



## CHAPTER THREE

# A Big Bet on Social Innovation

**P**INKERTON TAPPED INTO the new thinking by reaching out to several of those deeply involved in the field. At one point, Executive Director Joan Colello invited Sister Paulette to a Pinkerton board meeting to discuss youth development. “It wasn’t codified. It wasn’t anything,” said Sister Paulette; but her views nonetheless reflected a deeply-felt philosophy that was mirrored by the work of Cahill, Murphy and others in the field. “We’ve always worked with young people and families on the margins, and we’ve always [seen] the best in them. We always believed that change happens through caring relationships. We believed that young people are not going to think well of themselves unless we first think well of them and have very high expectations and help them achieve all that they can be. That was our approach to the work. . . . And Joan admired the work we did.”

Colello and George Gillespie, now the board chair, routinely hosted board dinners and lunches with thought leaders that were, in essence, seminars on youth development. Among the guests were not only Sister Paulette and Geoffrey Canada, but Gary Walker, president of Public/Private Ventures, Marc Freedman, founder and CEO of Encore.org, and John Dilulio, a political scientist (widely known, and often scorned, for coining the term “superpredators”) who headed the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. Those sessions “were a way to engage the board in the latest thinking about youth development, juvenile justice, social and emotional development, cultural enrichment and the like,” observed Rick Smith.

For New Yorkers involved in youth welfare, the mid-1980s was a pivotal period,

For decades, Sister Paulette LoMonaco and Good Shepherd Services have fought to improve prospects for poor New Yorkers.





BETT MANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

Protesters rally against racial violence in Howard Beach and other New York neighborhoods.

an era during which racial tension roiled the atmosphere and young people seemed perpetually at risk.

One particularly horrifying incident occurred in 1986. Five days before Christmas, Michael Griffin, a 23-year-old black man whose car had broken down, was walking through Howard Beach, Queens with two companions when a group of white youths happened upon them. The whites assailed the men with racial slurs and then gave chase. They caught and beat Griffin's two companions. To escape the gang, Griffin ran across a highway and was hit and killed by a motorist.

Mayor Koch compared the attack mob to a "lynching party." The Rev. Al Sharpton led a huge march through Howard Beach. Years after the attack, Sharpton told the New York Times, "Howard Beach brought to the attention of the country that this could happen in the North. It was as ugly as anything in Selma."

Public pressure led to the appointment of a special prosecutor and in December 1987, three young men were convicted of manslaughter. Behind the scenes, recalls Geoffrey Canada, community leaders, including Sister Paulette and Richard Murphy, were pressing Mayor Ed Koch to respond to what they saw as an ongoing crisis. They insisted that tragedies like the one in Howard Beach occurred because "kids have nowhere to go and that's why they're standing on street corners getting involved in all of this stuff."

As a result of such pressure, said Canada, "the mayor decided to create some-

thing called Evening and Weekend Programs. He got a pool of money and decided that in troubled neighborhoods he was going to open up schools [during the] evening and weekends. The concept of using schools for afterschool services seems routine today, but it was not routine in the eighties. There was a huge struggle, Paulette and Murphy led it, to actually get the schools open and allow youth organizations like ours to use schools after school."

In the wake of Michael Griffin's death, "Koch opens up a number of schools, maybe eight or ten, provides extended services until ten o'clock at night, six days a week. We start running these extended evening [activities]. And we had all of these kids coming in. . . . We could program for elementary kids from 3 to 6 in the afternoon, then have middle school and high school kids come in from 6 to 10, to keep the kids off the streets," said Canada, who was then at the Rheedlen Foundation.

Despite Koch's efforts, the city remained, in Canada's words, "a tinderbox about to blow." In 1989, as Mayor Koch geared up to run for his fourth term, an especially shocking racially-tinged incident put the city on edge. In April of that year, a young white woman was brutally raped in Central Park. Five teenagers—four black and one Latino—were charged with the crime, which became widely known as a "wilding" incident. The city's media went berserk, with condemnations of the teenagers coming from all quarters. Developer Donald Trump took out a full-page ad in several New York newspapers demanding the death penalty. Muggers and murderers, he railed, "should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, should be executed for their crimes." The collective rush to judgment resulted in convictions of the young men that were overturned some 12 years later when the Manhattan District Attorney turned up evidence—including a confession—indicating that another man, a lone individual, was responsible for the crime. The wilding frenzy was not the only racial grenade to rip the fabric of the city that year.

In August, in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, a mob of young whites killed a 16-year-old black boy because they believed, wrongly, that he had entered their neighborhood to date a white girl. As the Daily News reported the story on August 25th, "Fueled by jealousy and hate, a gang of up to 30 white teens—armed with a gun and baseball bats—shot and killed a black youth they mistakenly thought was dating a young white woman in their Brooklyn neighborhood, police charged yesterday." The report provided graphic details of the assault: "[The] white teens chased a small group of blacks through Bensonhurst and chanted, 'Let's club the n-----,' before one whipped out a gun and shot the helpless youth in the chest late Wednesday."

**W**HILE THE ATTACK and the concomitant rise in the city's fear of violence and racial conflict did nothing to unite the city, it did lead many to believe that perhaps only someone like David Dinkins, a moderate black man, could calm the troubled waters. Dinkins won both the primary against Ed Koch and the general election against Rudolph Giuliani. He hired Richard Murphy as the city's youth commissioner. From the perspective of youth development experts, this was akin to hitting the lottery.



MARTY LIPP/HARLEM CHILDREN'S ZONE

Geoffrey Canada, president of Harlem Children's Zone, resolved to replace "chaos and despair" with hope.



The combination of Dinkins and Murphy offered an opportunity to expand on the work begun under Koch. For Cahill, Murphy's move to the corridors of municipal power offered an opportunity to test, in a real world environment, the theories she and her colleagues had been developing. Early in his tenure, the newly named Commissioner Murphy persuaded Mayor Dinkins to invest money targeted for a prison barge to be spent on youth services instead. John Kelly, of The Chronicle of Social Change, recalled the occasion in an article published shortly after Murphy's death in 2013. Instead of "spending \$5 million on a prison barge, a floating tribute to the city's choked corrections system" wrote Kelly, Dinkins invested the money in Murphy's vision "of establishing schools that would be open to youth and parents beyond the classroom hours."

That decision, said Canada, was informed by the work Murphy and others had started under Koch: "We knew the impact of keeping these buildings open because we had this experience in the 80s." The programs' structures evolved from the countless conversations Murphy and the others had through the years. "Richard and I were talking about how we needed to make this be much more than a program, that we needed to make this be something that would bring some hope [to] these neighborhoods," said Cahill. "We came up with Beacon, [a metaphor for] lighting up the neighborhood."

**A**S PART OF HER WORK for the Youth Development Institute, Cahill and her colleagues produced small pamphlets, with Pinkerton support, that became guiding texts for the Beacon Programs and for the youth development movement writ large. The booklets carried such titles as "Core Competencies for Youth Work" and "The Handbook of Positive Outcomes for Youth." One, "A Guided Tour of Youth Development," laid out many of the movement's core ideas, embracing what it called a "holistic" approach to young people—which meant paying attention to the entire individual and to the circumstances and communities that affect them. This translates into such things as soliciting and acting upon young people's ideas, involving them in service projects in their communities, acknowledging their cultural perspectives or backgrounds, and generally expanding their horizons. "What we really thought of was ... not solely services, but how you staff so the whole orientation is to surround young people with both supports and opportunities . . . for taking part in new things, trying on other kinds of identities," said Cahill. The Good Shepherd Beacon—one of the first 15 to be funded—opened in Red Hook in 1991. As described in a Good Shepherd publication: "It provides year-round, evening and weekend activities engaging thousands of young people and their families annually."

The Pinkerton capital grant to Good Shepherd (for South Brooklyn Community High School) was approved in 1999. It was "pivotal," said Sister Paulette. It allowed construction of the school to begin and also paved the way for grants from other institutions, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

The school, located in Red Hook, was completed in 2001. The "second chance" transfer high school, a separate facility, now accommodates some 150 students who



THE NEW YORK TIMES

A non-profit leader turned city official, Richard L. Murphy helped to fundamentally reform New York's approach to youth development.



have dropped out of (or were struggling in) a regular public school. Those students are given academic instruction while surrounded with supportive social services.

The participants are generally older and bigger than their previous classmates, and some have been mocked for failing. Many felt abandoned by their former schools, said Sister Paulette. "What you will hear young people say is that nobody knew if they were there [in regular school] or not. They felt unnoticed. They weren't programmed properly. They got in with the wrong group and it was too hard for them to break away . . . For many of them, dropping out of high school was not their first experience of not attending school regularly. Many of them would say that they had other black holes in their education."

South Brooklyn Community is a small school where "teachers and the principals can really focus on teaching and learning. . . . We have counselors with very small caseloads of like twenty to twenty-five students, unlike a large anonymous comprehensive school, where you might have two guidance counselors." They also have peer counselors—a "young person who looks like them, who has lived sometimes their own experience."

The results have been spectacular. Despite the prior deficits in its students'

Students prepare to graduate from Good Shepherd's South Brooklyn Community High School.

preparation and education, Brooklyn Community graduates two thirds of them. Had they stayed where they were, Sister Paulette estimates, only 15 percent would have graduated from high school.

For Geoffrey Canada, the need for a new approach to youth development hit home in the early nineties: “There was a kindergarten girl in Harlem who was in her kitchen and was hit by a bullet in the head. She happened to be in one of the schools we were working with. Five months later, the girl returned to her school and Canada inquired as to what had been done to welcome her back. “They said, ‘Nothing.’ I said, ‘What do you mean nothing? They didn’t sort of celebrate her coming back?’ . . . No. She went to class and sat down. And I thought, ‘In what other universe does a five-year-old get shot in the head and people treat it as routine—as not a big deal. That’s nuts.”

**T**HE EXPERIENCE AFFIRMED Canada’s conviction that after-school programs had to offer something beyond academic skills; they also had to help young people deal with an array of problems unavoidable in disadvantaged communities. “We decided that this issue of violence was something we had to tackle head on, and we had to convince kids that there were other ways of dealing with anger and frustration. We created our peacemakers program and decided to really teach conflict resolution that was going to let young people know that we at the Harlem Children’s Zone were going to be back in control, as adults. And from the very beginning, Pinkerton was one of the folks when we said we wanted to prepare a generation of kids—not just for high school graduation but for college—that was very supportive of these communities.”

Pinkerton was not alone in admiring Canada and Murphy’s approach. As John Kelly pointed out in the *Chronicle of Social Change*, their model was emulated nationally. It was the Rheedlen Center for Children and Families, founded by Murphy, he noted, “that led the Beacon movement, which quickly spread to other U.S. cities and informed the Clinton Administration’s Community Schools model.”

Sister Paulette’s work, likewise, attracted widespread attention—not just from other foundations but from Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s administration

which, as Sister Paulette put it, “took our model and another model that we had developed and focused on them and created an office called the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation. And we became very big in this world. They also gave us a contract so that we could train other people on our model,” said Sister Paulette. “Without the vote of confidence that the Pinkerton grant symbolized,” she added, “we would never have achieved additional substantial grants from other foundations and individuals that made the construction of the community center and school possible.”

The grant for Sister Paulette’s new high school was, in some respects, as significant for Pinkerton as it was for Good Shepherd, signaling a determination, on the part of the Foundation, to contribute to supporting social change in a much more substantial way than it had previously—in terms of dollars certainly, but also in supporting fresh ideas. Somewhere along the line the Good Shepherd leadership realized, as Sister Paulette put it, “we’re very good at inventing models and then giving them away so other people can replicate them.” In standing with Sister Paulette, Pinkerton was placing a big bet on social innovation and going a long way toward answering the question posed by board member Michael S. Joyce about how the Foundation would deal with its growing resources. For Pinkerton, that meant investing not just in children but in youth along every step of their journey into adulthood.

“A lot of people were into the early childhood piece,” said Canada. “I think when kids are young and cute a lot of folks are interested in them. But . . . we were staying with these kids through middle school, through high school, through college. There were not a lot of folks who were interested in supporting that kind of work . . . our CSO [College Support Office] work. There may be a better program [but] I haven’t found it in terms of not just getting kids into college but actually graduating those kids. And when you compare our college graduation rates to even whites in this country, we’re beating all of them. And that really grew out of the direct support for our College Support Office that we got from Pinkerton, [which was] ready to support us, to back us, with much higher expectations for these kids than lots of folks are used to dealing with.” ♦



**Community Connections for Youth 4As.** Mobilizing faith-based and neighborhood organizations to support youth who have been involved with the justice system



**Drive Change.** Providing job training fellowships to young adults who have been incarcerated



We believe that young people must be held accountable for their actions, but that incarceration is rarely the most effective tool. As a result, we support programs for court-involved youth that build skills and a sense of responsibility . . . , often with the help of trusted “credible messengers,” young people who have faced and overcome similar challenges.