

ALUMNI

A Prescription for Change

How pediatrician Cheryl Dorsey became a social entrepreneur

ON A sweltering summer afternoon, Cheryl L. Dorsey '85, M.D.-M.P.P. '92, is hard at work, cruising briskly down the Bronx River in a home-made wooden dinghy.

Despite the abandoned, graffiti-covered trailers and cement plant on the riverbank, the scrap-metal recycling center around the bend, the constant rumble of cars on a metal expressway bridge spanning the waterway, the setting is—if not exactly pastoral—surprisingly serene. The only other people in sight are about 20 teenagers paddling along nearby in similar vessels with names like *Aurora* and *Eclipse*.

Dorsey waves to one boatload of lifejacket-clad kids and grins as they wave back. She settles back with a contented sigh as the dinghy's skipper, Adam Green—director of the boat-building program to which the young inner-city sailors belong—rows steadily down the river, taking advantage of a welcome breeze.

Normally, Dorsey works in an air-conditioned office, in a high-rise building near Grand Central Station. Today, though, she's perfectly content to be out here in the steamy city air, watching these teens from one of New York's grittiest neighborhoods maneuver their hand-built boats as expertly as if they'd been born at sea. It's a scene that, without the organization Dorsey directs, probably wouldn't exist. "This is truly my dream job," says the former emergency-room physician and Clinton administration public-health and labor adviser. "There's nothing else that I can imagine doing."



Cheryl L. Dorsey

DORSEY IS PRESIDENT of the Echoing Green Foundation, a Manhattan-based organization that provides start-up funds for projects promoting social change. Since its founding in 1987, the foundation has awarded more than \$21 million in start-up capital to 370 "social entrepreneurs" in 30 countries. Grant recipients—"fellows" in Echoing Green parlance—have launched programs promoting education, nonviolence, human and civil rights, legal advocacy, youth leadership, community improvement, the arts, and other social goals. (Although Echoing Green supports some conservation projects, the lyrical name isn't an environ-

mental reference. Instead, for reasons no one remembers now, it's borrowed from the title of a William Blake poem with no apparent connection to the much broader range of programs the foundation supports.) Dorsey has headed the organization since May 2002.

Echoing Green fellows currently receive \$60,000 in seed funding over the course of two years to "turn bold ideas into action," as the foundation puts it. They also receive health insurance, administrative support, and technical help, and they are encouraged to attend the foundation's networking gatherings. "You don't just write the check," Dorsey says over a quick wrap-sandwich lunch at her desk. "You provide the assistance they need to build sustainable organizations."

Adam Green is typical of the fellows who have achieved that goal. In 1998, the native New Yorker used

an Echoing Green grant to found Rocking the Boat Inc., a Bronx-based program in which local teenagers construct traditional wooden boats from scratch and, as they did during Dorsey's impromptu site visit, sail them on local waterways. "The goal is not to train master boatbuilders," Green says; instead, the organization's mission is to promote youth leadership, teamwork, and interest in environmental and marine science. Every year, about 100 teens go through the intensive summer-long program, which is based in a storefront next to a tire store near the Cross Bronx Expressway. Some program alumni go on to college; several now

work or volunteer for Rocking the Boat.

Another recipient: Dorsey herself. In 1992, during her pediatric training at Harvard Medical School (HMS), Dorsey used an Echoing Green grant to launch a mobile health program to serve at-risk families in Boston's poorest neighborhoods. But that's getting ahead of the story.

CHERYL LYNN DORSEY grew up in a Baltimore suburb, the daughter of two Baltimore public-school teachers (now retired, they still live in Dorsey's childhood home). Not surprisingly, she recalls, "the emphasis on education was intense and ongoing in my family."

Her interest in social justice started early. "My mother reminded me a couple of years ago that one of my favorite refrains as a child was, 'Life isn't fair,'" she says. Her mother essentially agreed with that assessment, but didn't want it to limit her daughter's ambitions. "Her attitude was, 'As an African-American woman in the United States, you'd better learn that life is not fair,'" Dorsey recalls. "She wanted me to understand the systems as they are and move forward in spite of them." The underlying message was her parents' refrain: "Education is the engine to catapult you wherever you want to go."

Dorsey absorbed that advice. "I wasn't an athlete, I wasn't a musician, I wasn't a creative type," she says. Instead, she was an outstanding student, surprising no one but herself when she was admitted to Harvard. "I was terrified. I came from a good public school, but it was a public school," she says. "I was convinced the ad-

missions committee had made a terrible mistake, and that they'd quickly send me packing back to Baltimore."

They didn't, of course, and Dorsey did just fine, graduating magna cum laude with highest honors. She had planned to become a veterinarian, but scotched that idea during her Harvard years, when she realized, "I loved dogs, but I was slightly unnerved by other animals." She decided instead on a career in human medicine, specializing in pediatrics.

While at the medical school, Dorsey worked with Nancy E. Oriol, M.D. '79, then director of obstetric anesthesia at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston and now associate dean for student affairs at HMS. Oriol became "my mentor, my dearest friend, part of my family," Dorsey says; among other common interests, the two shared deep concern over a disturbing local public-health issue making headlines at the time.

Despite Boston's network of world-class medical facilities, the city had the nation's third highest mortality rate for black infants. In the city's poorest neighborhoods, "black babies were dying at three times the rate of white babies," Dorsey recalls; that incidence, according to a 1990 *Boston Globe* investigative series, was worse than those in many third-world countries. "And they were dying just blocks away from the best medical institutions in the world," Dorsey says. The saddest news: many of the deaths resulted not from medical, but from socioeconomic problems: teenage pregnancies, women fearful of seeking treatment because of illegal-alien status or inability to

speak English, a shortage of inner-city prenatal and pediatric services.

Dorsey and Oriol developed an idea for a mobile health unit that would overcome such barriers and offer care in the city's Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan sections. By then, Dorsey was also studying public policy at the Kennedy School, where she heard about a New York-based organization that provided seed money for community-service projects such as the one she and Oriol hoped to establish. Named an Echoing Green fellow in 1992, Dorsey used her grant to launch the Family Van, a mobile health clinic whose staff provides exams, shots, and other services to at-risk residents. Twelve years later, the Van still serves 7,000 residents a year.

When the fellowship ended, Dorsey spent three years as a resident physician in the emergency room at a busy children's hospital in Washington, D.C. The experience, which primarily involved rushing to treat one young patient after another, left her disenchanted with active medical practice. "At the end of the day, what had I really done?" she says. "Maybe I'd helped one kid temporarily, but I hadn't addressed the underlying problems," she says. "There's a need for [hands-on care], but there's also a need for people working for systemic change."

Dorsey's first step back into social activism was a big one: She became a White House Fellow, advising the Clinton administration on healthcare issues. She later served as special assistant to the director of the Women's Bureau in the U.S. Labor Department, helping to develop family-friendly workplace policies, then briefly

Harvard@Home: Commencement and Cloning

If you missed Harvard's 353rd Commencement in June—or if you were there and want to relive the experience—be sure to visit Harvard@Home.

A new Harvard@Home program offers nearly two hours of Commencement coverage, including the keynote address by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, remarks by President Lawrence H. Summers, and a Class Day performance by comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, better known as rapper Ali G, star of HBO's *Da Ali G Show*. The program also includes highlights from Commencement exercises and the Harvard Alumni Association's annual meeting.

Also new at Harvard@Home is *Science in the News: Stem Cells and Cloning*. In this 100-minute program, Harvard Medical School students discuss scientific and ethical questions surrounding this controversial issue.

Harvard@Home provides desktop access to lectures, speeches, presentations, performances, and other events. The Web-based project offers nearly 50 free public programs on topics in the arts, the sciences, current affairs, history, literature, and other areas. Programs, which range from a few minutes to a few hours long, are edited and indexed for easy access. For more information, and a program list, visit www.athome.harvard.edu.

returned to the private sector to develop public-health projects for a Washington-area health-communications firm.

She collected numerous accolades along the way, including Radcliffe's first Jane Rainie Opel '50 Young Alumna Award, and she was featured in a long-running PBS documentary series tracking the careers of seven HMS alumni (the most recent installment, *Survivor M.D.*, aired in 2001).

But she still yearned for the kind of community activism she'd experienced with the Family Van project, and that longing brought her back to Echoing Green. She served on the foundation's board for a few years before becoming its chief executive officer in 2002.

In that role, she oversees a highly com-

petitive process for awarding fellowships and seed funding for an astonishingly broad range of grassroots projects. Current efforts range from the Bronx boat-building workshop to an Iowa program that provides job training for recent immigrants to a Montana initiative to preserve the culture of a Native American tribal nation whose population is growing, but whose native language is dying out. Among the highest-profile efforts is A Fighting Chance, a New Orleans-based program that provides legal help to indigent death-row inmates who were inadequately represented by public defenders. Echoing Green fellows Melanie Carr '97 and Colleen Francis, both former trial investigators, founded the program based in

part on a study indicating that the conviction rate in death-penalty cases fell from 68 to 16 percent when defendants received competent representation. "You're sitting there sobbing as you read these handwritten six-page letters of recommendation from inmates about why these women deserve an Echoing Green fellowship," Dorsey recalls. To date, the program's efforts have freed one wrongly convicted inmate and reduced the sentences of two others.

Results like that remind Dorsey why she's running Echoing Green rather than maintaining a lucrative private practice. "Investing in innovative leaders with great ideas," she says, "goes a long way toward closing the gaps in society."

—ANNE STUART

HAA Leader Seeks Global Outreach

THE NEW PRESIDENT of the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) summarizes the theme of his year-long term in four words: "Participate in Harvard's future."

That's the message James R. Ullyot '62, M.B.A. '66, of Minneapolis, hopes to send to Harvard alumni everywhere. "It's an invitation to our 322,000 alumni around the world to join us at a very exciting time in the University's history," he says, citing development of a new undergraduate curriculum, early planning for expansion in Allston, and other forward-looking initiatives.

Alumni wondering how to participate can start with Post.Harvard, the University's on-line community. At Ullyot's behest, the website's homepage (www.haa.harvard.edu) sports a new link with his four-word slogan. "If you click on it, you'll find 20 to 30 different ways to stay informed and connected," he says. Suggestions range from joining local Harvard clubs to hiring current students for summer jobs.

Using the Web is a natural move for Ullyot, a veteran technology executive who specializes in on-line networking. Currently, he's chairman of Creative Communications Inc. of Bloomington, Minnesota, a small business that, among other things, designs and hosts websites.

That same expertise prompted him to help get the HAA on-line in the early 1990s, when the Internet was still little-known outside the geek universe. Ullyot persuaded HAA staff to let him set up an electronic bulletin-board system in the association's headquarters. In those pre-Web days, computer-savvy alumni could dial into the system over telephone lines to join on-line discussions. Eventually, that system evolved into the far more sophisticated Post.Harvard, which today provides e-mail and other services to more than 150,000 alumni users.

Ullyot's electronic efforts earned him a 1999 HAA Award; its citation praised him as "our fearless guide through technological gateways, ushering the HAA 'from the age that is past to the age that is waiting before.'"

That award also acknowledged Ullyot's long-time leadership in state and national Harvard activities. He is former president of both the Harvard Club of Minnesota and the Harvard Business School Club of Minnesota; he has also served as an HAA regional director and cochair of the association's communications committee. A longtime admissions interviewer, he organized a 1993 fundraising effort that helped finance a short film shown to prospective students nationwide.

Ullyot's dedication to Harvard may have genetic roots. His family's other Harvard alumni include his brother, Daniel '58, and Daniel's sons Theodore '89 and



James R. Ullyot

Jonathan '91. His own daughter, Elizabeth, is an incoming freshman, and Ullyot acknowledges that his outreach efforts are partly on her behalf. "One of the extraordinary things about Harvard when I was there was the constant contact between students and alumni" through House and College events, he recalls. "I hope Elizabeth and her classmates will have a chance to experience the alumni community the same way I did."

Ullyot, who succeeds James V. Baker '68, M.B.A. '71, of Surrey, England, will serve as HAA president until Harvard's