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# The Dreamer

## SUSIE KAY

Founder and President of Hoop Dreams

By Samuel Goldreich

**W**hen Susie Kay started out, she had nothing but \$1,000 in seed money from a friend, a desire to deliver a desperately needed service and a dream. Ten years later, she reports \$1.3 million in annual revenue, serves a client base of 80 and is living her dream of bridging the gap between Washington's business and political elite and disenfranchised inner-city District youth.

The Hoop Dreams Scholarship Fund Kay founded while still a public high school teacher in 1996 has provided 1,400 college scholarships and renewals totaling \$2.5 million and helped coach nearly 400 students through its SAT prep program in partnership with the Princeton Review. The program will get a big boost in the coming year, thanks to a \$500,000 grant from the District government.

The fund which took its name from the 1995 Hoop Dreams documentary about a pair of Chicago projects teens hoping to make it to the NBA--has set a national example for other groups that have formed to give low-income students the financial and life skills

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Bryan Burris

means to go to college. Major local and national companies and executives line up each year to provide contributions or act as mentors.

"Young people have to have jobs," Marie Johns, former CEO of Verizon Washington, and DC mayoral candidate said in June during the fund's annual basketball tournament fundraiser. "Anything that prepares our young people to move from high school into a good paying job, that is a good thing and I'm all about supporting that."

Kay continues to build on her efforts to pair students and mentors from the local business community, which forms the core of her original dream to inspire kids in her own classes to make it to college, build careers and lift themselves from poverty. That means not only tapping power players like Washington Capitals chief and AOL Vice Chairman Ted Leonsis as a contributor but pairing him as a mentor to a District school student.

Kay learned that lesson during the 1990s crack epidemic, when she left her job as a Democratic Capitol Hill staffer to teach American government at H. D. Woodson Senior High School in Far-Northeast on the "wrong" side of the Anacostia River. "Driving over that bridge every day was like going between two different planets," she said. She committed herself to trying to bring those planets together.

Kay reached out to friends in the business and political worlds to guest-teach in her classes and to show that there is life beyond the District's mean streets. One of the first was another Hill staffer from the GOP side of the aisle, Ari Fleischer, who at that time was the Republican spokesman for the House Ways and Means Committee. Kay recruited him to explain the Republican "Contract With America" to her students.

When Kay got the idea to stage a hoops tourney between her students and members of Congress and their aides, Fleischer signed a check for \$1,000 to help out. That first event in 1996 raised \$4,000 and won the attention of George C. Newstrom, then senior vice president of Electronic Data Systems Corp. He called Kay to offer \$10,000 and EDS became the fund's founding sponsor, one of more than a dozen donors that now annually contribute at least \$50,000. Newstrom, who served as Virginia's technology secretary before becoming CEO of Wisper Technologies in 2004, still serves on the fund's board of directors.

Hoop Dreams thrives today thanks to a basic premise in the business world.

"We're only as good as our relationships," Kay said. "You have to be relentless to keep something like this going and you have to know how everything and everyone makes it work." •