Nancy Leopold

Repairing Her Corner of the World

In the sweltering summer of 1963, the character of America underwent one of its most transformative moments, and the character of eight-year-old Nancy Leopold followed suit. The March on Washington marked the largest demonstration to shake the Nation's Capital in history, and among the first to be extensively covered on the news. At home in her living room in Meadowbrook, Pennsylvania, Nancy sat up close to the television set, scouring the faces of the crowd for the one she knew best. One of those

250,000 participants was her mother.

"For her, every cause was critical," Nancy recalls today. "She had to be there, an understated but certain force in our country's vast evolution toward equality and social justice. Tikkun olam, the Hebrew term in Judaism that compels us to repair the world through human action, was never openly talked about in our home, but it was still the central driving force of our family's philosophy. It

permeated everything she did, and was a model for me as I grew up and developed my own passion."

Now, Nancy lives and breathes the spirit of tikkun olam every day as the cofounder and CollegeTracks, Executive Director of organization committed to changing lives by giving disadvantaged kids the guidance they need to pursue higher education at a college or university that fits their interests and abilities. The school-based program begins working with students in their junior year of high school, guiding them through career exploration and a college search process geared at achieving the best possible outcome for each kid's unique interests, abilities, and financial circumstances. From test preparation assistance, to college visits, to scholarship opportunities, CollegeTracks monitors students through each step of the college and

financial aid application process to ensure followthrough and success.

Nancy and the other CollegeTracks cofounders didn't set out to launch an organization—they set out to solve a problem. It was 2002, and their children were enrolled at Bethesda-Chevy Chase (B-CC) High School in Montgomery County, Maryland, where an International Baccalaureate program had just been launched. New advanced placement courses were added to the curriculum, but Nancy and her

colleagues, who had started a Human Relations Committee for the school, noticed mostly white faces in those classrooms.

The school's student body was approximately 25 percent nonwhite, and students, faculty, and parents alike celebrated its vibrant diversity, yet it had become glaringly obvious that many students weren't getting enough help through the circuitous college application process. "Kids who had always grown and learned together

were starting to see their paths diverge, through no fault of their own," Nancy recounts. "The kids moderate-income, lowto minority, immigrant, or non-college-educated families were facing significant hurdles. They were bumping up against hard deadlines for new and confusing tasks, and they didn't have adults at home who could help guide them. And this was reflective of national trends, which show that the lowest performing affluent kids still get into college at higher rates than the highest performing lowincome kids. It felt so wrong, and we wanted to do something about it."

With that, Nancy and several other concerned parents arranged with the school to set up shop in the Career Center on Tuesdays after class, providing extra service to the kids who needed it. When they realized that between thirty and fifty students needed immediate help, they

brought on volunteers, and the operation began to take shape. The leaders trained themselves, and each other, on the intricacies of financial aid and college selection. After two years operating in that capacity, while juggling their day jobs to boot, they decided they needed to commit far more time and resources to the project to achieve the kind of impact the students deserved.

It was as if Nancy's whole life had been perfectly orchestrated to prepare her for what came next. The Jack Kent Cooke Foundation put out a notice of intent to fund college access programs in Maryland, offering pro bono assistance to programs looking to become a 501(c)(3). Nancy took the program development and evaluation skills she had learned through obtaining her masters in Health Policy; the business skills, social marketing and deep communications knowledge she had honed earlier in her professional career; and the passion for social justice that has nourished her from the very roots of life, and put it all behind the concept of CollegeTracks. The program was awarded a twoyear, \$90,000 grant, and now that they were plugged into the National College Access Network's web of resources and support, its mission leapt to the next level. "It was one of those unbelievably lucky moments," Nancy says. "It gave us everything we needed to succeed, exactly when we needed it, and we suddenly realized we were becoming an organization."

one fell swoop, CollegeTracks In incorporated in 2006, assembled a board, hired staff, formalized its relationship with Montgomery County Public Schools, and decided to take on the school district's greatest challenge by expanding into Wheaton High School, where 82 percent of students qualified for the Free and Reduced Meals program. The program's representatives established full-time presence at both schools, and they weren't afraid to pull a student out of class to strategize if a critical deadline was looming. And while a third of B-CC students had opted to sign up with them, more than 90 percent of Wheaton's juniors fell in their target group. "As soon as we open our doors each year, we get a rush of kids wanting to sign up," Nancy explains. "But sometimes we aren't approached by the ones facing the toughest issues - homelessness, family reunification, or the debilitating experience of being told too many times you're not college material or don't matter. We seek those kids out through the help of teachers, counselors, and administrators at the schools."

During this period of great acceleration, Nancy decided it was time to give up her consulting work to focus full-time on the endeavor. She had found her purpose-her own March on Washington. She decided to go all in, and since opening its doors, CollegeTracks has served almost 3,000 kids. More than 80 percent of CollegeTracks students enroll in college – a figure more similar to that of the county's white and Asian students than its low-income and minority students, who tend enroll at 55 to 63 percent, according to the district's 2012 study. The organization also launched a college success program component in 2010, reflecting a national focus that now values college completion on the same level as enrollment. CollegeTracks enrollees who pursue college within the region are now eligible to apply for its College Success Institute, which teaches valuable time management and study skills. Students learn the critical differences between high school and college, and are taught how to deliver on the new expectations. They're then matched with a college success coach who meets with each student once a semester on campus to help map out and monitor a College Degree Plan and College Completion Plan. "Overall, it's a long and intensive commitment to each student, but the return on investment is incredible," Nancy affirms. "Operating with a budget of around \$900,000, we invest around \$1,200 per year per student, but when you match that against the financial aid they earn and their increased lifetime earning potential, it's a nobrainer. And, as we engage in a strategic planning process to become even more efficient and effective while expanding into other schools, it's truly an investment in revolutionizing higher education. That goal is priceless."

The social justice undercurrents of Nancy's work were forged from the very earliest days of her childhood growing up in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Her father would tell her stories of her grandfather, who worked as a physician in downtown Philadelphia and provided free care for all the patients who couldn't afford to pay. Her mother carried a similar mantel, supporting equality and justice in every way she could. "She participated in silent vigils against the Vietnam War every Saturday for years," Nancy

recalls. "I also remember her going door-to-door in our lily-white neighborhood with the Fair House Pledge, asking neighbors to consider any offer, regardless of race, if they decided to sell their home. She had doors slammed in her face, and was astounded every time when she encountered racism or injustice, but she remained completely undaunted."

Nancy's father had wanted to be a doctor, like his own father, but had instead enlisted in the army when he was seventeen. By the time he got out, he was 21 and had no formal higher education, so he decided to pursue business instead. He was the first Jewish salesman in IBM's Philadelphia office, blazing a trail of cultural integration and excelling as a top performer. His influence would be critical in guiding Nancy and her younger brother into business later on, equipping them with valuable skills that would then be brought back to helping professions. Their mother, as well, emphasized the importance of lifelong learning when she went back to school for her social work degree at age 40.

Growing up, the picture frames adorning the mantle in Nancy's house held photographs not of blood relatives, but of cultural icons like Martin Luther King, Jr., John F. Kennedy, and Robert F. Kennedy. With the family's focus set on its role within the larger context of national and global politics, Nancy led a blissfully happy childhood. Big anti-war marches in D.C. in 1968 and 1971 were family events, and when Nancy wasn't joining her mother on a social justice mission, she loved immersing herself in books, school, and friends. She came to understand the subtle magnificence of the U.S. political process when she'd watch her mother, a tirelessly upbeat Democrat, man the polls on Election Day as hundreds of Republican votes rolled into bury the dozen liberal votes cast in their precinct. Likewise, she remembers coming home from school the day JFK was shot, finding her mother weeping and the nation changed irrevocably. It was a childhood with a hand on the pulse of national affairs, and a mind toward how her own role in those affairs might evolve in the future.

In school, Nancy was a rabble-rouser, but always in the service of a higher good, and always stopping short of causing serious concern. Inspired by her mother and father, who taught her that every system could be beaten, she planned antiwar protests and class walk-outs. Academically, she excelled in the areas in which she was naturally gifted, and wrote off other subjects that required work, reasoning that she shouldn't waste time on something she didn't have inherent aptitude for. Luckily, Ash Carter, the current nominee for the Secretary of Defense, was a good friend of hers at the time, and convinced her it was worth the effort, and she ended up earning decent grades in harder subjects like math.

Eleventh grade proved to be a particularly evolutionary year for Nancy. Inspired by her older friend, Joan, she set up an independent study program that allowed her to spend the first half of each school day at Temple University or the University of Pennsylvania, doing college-oriented research that prepared her well for the years ahead. Her school was also led by a principal with tremendous vision, who was determined to launch a progressive alternative public high school. Nancy had the opportunity to join the planning process that year, and to enroll in the new school's first class for her senior year. "It was launched by a group of teachers, students, and administrators who wanted a very participatory and collaborative learning environment," she says. "By the time I finished my senior year, there was no question in my mind that I could participate in major changes. Between my parents' activism and my own, I had the strong understanding that it was completely ridiculous to feel that you just had to accept whatever situation you fell into in life. I had seen firsthand that, together, people can make real change."

The experience was also valuable in revealing to Nancy her preference for some structure in life. She had applied early decision to Hampshire College, known for its free-flowing approach to education, but was deferred. Luckily, in the months that followed, she realized that while she appreciated the alternative school she had joined, she wanted a college experience with a few more parameters. After visiting Brown University, she knew it was the perfect place for her. "Brown has a good deal of structure, but not a lot of requirements," she explains. "It had professors and classes like a traditional school, but no general education requirements, so I was free to make my own education. It was an enormously formative time for me, allowing me to play around in the world of ideas to find my place through my own decision-making process. It was an incredibly rich intellectual environment, but one where

you're meant to navigate on your own and be the master of your own fate—a luxury and responsibility that banished any notion of ever being passive or a victim in life."

This mindset became particularly important when her father suffered a heart attack the summer after her freshman year. He survived, but was laid up in the hospital for months. By that time, he had left IBM sales to start a career in the construction industry, though he knew nothing about it. He had apprenticed himself to a developer to learn the building business, and was now the General Manager of a company that was building retirement communities in New Jersey, so he hired Nancy to be his eyes and ears in the office while he was gone. The company was automating their payroll at the time, and because she had taken a computer course at college, she was able to help by writing code. "As my first job that actually used my brain, it was an incredible introduction into the real world of work," she remembers. "I worked there for the next two summers as well."

Nancy had always thought she'd become a lawyer because of her vocal nature and ability to hold her own in an argument, so she landed a job as a litigation paralegal at a big Wall Street law firm upon graduating from Brown in 1976 with a BA in history. She decided to organize the paralegals in the department, and they did a survey that revealed they were substantially underpaid. They were able to negotiate better wages and salaries, but she still felt distaste for the competitive, dog-eat-dog culture atmosphere. With that, she decided to pursue business school instead. "I liked that business seemed to have the clear, straightforward goal of making a profit," she explains.

Nancy enrolled in Wharton's MBA program, withstanding some culture shock amidst peers determined to make their way to Wall Street or management consulting firms. Yet her ideals and approach resonated strongly with one of her classmates, Jeffrey Wagner, who dreamed of getting into sports marketing. The romance that blossomed between the two of them helped her persevere, as did the Wharton Follies, a theatrical production put on by students who wrote new words to Sondheim and other show tunes. Though she had sung in college, she had never danced or acted, yet she was accepted into the act as a performer. "As crazy as it seems, those performances were what finally taught me that

practice really makes a difference," she says. "That translated into studying, and I saw that when I took the time to do practice problems, I learned the stuff. And it translated into business and public speaking, teaching me that you need to know your material cold so you can be free to focus on other things while presenting."

The summer she was in business school, Nancy went to work for General Mills in Minneapolis, and loved it so much that she decided to take a job there upon graduating. It was a phenomenal company that truly cared for the surrounding community and for its employees, hastening Nancy's professional return to sociallyminded work. But Jeff had taken a job in Washington, D.C., at Donald Dell's sports management firm, becoming the first non-lawyer professional to be hired at ProServ. When Nancy ultimately decided to make the move, she learned about Porter Novelli, a social marketing firm using the tenets of for-profit marketing to induce behavior change. Bill Novelli, one of her mentors there, played a seminal role in creating the discipline and later headed the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, making an enormous mark on the world. During Nancy's tenure at the firm, Porter Novelli, worked on smoking cessation campaigns for the National Cancer Institute, the National High Blood Pressure Education Program, and a project to bring international contraceptive marketing to Egypt and other countries in need. "The experience really validated the notion that I could use my business and marketing education for good," she affirms. "The environment was rife with theories and approaches and discipline, all of which I later drew on to start College Tracks."

After three years at Porter Novelli, Nancy worked a brief, unfulfilling stint at the Psychiatric Institutes for America before having her first child, Julie. A friend then dragged her out of maternal retirement to do some marketing consulting work for his commercial real estate business, launching her consulting career. She did some social marketing and healthcare work and decided to get a masters in health policy from Johns Hopkins University, emulating her parents' commitment to lifelong learning and fearlessly plunging into new career avenues. She found the program to be a perfect fit, both intellectually stimulating and socially minded. The degree allowed Nancy to focus her consulting work on organizations like the Agency for Health Care Quality and Research

which kept her brain busy until CollegeTracks came along.

Now, with her life's purpose in sight, and with the education and business skills necessary to truly achieve it, Nancy has Jeff to thank for his support and collaboration. "My success starts with the understanding we've always had to never make assumptions about what the other would do," she explains. "We knew we would always find a way to allow each of us to do what was important and meaningful to us. We weren't going to get ourselves into a situation where one or the other of us had to do something we didn't like or believe in for any long period of time. We were never interested in trading off what made us happy and fulfilled for money." Jeff now sits on the board of CollegeTracks, and is a major contributor of time, money, and sales and fundraising expertise, not to mention moral support. "He's fearless and always willing to say to people, 'Hey, my wife is doing this unbelievable thing. It's really important and you've got to be a part of it.' There's no way I could have done all this without him."

When their daughter, Julie, was in middle school, Jeff and Nancy launched a nonprofit lacrosse program for girls because there were no opportunities to play the sport in the public middle schools. When they realized cost was a prohibitive factor to some of the girls, they added a fundraising component to provide for those children. Jeff has since expanded the program to two recreation centers, working with the county to offer underprivileged children the opportunity to play lacrosse. "I love can-do attitudes, which is something sports help to each children," Nancy says. "I always aim to hire smart, passionate, curious people whose instincts are to ask how we do it, not whether we should do it. I think Jeff's program lays the foundation for this kind of approach and has benefits for kids later on in life."

In advising young people entering the working world today, Nancy encourages exploration. "The younger generation is facing some tough economic times, and I see many

people take jobs as baristas while they wait for the perfect job to come along," she observes. "But it's important to get out there and try an array of different things, even if they're not your dream job. Whatever you do, you'll learn from it, so don't be afraid to try opportunities that don't completely match the image in your head of what you want. You just might be surprised."

As well, Nancy underscores importance of looking beneath the surface of any circumstance to understand the root causes and realities that are not readily apparent in life. Citing works by the architect Christopher Alexander and the anthropologist Edward Hall, she points out that even the most fundamental elements like time and space are relative and culturally-constructed. "There are underlying rules and principles that give rise to the systems and patterns of behavior dictating the world's status quo," she points out. "Understanding invisible rules, principles, biases, or prejudice is critical in breaking down the barriers of injustice and miscommunication. If we are to repair the world through human action, we need these tools in our hands and this understanding in our hearts."

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