

First Person

Gerald Chertavian Year Up Executive Director



Year Up

Changing Minds

What makes a young, successful businessman decide to devote at least 10 years and \$500,000 to helping low-income youth get a leg up in the world? Was it the mentor at his Lowell, Massachusetts, high school who pointed him to Bowdoin College? Was it the satisfaction of helping boys through the Big Brother program—first at college in Maine and then while at Chemical Bank in New York? Perhaps it was selling a software company in 1999 before the downturn. But the main reason that Gerald Chertavian founded the nonprofit Year Up in February 2000 was to create a school where low-income youth could build career paths out of poverty. The program offers a year of skills training, a stipend, long-term mentoring, internships in local companies, and college credits. After several years of strong, measurable results in Boston, Chertavian is establishing Year Up schools in Providence and beyond.

C&B: Describe how your early experiences influenced the Year Up concept.

GC: I saw the power of mentoring both as a recipient and as a Big Brother. The boys in the Big Brother program had no adult male role model. Similarly, the young men and women Year Up works with lack career role models. Year Up gives them needed mentoring and helps them build career networks after graduation.

Being a Big Brother also showed me the barriers low-income people face every day. My Little Brother David lived on Manhattan's Lower East Side in the

Photographs courtesy of Year Up

Rutgers housing project. In 1987, when I met him, Rutgers was one of New York's most heavily photographed crime scenes. Going there Saturdays, I was exposed to the needs of David's brothers, neighbors, and friends. I learned how difficult it was for them to make positive transitions and how much my advice and support meant to them.

C&B: Is that when you thought of a way to give low-income youth a career boost?

GC: Yes. I was applying to business schools then, and I wrote an essay about starting a school to address the opportunity divide. Why should anyone's prospects be limited because they were born in the wrong zip code or educational system? I thought a direct intervention was the answer. Of course, I wasn't able to carry this out immediately. In 1992, when I finished Harvard Business School, I was married and in debt. I ended up co-founding Conduit Communications in London and helping run it until it was sold.

When we sold Conduit, I already had a clear sense of how I wanted to spend my time. I had continued being a Big Brother to David through the 1990s, and that experience made me want to help the men and women who don't get into our mainstream. I returned to Massachusetts to sound out local support.

C&B: How did you prepare yourself to run a school?

GC: I spent about six months researching programs for low-income adults in England and America. Initially, we got only 60 percent of the model right. We were right that we had to be market led—we had to understand what companies needed and train for skills they'd pay for. We also were right that we couldn't fast-track development of student attitudes and behaviors. And we were right to start the skills training with a good sector—technology. What I underestimated was how much time we should spend teaching professional communication. I also didn't appreciate the critical importance of a clear, consistent, and fair structure to manage behavior. We asked Stanley Pollack from the Center for Teen Empowerment to create a system to help us with that.

C&B: How does Year Up work on communications skills and behavior?

GC: Students spend the first six months in an environment that involves both strong support and high expectations. We do not dumb down the program. We expect people to show up on time, work hard, turn in assignments, and be professional. We provide support to help them overcome challenges they may face outside the program, but we screen for young people who will fully commit.

First, we look for motivation, so the application process itself is challenging. People must submit an application, an essay, high school transcripts, and a reference. If applicants can get through that, they are probably motivated enough to arrive every day at 8:30 for classes. Second, applicants interview with a staff person, who tries to understand what's going on in their lives and whether this is the right next step. Finally, there's a learning assessment because we teach in a relatively standard way. We want to be sure we don't bring in individuals if we're not equipped to teach to their learning style. But we're all about support. If people make the effort and don't get in, we advise them on what they need to do next time. We're known for treating everyone with respect. When we started, we sought referrals through high schools, community-based organizations, and the *Metro* newspaper. Now more than 70 percent of students come through word of mouth.

C&B: I understand that Year Up has expanded to Providence.

GC: We wanted our first expansion to be in driving distance of Boston. Paul and Navyn Salem provided the start-up capital. Providence Mayor Cicilline welcomed us warmly. Companies including Textron, Citizens Bank, and Fidelity got involved. We've opened an office in Washington, D.C., too, with New York next.

C&B: Are you sticking with technology for your skills curriculum?

GC: Yes, but we recently launched a second curriculum, in financial-services operations. It's possible to do back-office financial services without a college degree, and the jobs are



The students, ages 18 and 24, apply their new skills in local businesses.

good—livable wages, health benefits, tuition reimbursement. Unfortunately, there is only one accepted job screen in this country—college. It doesn't have to be the only efficient screen. We must change mindsets. I have no problem with outsourcing, but there should be a concomitant strategy of “insourcing” in the inner city. At Year Up we partner with top executives—CIOs, CEOs. As our students build a track record without college degrees, executives may begin to wonder if their current job requirements make sense. Year Up must look beyond its direct impact and tackle systemic levers: changing mindsets, influencing policymakers, helping graduates build networks. By ourselves, we can't change the reality of 3.8 million young adults who are out of school and out of work.



Students get a year of training, a stipend, mentoring, internships, and college credits.

C&B: After students graduate, you stay connected?

GC: Definitely. They need networks to progress in their careers—and to reach back and pull others through. Seventy percent of low-income individuals have fewer than three people they can access for advice on jobs and college. Our graduates need a wider community.

C&B: You committed 10 years originally. Do you see yourself leaving?

GC: I don't. The question is, What's appropriate? There's a lot of work to do. If I were a bottleneck in building the leadership to make Year Up sustainable and scalable, that would be a mistake.

C&B: Is there a downside to scaling up?

GC: Sure—if you scale prior to developing the quality control and process control you need. Having financial capital, human capital, and process capital is as important as getting bigger. We made sure we had strong foundations before growing.

C&B: What help has Year Up received?

GC: Boston is an incredibly supportive community for social entrepreneurial programs. I could name individuals at the Boston Foundation, Trefler Foundation, Partners Healthcare, Boston Medical Center, Fidelity, State Street Bank—and all levels of government.

Today, with 89 percent of our graduates earning on average \$15 an hour within in four months of graduation, we have a track record. But before we had one, certain people took a chance on us. There is no shortage of strong concepts out there. It took courage to let us prove that Year Up was more than just an idea.

C&B: Can you evaluate your impact in ways corporate partners understand?

GC: Yes, we know how many students are working, how soon after graduation, and how much they are making. We're comfortable telling benefactors, “Don't fund us if we don't hit our numbers.” We are exceptionally measurable. The whole non-profit sector would benefit from holding itself accountable to outcomes. We've been fortunate to get funding from the state, but we've kept it to a modest level and leveraged it by getting private capital. The paid apprenticeships are another source. Students earn an education stipend from us, and our partner companies pay to participate. To government we can say, “We will pay back each dollar with incremental tax revenue within two to three years. And our graduates won't be drawing on your social programs.” Our students amaze visitors by how professional they are, how they dress, how they shake hands in the elevator. They're redefining people's view of who is talented and where talent resides in our community, and they're changing perceptions about low-income young adults. Together with our corporate partners we can close America's opportunity divide.