

Deborah Kenny: Radical Education Reformer - Esquire

Thursday, January 12 2012, 4:53 PM

November 20, 2007, 12:01 AM

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A sudden widow with three kids decided to re-create urban education in New York City. And hundreds of lives have changed.

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Alan Witschonke

Spend time with Deborah Kenny and you walk away knowing that one day her name will be engraved in bronze. As we climb the stairs to the fourth floor of PS 194 in Harlem, she points out where she and President Bush paused on a landing to wait for Representative Charles Rangel to catch up with them. The president and the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee had come to visit Kenny because she works educational miracles.

We push through the doors onto the top floor and into Harlem Village Academy, the charter school she opened in 2003. The difference from the lower floors, which house a typical city school, is stark. The HVA sparkles, it seems brighter up here, and the

students are all neatly dressed in uniforms -- no baggy-ass jeans, no shirttails dragging, and no hats askew. As she takes you on a tour, you notice the subtler differences -- kids sit up straight in their chairs, no horseplay, no back-row whisperers. Students speak in complete sentences. The classrooms have names -- Duke, Syracuse, and Berkeley. The names are not mere dreams, and they are no accident.

In six years, Kenny's vision has grown into a trio of charter schools under the rubric of Village Academies, located in New York precincts where a muscular poverty has thrived for generations. The numbers alone tell a compelling story. Locally, passing rates for seventh-grade math hover around 30 percent. At HVA, the rate is a stunning 96 percent. Kenny takes

kids, by lottery, from the same blocks and projects and turns them into stellar students ready to move on to higher education, proving that poverty and fractured home lives are conquerable by a quality education. How does a white woman, an erstwhile soccer mom, end up leading the charge for radical education reform in Harlem?

It all started with a young man's dizzy spell. In 1999, Deborah and her husband, Joel, were in their late thirties, with three kids and a nice life in a leafy suburb. One day he complained of dizziness, and eighteen months later he was dead from leukemia. Faced with despair, Kenny, thirty-eight, decided to turn the howling grief into something positive, a calling as pure and as vital as any in our land. She decided to use her education, skills, and talent to help people who need it the most.

She had earned a Ph.D. in comparative international education from Columbia and taught public school in three states. Disillusioned by the systemic failures she encountered, she left for the corporate world, where she became vice-president of marketing for the parenting group at Time Warner and then head of Sesame Street Publishing. When she decided to start Village Academies, she knew she would utilize the business side of her background as much as the teaching side. She developed a business plan devoid of bureaucracy and heavily influenced by Jack Welch's notions of leadership analysis and accountability.

In founding her schools, Kenny strove to re-create urban education. Her emphasis is on teaching critical thinking, not standardized-test compliance. At VA's schools, student progress is monitored daily, and as problems arise, Kenny and her staff utilize a rapid-response approach to help students stay on course. If there is a sense of urgency in the way Kenny runs her schools, it is because she knows that she is in the business of saving these kids, of providing them with futures.

The other pillar of the VA model is a strict code of behavior. Kenny espouses relentless discipline -- long days, intensive homework, respectfulness in class -- infused with love. Kids are given a shot, but they have to pull their weight. The VA code is a balance of rights ("education is every child's birthright") and responsibilities ("education is my full-time job").

Kenny puts much of her effort into recruiting young teachers who share her passion. Last year she culled through a thousand applicants for eight new positions. Her staff exudes a kind of *joi de education* -- many had taught in schools where bureaucratic malaise stifled their ambitions. Kenny gives them a remarkable amount of freedom, tied to rigorous accountability. She wants her staff to shine as brightly as her pupils.

We move out to the playground for recess. Kids in full exuberance play under an autumn sun that seems to bask them in the glow of possibility. They are like thousands of school kids anywhere until a whistle blows and they freeze. They don't talk, they don't move, until they are instructed to line up with military precision and march back into the halls where, with the help of Kenny and her staff, they are forging themselves into full participants in the American Dream.

You leave her inspired to do more for others in this life.

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