

NO DREAMS DEFERRED

BY SHARON FITZGERALD

“Let’s begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. . . . So any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to ‘go for broke.’”

“A Talk to Teachers”
James Baldwin

The term “ghetto” was not popular when James Baldwin urged an assembly of teachers to “go for broke” in 1963. Freed from its identification with European ethnic communities (and decades away from becoming a declaration of status), ghettos in America were holding pens for the unfortunate, the underclass, those people of color. A word that once had described a demographic location was becoming the insignia for blighted states of being and of mind.

Dorothy Leigh Maynor—an acclaimed mezzo-soprano and the wife of Shelby Albright Rooks, the pastor of Harlem’s St. James Presbyterian Church—viewed enrichment as the remedy. Armed with a supportive church community and an A-list phone book filled with legendary friends and admirers, Maynor decided to unleash the muses of young people, to inspire them to fly through the arts. Two months after Baldwin’s address to educators, three months after the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, and four months after the March on Washington, she announced the opening of an arts school for children in post-Renaissance Harlem.

Her no-frills approach to advertising the plan entailed posting a notice on the bulletin board of a local school and a sign above the door of the St. James Community Center. Observers marveled when 85 parents appeared to enroll their children on the

first day. A week later, on the second day of registration, over 100 positions were filled and the program's classes and instruction spaces exceeded capacity. The Ruling Board of St. James, who had agreed to host the classes in the congregation's community center, contributed church funds to facilitate the hiring of additional teachers.

"We took all the children who came," Maynor said at the time. "This is a school for those who can't afford private lessons and yet have talent. This school is set up to give them the chance they must have.

"We never announced that the school was open, but one mother told another mother, and one child told another..."

Instruction in art, dance, and music began in the fall of 1964. Families unable to afford the school's tuition were allowed to pay a nominal fee of fifty cents. During the academic year children took lessons after school; throughout the summer months classes were conducted all day. The stage was set for virtuosity: instruments were distributed, practice and performance spaces provided; a reference library installed. The school's teachers were accomplished artists and often graduates of top universities and conservatories. In 1965, the St. James Community Center, Inc. was renamed the School of the Arts of St. James Community Center; in 1967, the program became the Harlem School of the Arts.

News of Maynor's accomplishment spread beyond Harlem, and enlightened members of New York's cultural and political elite championed her efforts by writing letters, donating money, and holding fund-raising events. Former presidential candidate and UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson was the first honorary chairman of the school's board of directors. New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller paid tribute with an official proclamation. Poet Langston Hughes and pianist Vladimir Horowitz were two of the

creative giants who raised their voices to encourage contributions. In addition to the school's ongoing program of student recitals and exhibitions for parents and community, glistening benefit galas were held annually. Featuring performances by such acclaimed artists as Peter Nero, Leontyne Price, Shirley Verrett, and Andre Watts, these events reaped tens of thousands of dollars for the school's building fund. The 1973 black-tie benefit—at which Betty Allen, George Shirley, and William Warfield performed spirituals a cappella with the St. James Choir—has become a part of urban legend.

Maynor managed to raise about \$2.2 of the \$3.5 million needed by the school's building fund; she also hoped to secure a \$5 million endowment. In December 1979, an illness and hospitalization convinced her to accelerate plans to pass the torch and she summoned fellow mezzo-soprano Betty Allen, the successor she had chosen. Allen would not allow the school to miss a beat. During the first year she launched a three-year, \$1 million fund-raising campaign to secure a 3:1 matching grant promised by the Ford Foundation. She welcomed the community to series of concerts, seminars, and workshops. In 1982, the final payment was made on the new school building's \$1.6 mortgage; HSA was the first building constructed by private investors in Harlem since the Renaissance period of the 1920s. When Allen passed away, in 2009, the community mourned the loss of the school's second visionary leader.

During the 47 years since its inception, the Harlem School of the Arts directed the creative lives of at least two generations, enabled accomplished graduates to pursue advanced studies and careers within the arts. Ironically, it may be this dazzling legacy that allowed us to relax and thereby to risk losing this cultural institution. Dwindling resources and a looming financial crisis triggered alarms for several years. Empathetic organizations made emergency donations, yet it took an announcement that HSA might

close due to insufficient funds to rock the uninformed. A front-page article in *The New York Times* attributed the school's predicament to a mismanagement of resources that only could be described as "a crying shame."

As local supporters of HSA prayed for an angel with deep pockets, political and cultural leaders began making 11th-Hour phone calls. Although a sign at the entrance announced that the school was closed temporarily, the door was left open a crack and the school's parents and children slipped in to express shock and concern, and then to inquire about the summer program. A few families positioned themselves on the sidewalk one Saturday morning, wielding posters that communicated their hopes and dismay. Meanwhile, HSA's board members suited up for fierce deliberations that tackled the issues of funding and the restoration of public confidence.

Weeks later, the sights and sounds at the school promised survival. Parents and children rushed inside and headed for classes, the sparking notes of a piano graced the lobby, board members hastened to meeting rooms on the second floor.

It is significant that even as New Yorkers exhort the need to uphold the city's children, the funding of established organizations metastasize into life-threatening crises. We celebrate then seem to forget the economic battles fought and won by visionaries, committees, and philanthropists, which were a blueprint for sustenance and not a passport to apathy. Distressingly absent has been a community-driven, no-dreams-deferred response to the struggles of HSA and other institutions committed to Harlem's children. It is as if the prowess, commitment, savvy, and sacrifice that brought to life HSA, Boys & Girls Choir of Harlem, and Dance Theater of Harlem are beyond our skill set. We appear in danger of misinterpreting these achievements as incidentals

of a cultural legacy that satisfied our longings “back in the day” but ceased to be relevant after we had attended a few performances or had experienced the wonders of bling.

There are, as there should be, new organizations and champions on the horizon, but how can we ensure their success if we forsake cornerstone institutions that have defined the community? Furthermore, the difficulties may not be as overwhelming as they seem...

What if Mr. Baldwin’s beloved people of Harlem took the lead and demonstrated an ability to unify and ‘go for broke?’ What if everyone contributed \$5 (or more) to a no-nonsense fund monitored by a contingent of Harlem leaders? How long would it take to secure a trust that (1) pulls our treasured institutions away from the abyss and buys them the time needed to (2) consult with the culture’s best financial minds, who would prepare the groups to (3) restructure their organizations from within and establish a protective alliance?

We do not need *The Wall Street Journal* to tell us that there are institutions uptown that are “too big to fail.” We have witnessed the importance of these groups each time we have watched our children enter true centers of enrichment. We have been emboldened by the knowledge that somewhere in the neighborhood a talented young person was being prepared to take center stage. The economic crises may rain on the parade of elegant events, but that should not deter a community that can still pull together a potluck feast. It is time to go for what we know. Reinvent those rent parties of yesteryear. Defend the precious institutions that have inspired our children. Invest the “disposable” income that each of us spends without thinking.

How much Skittles and Popeyes and Starbucks change would it take to resurrect the Boys & Girls Choirs of Harlem? Could we borrow books and DVDs from the library

and place the Barnes & Noble/multiplex/pay-per-view dollars in a kitty for the Dance Theater of Harlem? Would reducing the must-have inches on that new, flat-screen TV allow us to make a contribution to HSA and the performance skills of Harlem's children? Imagine a tax-deductible, dimes-to-dollars campaign championed by the people for the people. Consider the ripples that would be created by a calculable investment of the community's modest resources.

Finally, wouldn't it be nice to know how much we are actually worth? Would it not be fortifying to assure our children that we can and will defend the institutions that empower them? We might refer to this as an "entrusted fund"—a save-the-day account built upon the confidence and determination of all Harlemites and managed with common sense and integrity. It is time to honor our culture's inheritance, to ignite a no-dreams-deferred version of the explosion Langston Hughes foretold.