

The Price of Freedom

by Earl Martin Phalen

When I think about social change in our community, I often reflect on the story of Harriet Tubman -- a woman who first emancipated herself and then risked her safety on dozens of trips leading others to freedom. Consider the odds stacked against her. In times of injustice, war, and political unrest, Harriet Tubman believed freedom to be so fundamental that she utilized her talents and risked her life itself to fight for liberation.

More than one hundred years after Harriet's sacrifice, thousands of men and women risked their safety, livelihood, and stability in a year-long boycott of the Montgomery city bus system. Already earning minimum wages, Black workers throughout the city chose to walk, carpool, or ride bicycles in order to ensure freedom for their children and for other Americans.

These and other civil rights heroes knew that the price of freedom may be death (or, at least a willingness to give your life), and they were willing to put themselves on the line to achieve it.

Investing in the Next Generation

BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life) began as a community service project to honor and build on the work of people such as Harriet Tubman and those who participated in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A small group of Black students at Harvard Law School were determined to give back to the Black community and multiply the impact of the sacrifices made by those who came before. We were not risking life. We were not making an immense sacrifice. We just wanted to give a couple of hours a week to help our younger brothers and sisters, as so many had done for us.

There were 20 law students and 20 elementary school students. Our only goal was to let them know they could achieve that which they willed. Through academic tutoring, field trips that engaged our young students in opportunities outside the three block radius of their neighborhood, and exposure to Black women and men who had become doctors, lawyers, executives, and great husbands, wives, mothers, and fathers, we worked to give these young people a broader picture of their history and an expanded vision of their future.

Thirteen years later, BELL is educating nearly

10,000 children through its summer and after-school programs in Baltimore, Boston, and New York. From our experience, we understand the power of helping children who start the school year labeled as "failing" go on to achieve proficiency and develop as leaders. We also recognize the need for systemic change.

Expanding Social Impact

Social entrepreneurs think about societal impact. They realize there is a difference between providing a service and changing the system. Harriet Tubman provided an invaluable service to individuals through the Underground Railroad, but her work with abolitionists, presidents, and other leaders helped to dismantle the system of slavery. Similarly, the Montgomery Bus Boycott had a significant impact on toppling the overt systems of segregation and oppression.

Social entrepreneurs utilize their individual talents to not only provide direct services, but to change social systems and social structures. A social entrepreneur, as an author, could write a book that shifts national opinion. As a filmmaker, she could produce a documentary that leads to policy changes or resource reallocation for a pressing social need.

Universal access to high-quality education is an issue BELL is addressing in a systemic way. BELL is working to make summer learning a powerful tool for children, especially those living in urban communities, where one out of four Black and Latino youths between the ages of 16 and 19 are neither in school nor employed. In a time when Black and Latino males are statistically more likely to receive their GED in prison than graduate from college, BELL scholars learn that graduation from college is a goal we expect them to achieve.

In response to these conditions and as a service to the community, BELL developed a boys-focused summer learning initiative, with the support of the Charles Hayden Foundation, Bank of America, Liberty Mutual, Jane's Trust, and others, who enabled us to modify our co-educational summer program to target boys. Both the co-ed and boys summer programs strengthen the academic skills of students, whom we call "scholars," while increasing their self-esteem and encouraging them to dream.

One of the biggest challenges that lies in front of social entrepreneurs is to find ways to take impactful ideas and make them the fabric of our society. BELL firmly believes that a critical step in doing this is to demonstrate effectiveness. BELL scholars excel, with 100% of scholars who enter BELL at the "failing" level moving up and out of this category by the end of the program. Scholars gain an average of six months of skills in the summer program, while their peers typically lose three months of skills. Most recently, BELL participated in a controlled study by the Urban Institute that found statistically significant evidence of BELL Summer's ability to improve the reading skills of low-performing elementary school children.

Our next challenge is to communicate that there are scientifically proven programs to help our children excel. In order to effect change from a systemic perspective, BELL is now focusing on the policies that impact the education of children in America. As an example, BELL was an advocate for Senator Barack Obama's introduction of the STEP UP Act, legislation that would direct hundreds of millions of dollars towards summer learning opportunities for children. This is our first attempt to take the amazing results achieved by our scholars and leverage them to impact the policies that affect all children.

A Call to Action

None of this is risking life or limb, but building highly effective programs that help children excel within and outside of traditional school settings is one of the key struggles of the 21st century. The challenges facing our children and community are great. But the resources and talents are even greater. For our children and grandchildren to be truly free, we must ask ourselves, "What am I willing to die for, or at least give my life for?"



Earl Martin Phalen is co-founder and CEO of BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life). For more information about BELL, please visit for more information, please visit www.bellnational.org.