



Dan Corley, center, with students. From left, Jenise Jones, James Saunders, and Janelle Jones.

Dan Corley could have taken the same path many of his Brown classmates did and had a big, shiny career. Instead, he opened a school in South Providence that is **beating the odds** and **changing kids' lives**.

BY BOB CHIAPPINELLI • PHOTOGRAPH BY DANA SMITH

# first IN CLASS

**It's 8 a.m.** on a sunny spring morning at Community Preparatory School in South Providence. The school day launches as it would at any other school — with greetings, announcements and accolades. And then there's this: the recitation and signing for the deaf of educator Marva Collins's "Pledge to Myself":

"This day has been given to me fresh and clear. I can either use it or throw it away. I promise I shall use this day to the fullest, realizing that it can never come back again. I realize this is my life to use or to throw away."

Thanks to Community Prep, many students who otherwise might have thrown their lives away are actually thriving. The school serves minority and low-income students from Providence, helping them not just get through, but succeed, in college preparatory high school programs. These are the kids who often fall through the cracks in other schools. Here that's not an option. Here, it's about personal responsibility and giving back to the community. And it's all thanks to an Ivy League-educated white guy from the suburbs.

Three years after his 1976 graduation from Brown University, Dan Corley had a broom and a dream.

The broom came with his factory janitor's job, a rare career track for an Ivy Leaguer, but a living for an aspiring teacher in a tight market. His dream involved helping kids in need. That vision eventually became Community Prep, which is now in its third decade and educating 154 children in grades three through eight. The school eventually sees a robust 83 percent of its graduates attend college. The independent school tops a million dollars a year in donations and grants. As a result, 63 percent of students pay only a minimal amount of the \$9,000 tuition. Community Prep has been cited as an exemplary school in *The Middle School Journal* and was featured in articles in *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Of course, its beginnings weren't quite so auspicious.

**Dan Corley grew up** in Warwick, a dozen miles and a world away from Community Prep's inner city diversity. He mowed lawns and shoveled sidewalks to earn money as a kid. His parents, Mike and Dot, taught him and his four younger brothers and a sister that you could take pride in any job you did well.

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Rick Corley, now a senior partner with the law firm of Corley, Taveras and Petrarca, is two years Dan's junior. The brothers grew up playing sandlot baseball and touch football in a bowling alley parking lot. They captured turtles and frogs at Buckeye Brook and hunted lost golf balls at Bayside Country Club. Their father erected a basketball hoop and family and friends played year-round. At bedtime ten-year-old Dan tossed a basketball into the air 100 times to polish his shooting stroke. Now fifty-two, Dan Corley has a tall, athletic frame that still looks basketball ready. An occasional loosened, droopy tie and untucked shirttails suggest he might have been

shooting hoops out back in between classes. Corley made the Bishop Hendricken High School basketball team that tested the great Central High School team that featured Marvin Barnes, the future Providence College All-American. "Dan was probably the twelfth guy on a twelve-man team," his brother Rick recalls, "but he did score a basket over Marvin Barnes." The family's two oldest brothers shared a room, and Rick had to defend his brisk study sessions to his parents, who saw the hours that Dan toiled. But, Rick says, he and Dan fared about the same academically. "He's an intelligent guy," Rick says, "but he's not a genius. Most of it was through persistence." That persistence helps on days like today. Corley was up at dawn, swam seventy-two pool lengths at the Y near his Cranston home and downed a healthy breakfast of Quinoa Flakes to help his cholesterol levels. Now he sits in his office at the school. As his iMac bleeps awake, Corley feeds a wastebasket a few morsels. Community Prep, the former Tyler School, features tall ceilings and a dove of peace dangles above visitors' heads in Corley's office.

A wall map illustrates the school's diversity: 37 percent Afro-American, 27 percent Latino, 8 percent biracial, 16 percent Caucasian and 12 percent Asian. About four out of five students come from Providence, and religious faiths include Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, Jehovah's Witness and Unitarian. In a mainstreaming arrangement, a Rhode Island School for the Deaf student attends Community Prep for several hours each day.

Family and school pictures and a commendation plaque from the John Hope Settlement House, where Community Prep began in two rented classrooms in 1984, complete Corley's office decor. While he searches for an answer key, his son arrives.

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Brendan graduated with the Community Prep Class of 1997. He is twenty-two, tutors part-time and hopes for an engineering career. He sports his mother's blond hair and his father's laid-back manner. Corley and his wife, Betsy, have two children of their own. Dan became legal guardian for his niece, Jessica, after her father, Steve, died. She, too, went to Community Prep. In 1995, the Corleys provided a home for teenager Francisco Velasquez, a Dominican Republic native who had essentially run away from home in New York City and was staying temporarily with a Rhode Island relative. Francisco, twenty-six, works for a mortgage company now but has a master's degree in education and says that he might someday emulate the man he calls dad, who founded a school.

By 7:35 a.m. Corley and his son are in the basement community room with about twenty-five early arrivals. Brendan works with four students at a blue table on a small elevated stage, where some students pick up breakfast.

His father reviews homework with eighth graders, including Amy Pena. Several times, Amy's long dark hair frames a smile and a "That's-it" look. "We go over every single problem," she says afterwards. "He explains to me what I did wrong. I think he's a great math teacher because he's understanding with us. He works with us and he also listens to us."

Corley usually teaches one math course and conducts weekly sessions of his distinctive Calculator Club in the school's nine classes. He poses problems that a student must solve in his or her head before a classmate produces an answer on a calculator. Youngsters learn to value their brainpower and usually best the electronic device. Corley, whose favorite role is teacher, leads his charges in pursuit of two numbers with a product of negative forty and a sum of negative three. "What's the first thing we always do?" he asks. "Find the common factor," students chorus. He coaxes the timid, draws examples for the puzzled and remains poker-faced for wild-guessers.

While one student ponders a math problem, the other asks Corley questions. Then, as though choreographed, roles switch. Even while fielding a phone call, Corley shakes his head to warn one student off a wrong approach.

Dana DiMarco, director of development, witnesses similar

scenes. Multi-tasking escapes many men, she observes, but Corley — who, incidentally, can juggle — is a master.

He will simultaneously tutor several students, discuss development with her, take a phone call, do a computer spread sheet and jot something in his date book, she says. "He's paying full attention to all of it somehow," she says. "The kids don't feel cheated. I don't feel cheated."

Corley initially planned to become an engineer and build bridges to help people in poor countries. But during his freshman year at Brown he lacked the excitement for the field that classmates exhibited. While considering a different major, he worked hard at engineering and earned As and Bs. "I want to prove that it wasn't because I couldn't do the work," Rick remembers his brother saying.

Sophomore year he announced at a family dinner that he intended to volunteer in New York City for a year at the Catholic Worker, a social justice movement that he had learned about at Hendricken. Then he would major in education at Brown. "That didn't go over well at home," Rick recalls.

Fearing that the hiatus would end Dan's college career, his mother left the table in tears. His father argued that Dan could earn a teaching certificate much more cheaply at Rhode Island College. The year off voided the payment deal that they had arranged, his father said, and Dan would have to finance the rest of his Brown education alone. He understood his dad's position but persevered.

He regards his Catholic Worker period as a highlight of his life: sleeping alongside homeless people, rising at 5 a.m. to make soup for the day's meal, working and playing with kids in a locale so foreign to the suburban setting of his childhood.

Corley considered God a personal friend — the only one to whom he could confide everything — and while in New York, weighed, but ultimately rejected, the idea of becoming a priest.

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The aspiring canonization candidate faced spiraling costs upon his return. Tuition nearly doubled during his college career, and part-time jobs couldn't balance the ledger. As it turned out, his ailing grandmother needed help, so he moved rent-free into her home near Cranston Street in Providence. He welcomed the chance to meet inner city neighbors. Many lamented that their children weren't getting a good education. He tutored some youngsters and the possibility of starting a school glimmered in his mind. But he decided that he needed some teaching experience first.

After graduation, with public school openings scarce, he taught for a year at a Catholic school, worked as a Volunteers in Service to America liaison at a neighborhood school, then wielded that factory broom. The fourth year, he landed a job teaching at Ocean Tides in Narragansett, a program for at-risk

adolescents.

Newly married in 1979 to Betsy and lacking a car, the new groom began driving a van of students from an Ocean Tides group home in Providence to Narragansett. But he often stayed late, so someone else drove the return trip and the future Head of School thumbed about thirty miles home.

During his Ocean Tides years, daughter Ruth was born. Her arrival rekindled discussions about starting a school that Dan had initiated with former Brown roommate Robert Hahn, an economist. Dan rounded up friends and neighborhood parents, won state approval for his planned curriculum, secured donations and grants and at age twenty-nine finally took the plunge. His loyal former roomie Hahn footed \$5,000 of the roughly \$60,000 budget.

But after a successful honeymoon year, things unraveled.

Initially the school admitted everyone and placed twenty students with widely differing abilities in two classrooms, each containing three grade levels and one underpaid teacher.

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Corley agonized but dug deeper. The board of trustees decided to raise the entire budget through grants and donations and offer scholarships to qualified applicants — redefined as those reading at grade level or above.

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The sharpened focus and pay-what-you can tuition policy yielded thirty-five students for year three. The trustees raised the funds and the school thrived.

“I do like asking people for money,” Corley acknowledges. “It’s a culmination of a lot of energy that goes into that. I do like it when the school’s mission meshes with the donor’s sense of how they want the world to be.”

Dory Adams, Community Prep’s director of development in 1986 and now a leadership support consultant and coach in Washington, D.C., calls him a rare “grounded visionary.” He sees things on a grand scale, she says, but also manages mundane details that usually derail other dreamers.

And he knows how to work his resources, no matter how basic. In seeking help in founding his school, Corley listed the five most influential people he knew. Doc O’Connell, the manager Dan worked for at the Brown Bookstore, topped the register. O’Connell, now deceased, then belly-laughed at his lofty ranking. But he was crucial because he connected Dan to Brown development workers. They sidestepped the potential fundraising competitor but referred him to recently retired colleague Dan Earle.

Under Earle’s mentoring, Corley cultivated supporters. He listened intently to others’ dreams and figured out how to connect theirs with his. Dory Adams considers Corley a consum-

mate dealmaker. “He does not hear ‘No,’” she says. “He hears the tiniest sliver of a possibility of a ‘Yes.’” So if you deny him a donation, he’ll persuade you to tutor.

Often Corley asks experts to enlighten him. Authorities, he says, enjoy teaching an eager young person about what is dear and interesting to them.

Marcia Reback headed the Providence Teachers Union when Community Prep was taking wing. Now president of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, she remembers Corley as a great guy with a terrific vision for schooling middle school children.

Corley stresses student responsibility, trust in teachers and parental involvement. He personally asks prospective students to commit to the school.

Before each term, individual parents, teachers and students meet, set goals and map strategies for achieving them. Teachers help set standards, he says, have some control over their budgets and now earn salaries comparable to other private school educators.

With eighth grade students off on a trip, Corley’s afternoon offers a rare chance to write. Clearly, though, authoring meeting reports and a self-evaluation is not his thing. He restlessly stretches his neck, checks the front desk, makes calls. At 3:45 p.m., a tutor asks for help with a problem. Corley springs up, saying, “Yes, I love to be helpful.”

In warmer weather Corley takes Thursday afternoons off to play in a golf league. He tries to keep evenings and weekends free, he says, but then mentions a coming fundraiser, an annual weekend trip with students to Washington, D.C., and a visit to a St. Louis school modeled on Community Prep. Regular weekend gatherings of the Corley clan refresh him, as do bridge and poker games with friends. He de-stresses with sessions of co-counseling, in which partners alternate stints as listener and speaker. The approach is all about emotional expression, and Corley says that he can uncork a good cry in such sessions.

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Rob DeBlois, director of the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program, a public middle school in Providence that has had noteworthy success with potential dropouts, has known Corley for two decades.

They both vacation in Franconia, New Hampshire, where DeBlois witnesses the “frenetic pace” of Corley’s relaxation: waking at five a.m., playing thirty-six holes of golf, competing in family races and conducting evening card games.

“Some people go: ‘What? Is he crazy!’” DeBlois says. Any of Corley’s friends in fact will tell you that, of course, he’s not crazy. He’s just on a mission, and juggling that with his other passions. And doing a damn good job of it. DeBlois expects Community Prep’s and its founder’s success to endure. “Dan,” he says, “is saving kids.” ●