The Better Legacy Campaign

Arriving in Providence, Rhode Island, in the summer of 2013, I understood that I was a representative of a very special type of community that needs much more support and empowerment from the academic community: a high-poverty community. This problem is impossible to ignore. Even walking down Richmond High School hallways, the plague of financial instability and culture of poverty is immersive. As an ambassador from Richmond, Indiana, it was very clear to me that my responsibility was to seek solutions for my community at one of the finest institutions in the world.

Leaving Brown, I knew I wanted my Action Plan to combat poverty, I knew that I wanted it to be a week-long event, and I knew I wanted it to be community-wide. Other than that, it was hard to move forward. I was riddled with questions as to how to garner community support, how to guarantee attendance, and what exactly to plan. Initially, I wanted to model the week on events scheduled in Australia called “Anti-Poverty Weeks”, but I realized that this was not the kind of event that could change a community in which the majority of citizens are actually living in poverty.

Research was also tough; there are a seemingly infinite collection of intellectuals, writers, and researchers who will bemoan poverty, speaking of how it must be eliminated, but few suggest solutions, and those who do generally call for national or state policy changes. Many books written on combating poverty are written with regard to poverty in third-world nations. Almost all the research being done sees poverty as something mostly inescapable, and investigates causes rather than solutions. This makes sense because of the statistics we have on success rates for impoverished children, but it is not very helpful.

The first spark of inspiration came in December 2013, when I read an article in the New York Times by Manhattan Institute economics researcher Scott Winship. Winship researches social mobility and immobility – the ability of people to move up the socioeconomic ladder. His landmark suggestion is to build a social infrastructure in which anyone with goals has the means by which to achieve them, rather than simply giving money to poor people. Money given to poor people helps to satisfy needs, but ultimately leads to poor people having money and nothing more.

These ideas were wholly in accordance with my own experience. The reason poverty has not yet been solved is that poverty is more than a financial situation; it’s a mindset, a culture. Regardless of financial situation, impoverishing lifestyles are lived when drugs are involved, or education and other avenues to success are rejected, or specific tools for achievement are not known or practiced in a household. When I took on combating poverty, I took on bettering the lives of not only the 73% of my fellow Richmond High School students who need government assistance paying $2.25 per day for lunch – I took on bettering the lives of the growing proportion of students who may live in more stable households, but are led by their friends even from an early age to take up impoverishing attitudes.

I still had more research to do, although my best resources were encountered by chance. On a visit to Columbia University, I picked up a newspaper and read that Edmund Phelps had published a new, broad, and widely anticipated economic theory under the title
Phelps’s work is too magnanimous to do justice in any summary I can write here briefly, but it is mandatory to say that the work provided me with a vision, for the first time, of what it would look like for Richmond to live up to its potential. Phelps’s central idea is dynamism, which is a tendency to innovate indigenously on a local level. The tendency is there as a result of an infrastructure being in place in which people beginning an economically implicated life adventure have the power, resources, and values necessary to succeed, or, alternatively, to try, fail, try again, and then succeed.

This also was in accordance with my own experience and understanding; the reason kids do not seem to be prospering is a question of values, and Richmond needs to look a lot more dynamic. When dynamism exists in an economy (or, in this case, a community), creativity abounds and, as a result, self-actualization is a standard. This is because people get to do what they want to do.

However, this is not the case in Richmond; many kids do not get to do what they want to do for a variety of reasons. Many fail to recognize the adverse effects of growing up in multigenerational poverty, and as a result do not take the necessary steps to overcome these adverse effects and work toward achieving their goals. Many do not understand that scholastic performance very directly impacts whether or not people in charge will hire them to do the work they want to do. Some with sky-high goals in athletics or music do not realize that, in order to be a professional baseball player or professional singer, they must be the best baseball player or singer anyone in Richmond knows, which means that they must put in more work than anyone they know. Many do not feel empowered or validated enough to strive for success in the classroom because no parent or teacher has ever recognized their potential. For many living in multigenerational poverty, the idea of living a life of financial stability and fulfillment is wholly foreign because no family members or friends have secured these things; sure, the students knows what a teacher or nurse or doctor is, but the idea of being one and living a stable and fulfilling lifestyle is not something that can be really imagined, let alone something that students can work to obtain.

In sum, many students seem to have expectations and ideas that are out of touch with what it takes to live a secure, happy lifestyle. This is often because of social context – what people around them say about them, tell them, and do around them, as well as how people around them act, work, and live life.

At this point, I had identified the root of the problem, and was ready to strike. My former teacher, Mrs. Karrianne Polk-Meek, said the wisest words I ever heard when I was in her AP U.S. History course: “History is the legacy in which we live.” All the students in Richmond live in a setting determined by history, by a legacy laid down by parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, neighbors, and/or family friends. Many of these existing legacies are disadvantageous to youngsters growing up in their shadow. Students would prosper if they would look at these legacies, these social contexts in which none of them had a say, and take a moment to think about whether or not the pressures they feel as a result of these social contexts will help them achieve their goals. Then, students would do well to take appropriate action to overcome obstacles and achieve these goals, break the cycle of poverty, and lay down a better legacy for Richmond.
This is indubitably asking a great deal of students, and the Allegory of the Cave comes to mind; many students are so integrated into cultures of poverty that it would take something very wrenching to empower them to declare independence and take hold of their futures in a new and positive way. This is hardly the fault of these students; self-analysis is challenging, and effective societal analysis is even more challenging. Applying knowledge gained from either of these processes is a daunting task. Life changes would result.

The first step to actualizing this vision is provided by Leo Tolstoy in *Essays, Letters, and Miscellanies*; he advises “If, then, I were asked for the most important advice I could give, that which I considered to be the most useful to the men of our century, I should simply say: in the name of God, stop a moment, cease your work, look around you.”

If kids stuck in disadvantageous legacies would look up from their actions only for a moment, good could be done. If a discussion could be started in school, self-discussion might follow. This idea, though quite novel, was not absolutely unprecedented at Richmond High School – a social welfare organization, of which I am a founding member, called The Movement, has been on a mission to “change the culture of Richmond Community Schools” since my freshman year. Among other things, we helped to write a curriculum implementable in high schools across the country promoting monthly values we see as important to getting along with others and building a healthy high school environment. The curriculum is called re: connect, and is marketed by the group Core Essential Values.

The mission of the Better Legacy campaign is much more complex, specific, and academic at its foundation than that of The Movement, but it was helpful to have experience writing curriculum for a school system. It was also helpful to have a group of caring adults who were open to campaigns for cultural change in the high school, who were able to give advice as far as making community connections, and who were able to deal with some of the business logistics of managing a social change campaign. In addition, the Movement proved that one of the most effective tools for social change is stimulating meaningful and genuine communication between people who can feel empathy for each other. Almost all people have good intentions for one another, and if there is opportunity for that to be communicated, smoother relationships can be built. In addition, life-changing advice is more believable if taken from others who have been in similar positions.

So I wrote a curriculum to implement in Richmond Community Schools that relied heavily on communication between RCS students, faculty, and alumni. The Better Legacy Campaign would kick off from May 12 to May 16 in what would be called “Better Legacy Week.” The components of the kick-off were many.

First, high school students were scheduled to receive notes of recognition in their first period classes on the first day of the week. I wanted all students to feel validated, cared about, and intelligent enough to actively pursue their education by asking for help in classes, trying challenging new things, and receiving special attention from faculty. Public education is only great if it is seized by students; no one, unfortunately, automatically grows just by attending public school. However, many students have been brainwashed by parents, teachers, or friends into believing that they are lost causes as far as education goes. “Why would I take an AP class?” “Why should I raise my hand? I won’t get it right anyway.” “All the teachers think I’m dumb – they don’t care about me, so why would they help me?”
“I’m not smart anyway. I’d just fail that class.” These are all statements utilized by RHS students, especially the 73% of students who live in multigenerational poverty settings.

In addition, these statements are all indicative of impoverishing attitudes. Aristotle laid out in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that happiness only comes from constantly seeking out and taking on new challenges, which makes sense; self-development can hardly occur without dealing with new experiences, and true happiness can hardly be earned without self-development. Phelps takes this principle to the economic arena; in Chapter 11 of *Mass Flourishing*, he suggests that the reader substitute “flourishing” for “happiness” when reading *Nicomachean Ethics*. According to Phelps, the key to being financially stable and economically creative (in other words, having dynamism) is to “flourish.”

In this light, it follows that students possessing the aforementioned attitudes would fail to flourish and thus condemn themselves and their children to financial jeopardy unless a change takes place or, by some miniscule chance, financial stability is achieved without education. This only occurs in very special cases, such as lottery-winning or professional athleticism. Neither of these things can be expected.

It also follows that, if students feel empowered enough to take challenging classes, ask for help in class, and ask for the special treatment they deserve from faculty, students will almost inevitably grow, thus taking steps towards true happiness and economic flourishing.

Secondly, teachers gave five-minute speeches daily in every class regarding how to study for the class, why the class is important, and why teaching is important to each teacher. This was an attempt to bridge a disconnect; something taken for granted in many more privileged households is that advice can be received in these households as to where to put school in life (i.e. how much to study, what to study, how to study). That many deficient domestic environments do not assume the value of education or act on this value is also taken for granted. If teachers were able to explicitly detail the importance of school, teaching, and how to be successful in class, students in such deficient domestic environments would at least be equipped with the fundamental information to begin a different academic track next fall.

The third and fourth components of the Better Legacy campaign were aimed at putting Richmond students in touch with community members and RHS alumni who have overcome adversity and are working to secure financial stability and happiness on their own terms. Multigenerational poverty is so pervasive because growing up in that setting alienates students from financial security and happiness in a very fundamental way. This is best explained by the manner in which Thomas Kuhn describes paradigms in his work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Throughout history, people have lived in closed loops of knowledge known as paradigms. In these paradigms, which are essentially epochs in which certain articles of truth are widely accepted, the truths held by society will be defended with conviction and certainty. This is not because the societally accepted truths are the best or most accurate truths, but because the truths surround would-be revolutionaries so completely that to deny them would be contrary to experience, even if the truths have not necessarily been proved by experience for each individual. The truths held in a period are
believed to be the only real truths until a new set of truths is seen, observed, and very slowly 
amcepted.

This is exactly the case with multigenerational poverty; a household in a
multigenerational poverty setting lives in a paradigm, holding truths and values that are 
generally impoverishing. Mere statements expressing beliefs running contrary to those held 
in the little paradigms of the impoverished households are dismissed, just as Galileo’s 
suggestions regarding heliocentric theory were dismissed, with cries of “How can this be 
true? This is not in accordance with what those around me are saying!”

Staging a revolution against these little paradigms will involve giving tangible 
counterexamples and undeniable evidence disproving the impoverishing beliefs and truths 
held in so many deficient domestic environments.

Fourteen counterexamples arrived Tuesday, May 13th at noon. I recruited an all-star 
group of RHS alumni, drawing from the Youth Empowerment Movement, and a group of 
stellar African-American ladies and gentlemen who attended Richmond High School, as 
well as former star athletes, band captains, student body presidents, thespians, and 
vocalists. All spoke to class assemblies in groups of three, recounting from their experiences 
manners in which school was helping them achieve their goals and how their hard work was 
starting to pay off. If this component of the week proved anything, it proved that something 
powerful is always the result of putting together groups of outstanding people. To the 
surprise of many administrators, students were positively engrossed in the speeches of 
former classmates and fellow Richmond citizens. All the guest speakers were Richmond 
students, all were undeniably similar to the students sitting in the assemblies, and all held 
values that would lead them to flourish. For many, these speakers were unimpeachable 
counterexamples to the impoverishing attitudes held in the paradigms at home.

Other counterexamples came from community adults, who are not automatically as 
credible as RHS alumni, but whose testimony was just as powerful because many delivered 
surprising stories of personal struggle that were much more relatable to student’s lives than 
what many expected. In this way, many of the adults, whom I designated “Richmond 
Heroes”, were extremely valuable because they could give a wealth of specific strategies as to 
how to deal with times of challenge and adversity. Some of the stories shared gave insight 
that could have been anticipated; the RHS career pathways advisor and assistant basketball 
coach was raised in the projects of Gary, Indiana, and gave a powerful account of the events 
that led him to understand education was even more important than the sport that had 
consumed his life, while at the same time conveying that hard work can lead to the 
realization of far-fetched dreams. Some great insight was more surprising; that the District 
Superintendent’s struggles with doctoral studies would be so parallel to the academic 
struggles of RHS students; that the manager of the Richmond RiverRats (a minor-league 
baseball team) believed so wholly in the formative power of the education system was 
surprising, but was all the more meaningful because of it. Students viewed an interview 
each day of the kick-off week, each a testimony against impoverishing attitudes.

So went the kick-off of the Better Legacy Campaign at Richmond High School.

I had originally planned to make the week doubly hectic by sending Richmond High 
School students to all RCS elementary and middle schools to spend three to five minutes in
each classroom, speaking about why it is important to keep learning and stay focused on school despite the sometimes drab and usually perfunctory tasks assigned to students of these age groups. However, this component was delayed because the earliest time at which I could meet with RCS principals after notifying the Superintendent of Schools was May 15th, during Better Legacy Week. So much work arranging for elementary and middle school visits had already been done that to table the visits until school starts again in the fall would have been painful, so arrangements were made for the visits to occur the week of May 10th to May 23rd. The principals received the news very well, so I expected the following week to go smoothly.

That was not the case, however. Because of a communication breach on my part, elementary and middle school principals were unaware of which day high school students would visit their schools. This problem was fixed by Wednesday, however, and every school but one had been infiltrated by high school volunteers by the end of the week.

In the midst of all this logistical stress, I was temporarily blinded as to the meaning of what I was doing. Students returning from trips told me how fulfilling it was to visit the younger students, but I was just relieved that the visits had occurred smoothly.

This was remedied quickly when I visited Fairview Elementary School with a group of my peers on Thursday of this week. Teachers were so welcoming, and the Fairview kids were every bit as enchanted by the group of outsiders as the Richmond High School students had been by the alumni. After speaking, the entire school attended an assembly in which a local jazz band played, and my group had the privilege of dancing and singing and clapping with the young kids. Some of the Better Legacy Ambassadors present had more in common than I do with the Fairview students, who live in a generally impoverished district, but it was extremely impactful for me to feel totally integrated into the throbbing, excited crowd. In a way, the experience was reassurance that, even though the kids came from different backgrounds, we were all on the same page as far as wanting to be happy.

By the 24th of May, I had started the Better Legacy Campaign in the RCS School System, and I had come a long way myself.

The Better Legacy Campaign is unique in many ways, but one of its most special features is that it is particularly adapted to Richmond. The Campaign is an instance of indigenous innovation, using location-specific information to make the most difference. Richmond has a unique culture – it has remnants of 19th century swagger, hosts a world-class liberal arts university, and is filled with underprivileged individuals. There is an air of unrealized destiny, a prophecy of returning to the Richmond that was the birthplace of recorded jazz, the city of millionaires, and the crossroads of America. While the whole city has not yet been convinced, a powerful portion of the population believes that the city’s potential can be re-actualized, and is willing to do anything to get there for the sake of fellow citizens. It is from this population that Richmond Heroes, alumni speakers, and Elementary and Middle School Ambassadors are drawn. I hope that the Better Legacy Campaign will grow more and more integrated in this struggle for Richmond restoration.

On a basic level, I learned all the things I could have been expected to learn – that it is impossible to over-communicate, that details require as much attention as major efforts, that achieving goals takes drive, that the community has a great asset in its public school
staff and other affiliated volunteers, that delegating responsibility is dangerous unless the person to whom responsibility is delegated is absolutely trustworthy, that taking on the planning of a huge solo venture is extremely difficult, that administrators vary and are sometimes tricky, and that there is a difference between what potential aides say and what they are willing to do.

Most importantly, I gained a new perspective on what it means to learn. The Better Legacy Campaign saw me develop profoundly, but I was not reading, memorizing, or working problems. I was experiencing the beauty and power of humanity by letting my passion for learning manifest itself into something that spills over. I was living my learning. While I was charged with implementing an Action Plan project on the campus of Brown University, the specific measures I would take to counteract poverty in my community came from reading and being so excited that I had to do something to make the subject real. As I read *Mass Flourishing*, I wanted to help build Richmond into a community with dynamism, a community in which people are flourishing because they are able to do what they want to do. As I read *Nicomachean Ethics*, I understood that some of my classmates were pursuing leisure rather than happiness by acting on impoverishing attitudes, but that they would earn happiness by preparing themselves to take on life’s challenges and win. As I read *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, I wanted to help families in my community revolt against their respective paradigms.

The Better Legacy Campaign is aimed at building an infrastructure of purpose in Richmond. Richmond citizens will hopefully want to take measures to fulfill themselves, and I want them to have the resources and ability to do so. My objectives for next fall are clear, and over the summer I intend to formulate specific actions to be taken. A transformation of my community will take time, but I think the Better Legacy Campaign has succeeded in prompting many to look up and start playing with the idea of living a Better Legacy.