

## Susie Kay's Slam Dunk

By Katrina Olivares



There are very few people whose true calling come as clear as Susie Kay's. "My life is like a storybook-I like bringing people together for many different reasons. Sort of like a matchmaker, except not in the romantic sense." Susie's story has more substance though. She is the founder of Hoop Dreams, a nonprofit organization whose mission is "committed to expanding the academic and career horizons of Washington, DC public school students."

Hoop Dreams started as a basketball tournament meant to be a fundraiser for Susie's students at H.D. Woodson High School in 1996. These days, the organization goes beyond basketball: "It's not just about going to college; it's about scholarships, mentoring, SAT preparation courses, and internships," said Susie. A lot of the work consists in building bridges and relationships; linking DC public school students with the business community and greater opportunity.

Susie relates her personal experiences and challenges in the same breath as Hoop Dreams. Indeed, it is hard to imagine one without the other. Her vigor and voracity are a large part of her motivation, especially since the organization deals with a lot of "Complexity. [We're standing on] a quicksand of issues that are bigger and deeper than us." She is very aware that she is working "in a very wonderful, frustrating context" that deals with a lot of cultural and social stigmas as she strives to remain sensitive when it comes to running the organization. However, she is not one to lay blame on the circumstances of the kinds of communities that she works in, stressing that "There is no way we're going to point fingers [at people outside the community] by saying 'Why didn't they care?'" She understands that she shouldn't be deterred by the doubtful nature of Washington: "People always ask, 'What is she doing?' Everyone is always looking for an agenda." It's a good thing then that Susie is not easily swayed by skepticism, and looking at her purposeful dynamism, you know she means it when she says she wants to find more ways to help the kids in the city. "I still have faith and trust in people's humanity, [but at the same time] it's an uphill battle that never goes away."

Susie owes a lot of her persistence and positive nature from her late father, whom she refers to as "the greatest person I've known." Her father was one of the first Jewish graduates of the Naval Academy, and one of the people in charge of rebuilding the Ethiopian navy after World War II. She was regaled with stories of how her father toiled in Masawa, where he met her Italian Catholic mother. The nature of their meeting, in the midst of struggling towards another country's renewal, allowed them to find humor in their odd pairing, a situation that resulted in a home that had a "surplus of unconditional love and support." But more than this, it was her father's zeal for serving his country and community that made a great impact on Susie: "The way he respected and believed in people, that he had hope for humanity, that has kept me going for Hoop Dreams."

The other things that keep Susie pushing for Hoop Dreams' success sit at the core of their purpose: by building a support system for the children, she is also building stronger communities. She is a big believer of development from the bottom up, stressing that these children deal with the hard life of a single parent household in a tough neighborhood and have less than half a chance when it comes to making it in the real world. Susie wants to "eradicate mindsets by helping the kids deal with the diversity in their first real world experience. When you're the first one in your family to go to college, it's like being a fish out of water, and what we do at Hoop Dreams is an effort to give them a fighting shot."

Susie has certainly come a long way from her first few years in Washington. While majoring in Political Science at American University, she thought she would work for the government. Instead, she found herself teaching underprivileged kids in Anacostia as part of the school's outreach program. It was her first inner city experience, and she felt that student and teacher were from entirely different planets. "There was a real chasm and division between us-their reality was certainly very different from mine," she said. She felt deeply for the real injustice in the kids' situations, and for the odds that were against them. She remembered one of her first students, Jones Chandler, a kid who didn't have any family member who went to college nor had the real opportunity to get out of the tough neighborhood. He was the one whom he felt that "I didn't just want him to dream about a future-I wanted to make it tangible." Jones became the first of many children whom Susie tried to impart a sense of hope to have in the broader world, teaching them to keep going and never give up.

After that stint, no matter where Susie went, she knew that the issues of inaccessibility to real opportunities were not peculiar to her sometime students: "These are national issues that are part of everyday life, even as people told me to keep looking towards working for the government, somehow my gaze would get averted, to across the river, to Anacostia, where I knew many of these kids were." So she taught American government and politics at Woodson, thinking that she would leave it after a year. But she started teaching at the school in the early nineties, at the height of the crack epidemic, a drug that she saw "tear people apart" and made her even more determined to show help these kids have a better life. She quickly taught herself to take the good with the bad, and armed only with her sheer strength, she continued to face the life she committed herself to, watching her students come in day after day, with school their only solace from a tumultuous home life. She thought that "if they could go through their struggles, then so could I."

There were many moments when Susie felt that she beat and broken, but she was always thankful to be alive. And it was outside the life she had known in a loving family, in the midst of the inner city, teaching students whose lives were so different from her own, was where she found herself. She also wanted to show the children that she wasn't the only one: "I wanted to show the kids that there are other good people out there who would love to help them." She already knew that all these children were great, it was just a matter of getting other people involved. But to do this, she had to change the "us versus them" perception-a reality for people on both sides of the river. "The tougher things were, the more determined I became," she said.

Things did take its toll on her when her father died. Somehow, she felt bereft of the inspiration and perseverance he exemplified, "I lost so much of myself." It was one of her students who got her back on track. Jerrod Warrick, then a freshman at Morehouse, wrote her a letter saying, "Miss Kay, I'm sorry your dad died, but you've got to pull yourself together, at least you had a dad." His words struck her so much as she felt the pureness of her former student's intent as well as heartfelt gratitude for how the world manages to give back what we give away: "I had so much love given to me, I knew I had to return the favor somehow. I feel ridiculously wealthy [in terms of my family life], I want to keep doing this for the kids." She certainly took to heart what she said to the kids: "Don't blame the bad stuff." Since her father's death, she has reminded herself of this everyday.

Susie hasn't looked back since then and said, "I haven't stopped [working on this] since 1997." She remembered that year as when Hoop Dreams took on a life of its own, and took over her life as well. She says how she has sacrificed many pieces of her life for it, and even if she feels that everything was "unplanned and surreal," she still continues to find creative ways to fund and support her programs. She has learned to trust in the goodness of people on both sides of her organization, the givers and receivers, and recognized that their goodness comes from a solid core that she makes sure not to take for granted.

With over 700 DC public high schools under her wing, she knows she needs to reach out to the relevant people to benefit the communities in Wards 7 and 8. She said, "At the end of the day, who am I to say, we have nothing to do [with their circumstances]?" For now, Susie continues to "believe and invest" in the children's futures and is looking forward to the meaningful results that come with it. The annual tournament has now become a way to galvanize the community and has turned into a 1,000 person event graced by basketball stars and other sports and political luminaries.

Hoop Dreams has had 100 students graduate since its inception, and Susie said that the numbers are still growing exponentially. To this day, the thing that gets her up in the morning is the possibility of helping even more kids. Looking at Susie, one can't help but say that Hoop Dreams is a realization of her values and beliefs: that she has translated these into providing hope for children whose lives would have turned out much differently from what she has helped them achieve. "I want to teach these kids to embrace the totality of their lives. These kids have become the sum of very difficult experiences and challenges; their accomplishments are special and meaningful to me." Her spirit remains undaunted as well: "As long as I can keep doing this, I will."