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Motivated By Dark Childhood, Entrepreneur Helps At-Risk Kids With 'Friends' Program

Duncan Campbell, a Portland Native, had a rough past before he founded one of the nation's first timber investment firms, The Campbell Group. Neglected from an early age by his alcoholic parents, he worked three jobs to put himself through school and always said that, if he became wealthy, he'd come back for those children who have experienced the greatest amount of trouble and heartache in their short lives.

That journey began even before he became a successful businessman. In his 20's, Campbell worked as a childcare worker in the detention system unit in juvenile court, first at the Donald E. Long Home in Portland, Oregon, then at the Skipworth Home in Eugene.

“Most people would liken it to managing a jail, but we didn't treat them like we were their authority figures. We ran our unit as their friends,” said Campbell, whose father spent years in and out of jail himself. “We formed strong relationships with them over time, and they became be motivated to do things. Some were in there for arson and murder, some abused other kids, but they all needed someone to care for them.”



Almost every child had come from a home in which they were neglected, said Campbell, but after having numerous one-on-one conversations with the kids, one thing became clear. “At least 85% of those kids would have never been there if they had someone like a Friend in their childhood,” said Campbell. By “Friend,” he means a mentor that will stay in a child’s life from Kindergarden to college.

In 1993, after selling The Campbell Group, he enlisted the help of a friend with a PhD in child psychology and started non-profit Friends of the Children, hiring three educators to mentor eight children each as their full-time job. Now operating in six states nationwide, early intervention is still their key strategy. These educators—or Friends— spend six weeks in Kindergarten classrooms observing which kids aren’t showing up, who’s struggling academically, and who’s acting out. The children who are deemed most at-[risk](#) are brought into the program and, from then on, are referred to as Achievers.

In addition to providing educational support, Friends are just that—buddies who take their Achievers to the zoo and to sports games on weekends. By providing emotional and educational support for kids who come from awful home conditions, FOTC is, in fact, helping break the generational cycle of poverty.



Many Achievers are born to teen parents, and often, one or both parents are incarcerated or actively abusing drugs and alcohol. The percentages after Friends makes its impact, however, are impressive: 83% of kids graduate high school, 98% avoid early parenting, and 93% avoid juvenile hall.

“There’s so much instability in their lives. To have an adult role model stick around for that long makes all the difference,” said Terri Sorensen, President of Friends of the Children. “Some of the kids we choose are living in shelters, so it’s important to build bonds with families. Even if they move up to 30 miles away, our Friends will stay with the kids in the program.”

Often, volunteers in similar mentorship programs leave after just one year, which can be more harmful than helpful to children who are used to people coming and going very quickly. Because they usually don’t have the opportunity to experience a healthy transition in their home lives, FOTC pairs the kids up with one Friend from age 5-12, then another from age 12-18.



The stories are indeed heartbreaking, but many have happy endings. Five-year-old Millie from Klamath Basin, for example, showed signs of neglect when her Friend, Janessa, first found her. Millie's parents worked night jobs and struggled to provide for her basic needs. She was often bullied for coming to school smelling like stale food and cigarette smoke, and, while she worked hard, she struggled academically, expected little of herself, and was often absent.

Janessa helped her learn to care for herself, tutored her in school, and took her for a haircut at a professional salon. "It felt so good to have that lady run warm water over my hair, it smelled so nice afterward!" Millie said. Now in her seventh year in the program, she has made the honor roll and passed the state reading test.

Then there's six-year-old Durant, who can often be found bursting through New York's Harlem headquarters at 3pm each day, racing around to dish out hugs and making a beeline for the space where he gets tutoring. A few months ago, Durant's father was shot and killed. Durant is facing that loss without his older brother, also an Achiever, who is at a boarding school that partners with Friends New York. Durant struggles with controlling his emotions, paying attention and being impulsive.

Each afternoon, a Friend walks Durant from school to the center. His Friend, Erik Rivas, is a constant presence in his life, and, as a result, Durant is starting to believe that the balance of his life is shifting: more adventure, accomplishment and nurturing, less violence and fear. Durant has a grief camp available to him that Achievers who have suffered from losing a family

member often attend.



Campbell said that when he served on the Multnomah County Juvenile Services Commission and the Governor’s Task Force on Children, it was all about the lowest possible cost. But, based on that model, no change can take place.

“Someone told me they thought that nobody would ever support the Friends program because our biggest barrier was high cost per unit. But I knew that if I wanted to make real change, that’s what it would take.”

As it turns out, Campbell’s program is advantageous from a financial standpoint after all. For every dollar spent on an Achiever, seven dollars goes back into the community, according to a study done by the [Harvard Business School](#) Association of Oregon. This social ROI results from better jobs and more taxes paid by Achievers, fewer social support costs due to avoidance of early parenting, and savings on state incarceration costs within the juvenile justice system.

“It’s the same model I built my own [business](#) on. With most social programs, that dollar is gone, and it was an act of mercy that you cared for someone, but you didn’t change anyone’s life, their life just continued on the same path,” Campbell said.

Fortunately, expansion seems to be imminent for the non-profit. On the ground, they just opened a new office in the Bronx this past September, adding 20 new Kindergarteners from two elementary schools to the program. The South Bronx is one of the centers of poverty in NYC, and has

the highest unemployment rate and the highest rate of adults who failed to complete high school. Their Boston chapter has recently expanded their adolescent programming as well, and expects to double in capacity over the next few years.

Just yesterday, FOTC was named the winner in the 2014 Social Impact Exchange Business Plan Competition, and hopes to use the funds and services they were awarded to grow their national network to impact 7,500 children by 2017. They also recently became part of S&I 100, a program of the Social Impact Exchange, a web platform that helps potential donors navigate high performing non-profits.

“Our vision is that we’ll make this program big enough so that there won’t even be a juvenile detention system in our society,” Campbell said. “You can create resilience in these children if you start early enough, even if they’ve been damaged, but there has to be a long term relationship with an adult role model who has values and shares them with a child. Our Friends show these kids a whole different world.”

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