do the school? What if we do the school, and you could continue to do the things you're

really good at?'" he recalls.

And that's just what Cohen did: This fall, Jupiter Christian School will open its third campus, this one in West Palm Beach's traditionally Black neighborhood of Tamarind, and it will provide a subsidized education for local kids.

While it might seem like those new students will be the beneficiaries, Cohen says it's actually the other way around. "The opportunity isn't for Urban Youth Impact. It's for Jupiter Christian, and so we can try to live what we believe."

Jupiter Christian's program is one of several education initiatives that have begun in Palm Beach County in recent years to help traditionally underserved students. Some are smaller programs to target just a few kids challenged simply by the neighborhood where they were born, and others are wide-reaching, like attempting to keep kids from graduating college with massive debt.

These actions are possible in part because of the vast wealth here in Palm Beach County, a place where we've developed a culture of giving, says Alice M. L. Eger, executive director, Opportunity Early Childhood Education and Family Center in West Palm Beach.

Eger runs a multimillion-dollar early childhood center in a low-income neighborhood, made possible in part by



AT RIGHT: FAU
SPRING 2021 GRADU-
ATE MEGAN TOONO;
WEST PALM BEACH

FIREFIIGHTERS
VISIT URBAN YOUTH
IMPACT; THE FOUNDA-
TIONS SCHOOL STU-
DENTS LASSANE AND
JAKAYA WITH TEACHER
JOHN EDOUASSAINT;
CLASS FIELD TRIP TO
SANDOWAY DISCOVERY
CENTER IN DELRAY BEACH.



SCHNEIDER PHOTOGRAPHY & FILM



SCHEIDT & SHAW





ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: FAU SPRING 2021 GRADUATES ODJEENIE JEAN-LOUIS, ANGIE JOSEPH, AND TA'SHYRA JOHNSON. BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: TA'SHYRA JOHNSON, MEGAN TOGNO, AUBREY STRUL, ODJEENIE JEAN-LOUIS, AND ANGIE JOSEPH.

the generosity of Palm Beachers and philanthropists David and Jill Gilmour. "We are leaps and bounds in front of other counties in the state and other regions in the support of early childhood," Eger says.

And while there's still a lot of work to be done to give kids from poorer neighborhoods the same opportunities as others, Eger says the resources available to them now have made the difference for many.

Similarly, the Center for Creative Education's latest venture, The Foundations School at Northwood Village, launched in January 2021 to address the clear need for students to improve literacy skills and proficiency as a result of pandemic-era distance learning. The model demonstration school—with its kindergarten through third-grade curriculum, low student-to-teacher ratio, maximum class size of 15, and no tuition for qualifying children—currently provides up to 60 underserved local students an entry point

to a top-tier education via creativity and the arts. "With the inception of our not-for-profit private school that is available to everyone, we are making an even greater educational investment in the surrounding 33407 zip code," says Kevin Kovacs, the director of schools.

Perhaps the most ambitious of the efforts to help local students began at a dinner party in 2016, when entrepreneur and philanthropist Aubrey Strul was seated next to Carolyn Kelly, wife of Florida Atlantic University President John Kelly. At some point during the night, Strul asked Carolyn Kelly what students these days need the most. "They really need a full scholarship," she told him. "To be successful, they really need to not be doing three jobs."

Afterward, Strul met with John Kelly, and the two of them shared something in common. Strul was the son of a South African shopkeeper and was the first in his family to go to college. Kelly had grown up in a rural South Carolina town where few could afford college and nearly had to drop out in his senior year when his family ran out of money for tuition. At FAU, a full third of students qualify for financial help. By the end of the meeting, they concocted an idea for a scholarship for first-generation college students from low-income families. The students would also get mentoring and career planning help along the way to get them started on life after college. Strul and his wife, Sally, donated \$1 million to get the program started and then recruited friends to help. "It became this thing with a tremendous energy around it," John Kelly says.

Last year the program graduated seven scholars and now has 57 current students. Strul says he's gotten to know each one of the students. "To watch these students mature into confident young men and women is something very special," Strul says. "Watching [them] graduate was a total joy and delight for us. They all gave impressive speeches without notes. It was from the bottom of their heart."

Another initiative in Palm Beach County began in 2007





TOP LEFT: SETH COHEN IN FRONT OF JUPITER CHRISTIAN SCHOOL; LEFT: CHILDREN PLAYING OUTSIDE; ABOVE AND RIGHT: THE RESPONSIBLE ANGLING EDUCATION PROGRAM FIELD TRIP TO THE BAHAMAS INCLUDED VISITING ATLANTIS AQUARIUM IN NASSAU, DEEP-SEA FISHING IN Bimini, CASTING LESSONS, A STINGRAY ENCOUNTER, AND MORE.

with the idea that learning to fish could help kids better understand and respect Florida's environment. The Marine Education Initiative's executive director, Nick Metropulos says he first learned the importance of conservation after his family's home was destroyed by a hurricane in 2005. They moved into the home of a family friend in the Bahamas, who taught Metropulos and his brother to fish only for what you need to eat. When they came back to Florida, Metropulos' brother started the initiative, which now offers an 18-week program that uses fishing to teach kids about conservation. Just 10 percent of the kids have fished before and only 5 percent of them have been on a boat. Being out on the water is often a first step for them to understand the importance of taking care of the environment, Metropulos says. The program teaches the kids about jobs they can get in the marine industry, and they also work on a project to dream up new solutions to clean the oceans.

After starting in Boca Raton, the program now works with kids in Palm Beach County, Miami-Dade, the Virgin Islands, and the Bahamas. Metropulos, 22, has aspirations to duplicate the program nationwide. "In South Florida in general there's a huge need for knowledge of marine conservation. Growing up here, I didn't have any idea of wrong and right on how to properly

fish and conserve our environment," Metropulos says. "We go into different centers and teach these kids about something they often had no idea was an issue."

Jupiter Christian School's new campus off North Australian Avenue in West Palm Beach will open this fall, Cohen says. It'll begin with 24 kids—with students in first grade and kindergarten only at first—with plans to expand each year, adding more classes and more grade levels as they go. Eventually, they hope to grow to serve 210 students. But to do that, they'll need to raise \$5,000 in donations for each student to fund their yearly education.

For Cohen, the effort is the culmination of a career he's spent working to help traditionally underserved students. He worked for 20 years in Philadelphia in urban education before spending another nine years as an educator in the Dominican Republic. His job at Jupiter Christian was his first at a suburban school with ample resources. When he first brought the idea of the Tamarind campus to the school's board, pitching them on an idea he knew would be a major challenge, he says the school's leadership embraced the notion of practicing the lessons they strived to teach the students.

"It's not just about getting the kids ready for college. What I'm more concerned about is making sure someone's daughter or son is going to grow up to be a good parent, how they're going to handle their job," Cohen says. "We're not just trying to educate these students but [also] trying to teach them the character they need to be good people." <<

