

1 The Lottery

BY THE TIME Geoffrey Canada arrived at the Promise Academy lottery, the auditorium was almost full. He had expected a modest turnout—he figured the rain would keep a lot of parents away—but by 6:00 P.M. more than two hundred people had crowded into the back of the hall, and there were dozens more still streaming in the front door. Here and there, members of Canada’s staff were consulting clipboards and calming anxious parents. His director of education hurried past him, shouting into her cell phone. It was April 14, 2004, a cool, wet night in Harlem. The hand-lettered sign out front of PS 242, streaked with raindrops, said “Welcome to the Promise Academy Charter School Lottery,” and inside, past the sign-in table set up in the school’s front hallway, a tall, bull-chested young man named Jeff was handing a rose to each woman as she walked in. “These are for the moms,” he said with a smile. “Welcome to the ceremony.”

Canada, a tall, thin black man in a dark blue suit, surveyed the crowd. From what he could see, the parents taking their seats in the auditorium were the ones he had hoped to attract: typical Harlem residents, mostly African American, some Hispanic, almost all

poor or working class, all struggling to one degree or another with the challenges of raising and educating children in one of New York City's most impoverished neighborhoods. In many ways, their sons and daughters were growing up the way Canada had, four decades before, just a few miles away in the South Bronx: cut off from the American mainstream, their futures constrained by substandard schools, unstable families, and a segregated city.

Five years earlier, frustrated by Harlem's seemingly intractable problems, Canada had embarked on an outsized and audacious new endeavor, a poverty-fighting project that was different from anything that had come before it. Since 1990, he had been the president of a well-respected local nonprofit organization called the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families, which operated a handful of programs in upper Manhattan targeted at young people: afterschool drop-in centers, truancy prevention, antiviolence training for teenagers. They were decent programs, and they all did some good for the kids who were enrolled in them. But after Canada had been running them for a few years, day in and day out, his ideas about poverty started to change.

The catalyst was surprisingly simple: a waiting list. One Rheedlen afterschool program had more children who wanted to enroll than it was able to admit. So Canada chose the obvious remedy: he drew up a waiting list, and it quickly filled with the names of children who needed his help and couldn't get it. That bothered him, and it kept bothering him, and before long it had him thinking differently about his entire organization. Sure, the five hundred children who were lucky enough to be participating in one of his programs were getting help, but why those five hundred and not the five hundred on the waiting list? Or why not another five hundred altogether? For that matter, why five hundred and not five thousand? If all he was doing was picking some kids to save and letting the rest fail, what was the point?

Canada became less and less sure of what his programs really added up to. Each one was supported by a separate short-term

grant, often on a contract from one city agency or another, and in order to keep the money flowing, Canada was required to demonstrate to the foundations and agencies that paid for the programs that a certain number of children had participated. But no one seemed to care whether the programs were actually working. In fact, no one seemed to have given a whole lot of thought to what, in this context, “working” might really mean.

Canada began to wonder what would happen if he reversed the equation. Instead of coming up with a menu of well-meaning programs and then trying to figure out what they accomplished and how they fit together, what if he started with the outcomes he wanted to achieve and then worked backward from there, changing and tweaking and overhauling programs until they actually produced the right results? When he followed this train of thought a little further, he realized that it wasn’t the outcomes of individual programs that he really cared about: what mattered was the overall impact he was able to have on the children he was trying to serve. He was all too familiar with the “fade-out” phenomenon, where a group of needy kids are helped along by one program or another, only to return to the disappointing mean soon after the program ends. Head Start, the government-funded prekindergarten program for poor children, was the classic example. Plenty of studies had determined conclusively that graduates of Head Start entered kindergarten ahead of their inner-city peers. And plenty of studies had shown that a few years later, those same graduates had slipped back to the anemic achievement level of neighborhood kids who hadn’t attended Head Start. A few years of bad schooling and bad surroundings were powerful enough to wipe out all of the program’s gains.

Canada wanted to find a way off the treadmill. So he asked himself a series of questions, and gradually his thinking took shape.

Who did he want to help?

He wanted to help poor children.

What was his goal for them?

He wanted them to be able to grow into fully functioning participants in mainstream American middle-class life.

What did they need to do to accomplish that?

They had to survive adolescence, graduate from high school, get into college, and graduate from college.

And what did he have to provide in order to help them accomplish that?

Well, that was where the questions got interesting, and difficult to answer.

He concluded, first, that his efforts couldn't be as diffuse and haphazard as they had been. He would need to select a single geographical area and devote all of his energies to that one place. He would have to start intervening in children's lives when they were young, at birth or even earlier. The support system he provided would need to be comprehensive, a continuous, linked series of programs. It wasn't enough to help out in just one part of a child's life: the project would need to combine educational, social, and medical services. And he wanted serious numbers. He wasn't interested in helping just a few kids, the ones who were already most likely to succeed, the ones whose parents had the resources and foresight to seek out aid and support for themselves and their children.

It was partly a gut feeling, a personal thing: he had always hated the idea of picking and choosing, helping some kids and letting the rest fail. But it was also practical. He believed that in troubled neighborhoods there existed a kind of tipping point. If 10 percent of the families on a block or in a housing project were engaged in one of his programs, their participation wouldn't have much influence on their neighbors, and the children who did enroll would feel at best like special cases and at worst like oddballs. But if, say, 60 percent of the families were onboard, then participation would come to seem normal, and so would the values that went with it: a sense of responsibility, a belief that there was a point to self-improvement, a hopefulness about the future. Canada's theory was that each child would do better if all the children around him were

doing better. So instead of waiting for residents to find out on their own about the services he was providing, his recruiters would seek out participants by going door-to-door in housing projects and low-rent high-rises. They would create programs that were well organized and even fun to attend, and they would sweeten the deal by offering incentives—everything from a free breakfast to Old Navy gift certificates—to break down any lingering resistance.

At the end of the 1990s, Canada dedicated himself to making his idea a reality. He chose as the laboratory for his grand experiment a twenty-four-block zone of central Harlem, an area that contained about three thousand children, more than 60 percent of whom were living below the poverty line and three-quarters of whom regularly scored below grade level on statewide reading and math tests. He and his staff developed an array of new, integrated programs that followed the life of a child: a parenting class for Harlem residents with children three and under, an intensive pre-kindergarten for four-year-olds, classroom aides and afterschool instruction for public school students, and a tutoring center for teenagers. Canada's objective was to create a safety net woven so tightly that children in the neighborhood couldn't slip through. It was an idea both simple and radical, and he gave it a name to match: the Harlem Children's Zone.

A FEW YEARS into the life of the Zone, Canada hit a snag. The problem was the schools. His original plan had called for his staff to work closely with the principals of Harlem's local public schools, providing them with supplemental services like computer labs and reading programs. In some schools the collaboration had worked well, but in others it was a disaster. To Canada's surprise and displeasure, principals sometimes resisted the help, turning down his requests for classroom space or kicking out the tutors that the organization supplied. Even in the schools where the programs were running smoothly, they didn't seem to be producing results: the neighborhood's reading and math scores had barely budged.

In the dozen years that he had been in charge of the organiza-

tion, first as Rheedlen and then, after he changed the name in 2002, as the Harlem Children's Zone, Canada had worked with five consecutive New York City schools chancellors. And while each one had come into office with new reforms and lofty promises, in the end none seemed to make much of a difference in the lives of Harlem's schoolchildren. Still, Canada felt unusually hopeful about the latest chancellor, Joel Klein, a product of the New York City public schools who had gone on to serve in Bill Clinton's Justice Department, most notably as the lead prosecutor in the federal government's sprawling antitrust case against Microsoft. Klein was appointed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a billionaire technocrat with no previous political experience who was elected in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on New York City in 2001. Once in office, Bloomberg persuaded the state government in Albany to restructure the city's education bureaucracy, centralizing power under the mayor's control. Together, he and Klein succeeded in pushing through a series of significant reforms, often in the face of stiff opposition from teachers' unions and city officials.

One of Klein's early strategies was to recruit private groups, both nonprofits and corporations, to contribute in a variety of ways to the public school system. The Harlem Children's Zone was an obvious candidate, and soon after Klein arrived in New York, in 2002, he called Canada, and the two men met to discuss how the school system and the Harlem Children's Zone could work better together.

Canada brought with him a complex proposal that had his group and Klein's Department of Education working hand in hand to administer a few schools in Harlem. "Great idea," Klein said. "But it will never work." It would take forever to get parents, principals, and teachers to agree to that kind of power-sharing system, Klein explained; by the time they had the details worked out, he would probably be out of office and back in the private sector. But he suggested to Canada that there was a faster and easier way for the Harlem Children's Zone to get involved: charter schools.

In 2002 charters were still fairly rare. There were more than two thousand nationwide, but they were mostly small and new, operating off the public's radar screen. The charter idea was born in Minnesota in the early 1990s: publicly funded schools run by independent organizations, usually nonprofits, outside the control of the local school board. In education circles, there were bitter disagreements over charter schools, and the debate was politically charged. Teachers at charter schools were usually nonunionized, and many conservative policy groups touted the schools as a free-enterprise solution to the nation's choked educational bureaucracies. Liberals were more likely to oppose charters; many suspected that the Right's sudden interest in inner-city education was nothing more than a cloak for a campaign to weaken unions and undermine the public school system.

Nationwide, charter schools had a mixed record. Early advocates claimed the schools would raise test scores across the board, and that hadn't happened; nationally, scores for charter school students were the same as or lower than scores for public school students. But by another measure, charter schools had succeeded: by allowing educators to experiment in ways that they generally couldn't inside public school systems, they had led to the creation of a small corps of schools with new and ambitious methods for educating students facing real academic challenges. One of the best known and most successful was a fast-growing national network of charters called the Knowledge Is Power Program. KIPP schools targeted low-income minority students, the demographic that in most school districts was mired at the lowest academic levels, and yet KIPP students were for the most part thriving, consistently earning above-average scores on state tests. Canada knew KIPP well. He had visited one of KIPP's flagship schools, the KIPP Academy in the South Bronx, and he had become friendly with David Levin, the young Teach for America graduate who had helped found KIPP and now ran the organization's New York schools. Chancellor Klein had encouraged KIPP and other successful charter-management

organizations from around the country to apply for charters in New York City, and KIPP had plans to open two new schools in Harlem.

Although Canada was himself somewhat skeptical of the charter school movement—he believed that the only way to successfully educate poor children in significant numbers was to improve, not replace, the public school system—Klein’s offer was too attractive to pass up. If Canada could open his own schools in Harlem, the pipeline he had been trying to create would be complete. Instead of reaching kids here and there, for a few hours a day, he would have them under his care for eight or ten or twelve hours a day, enough time, he hoped, to let him bring order to even the most chaotic young life. So in 2003 the Harlem Children’s Zone submitted its three-hundred-page application to the New York City Department of Education. With Klein’s support, it was approved, and as parents arrived for the lottery that rainy night in April 2004, the opening day of Promise Academy was less than five months away. The school would start with just two hundred students—one hundred in kindergarten and one hundred in sixth grade. Each September, as those students progressed through the school, they would be joined by a new kindergarten and sixth-grade class, and over the course of seven years, the academy would expand into a single, continuous school, educating thirteen hundred students, from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, in the center of Harlem.

Like every charter school in New York, Promise Academy was free of tuition and open by lottery to students from anywhere in the city’s five boroughs. But the only students Canada really wanted in his school were from central Harlem, especially the lowest-performing students, exactly the ones whose parents were least inclined to apply to send their children to a different school. So in the days and weeks leading up to the charter school lottery, the organization’s outreach workers solicited applications from the parents of children in every one of its programs, and they knocked

on doors all over Harlem. By the evening of the lottery, they had received 359 applications—almost twice as many children as the school had room for. Now, here at PS 242, every seat in the auditorium was filled with a hopeful parent or a potential student or a patient sibling, and late arrivals were standing in the aisles. They weren't all model parents—Canada recognized some of them from the organization's substance- and alcohol-abuse programs—but they all wanted something better for their children. Multicolored helium balloons were tied to the end of each row of seats, which gave the room a festive air. More than anything, though, the place felt nervous.

AT A FEW MINUTES after six, Canada stood at the front of the hall, next to the stage, conferring with a tall, stocky white man in a gray suit: Stanley Druckenmiller, a legendary Wall Street hedge-fund manager who for the last six years had been the chairman of the Harlem Children's Zone's board of directors. Druckenmiller was extraordinarily wealthy; his personal fortune of \$1.6 billion landed him that year at number 356 on *Forbes* magazine's list of the richest individuals on the planet. In person, though, he was restrained and stoical, with the stilted body language of Al Gore. At public events like this one, he often gave the impression that he would rather be poring over a balance sheet or sitting behind a Bloomberg Terminal. But Druckenmiller was deeply committed to Canada and to the Harlem Children's Zone; next to Canada himself, Druckenmiller had done more than anyone to build the organization into the nonprofit powerhouse it had become.

In the 1990s Druckenmiller sat on the board of the Robin Hood Foundation, a well-funded and high-profile charity that gave grants to various organizations dealing with poverty in New York City. Rheedlen was one of the foundation's biggest recipients, and it was at a Robin Hood board meeting one morning in 1994 that Druckenmiller first met Canada. At the time, a vision was just beginning to form in Canada's mind of an alternative to the traditional

social service agency: something bigger and more efficiently run, an organization that would bypass the sentimental you-can-save-this-child-or-you-can-turn-the-page appeals to donors and instead offer, in exchange for substantial financial commitment, results—measurable, quantifiable outcomes that even the coldest-hearted capitalist would appreciate. It was exactly the kind of non-profit that Druckenmiller, a Republican who believed in lower taxes and smaller government and the wisdom of the market, was looking to support. The way Druckenmiller saw it, the tools of corporate America—management consultants, long-range plans, marketing data, quarterly targets—had created the strongest economy in the history of the world, but in the charitable sector, those tools were being ignored in favor of guesswork and good intentions.

At Canada's invitation, Druckenmiller joined the Rheedlen board, and with Druckenmiller's help Canada began to remake his organization along the sleek, efficient lines of a modern corporation. He hired a team of management consultants to help him write a ten-year business plan, and over the next several years the Harlem Children's Zone grew quickly, its budget expanding from \$6 million to \$58 million. Construction began on a brand-new building on 125th Street, Harlem's main boulevard, that would serve as the organization's headquarters. The annual fundraising dinner became a glittering event held in a cavernous restaurant across from Grand Central Terminal. Even as the donations increased, though, Druckenmiller remained the organization's largest benefactor. He personally contributed many millions of dollars a year, and he paid for about a third of the cost of the new headquarters himself.

There were two other Harlem Children's Zone board members at the lottery: Mitchell Kurz, the treasurer, who had retired early from a successful career as an advertising executive to become a high school math teacher in the South Bronx, and Kenneth Langone, a wealthy investor who had helped found Home Depot and

now served as the chair of Promise Academy's board of trustees. Canada had invited the three men up to Harlem to witness what he had hoped would be a celebration, the culmination of months of hard work behind the scenes. But as the crowd swelled, he began to get an uneasy feeling about the way the evening might turn out. He knew that for half these parents, the night would indeed be celebratory, full of hope and promise. But the others, he realized, were going to leave disappointed. There was no requirement for charter schools to hold their lotteries in public; legally, Canada could have drawn the names behind closed doors and simply mailed out acceptance letters. But he had decided to make it a big show. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Now he wasn't so sure.

"COULD I HAVE everyone's attention?"

Canada had mounted the stage, and he stood behind a lectern, leaning over the microphone. The room was loud, a steady din of chatter pierced by an occasional wail from a child, and Canada waited for the noise to recede. On a long table next to him, a gold drum held a jumble of index cards, each one printed with the name of a prospective student.

Canada had turned fifty-two the previous January. When he joined Rheedlen, two decades earlier, as the organization's educational director, he carried an intimidating physique, a broad chest and thick biceps, the legacy of an adolescence spent in schoolyard brawls followed by years of black belt training in karate. Now, in middle age, he still had the look of an athlete, but he had grown leaner with the years, tall and rangy, his arms long and his wrists narrow. His hair was going gray, and he wore it shaved close to his scalp. A sparse mustache and goatee, also graying, framed his mouth. These days, Canada divided his time between the streets of Harlem and the boardrooms of corporate America, and when you looked at him you could see the two sides of his personality reflected. Tonight, as always, his downtown uniform was flawless:

his dress shirt was monogrammed and his cuff links were gold. But there was something about the smooth, loping way he moved—or even now, the way he stood curled over the lectern—that was straight from the streets of the South Bronx.

When the hum in the auditorium died down, Canada began. “We are calling our school Promise Academy because we are making a promise to all of our parents,” he said. “If your child is in our school, we will guarantee that child succeeds. There will be no excuses. We’re not going to say, ‘The child failed because they came from a home with only one parent.’ We’re not going to say, ‘The child failed because they’re new immigrants into the country.’ If your child gets into our school, that child is going to succeed.” The curriculum at Promise Academy would be intense, he said: classes would run from 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., five days a week, an hour and a half longer than regular city schools. Afterschool programs would run until 6:00 P.M., and the school year would continue well into July. There would be brand-new facilities, healthy lunches, a committed staff. “If you work with us as parents, we are going to do everything—and I mean everything—to see that your child gets a good education,” Canada said. “We’re going to have the best-quality education that parents can imagine.”

From their narrow wooden seats, the parents watched Canada and considered the promises he was making. It was a complicated time to be raising a school-age child in Harlem. For as long as anyone could remember, the neighborhood’s public schools had been uneven at best and downright dangerous at worst. Parents traded rumors about a promising new principal or a decent afterschool program, but their options had always been limited: Catholic school, if you could afford the tuition, or whatever the city was offering. In recent years, though, Harlem had become home to a growing number of educational alternatives: small, narrowly focused academies, selective public schools, and brand-new charters. The new schools meant more possibilities, but also more risk: how were you supposed to know which promises to believe?

For some in the auditorium, the choice was obvious: they had

decided on Promise Academy the moment they heard it was opening. There were forty children currently enrolled in Harlem Gems, the Harlem Children's Zone's prekindergarten program, and all forty of them had entered the lottery for the Promise Academy kindergarten. Yasmin Scott was one of the true believers. She was here with her daughter, Yanice Gillis, who was about to turn five. About a year earlier, an outreach worker had stopped Scott on the street and invited her to attend Baby College, the Harlem Children's Zone parenting program. Scott signed up. She was young when she had Yanice, just fifteen, and she felt like she needed all the help she could get. For Scott, Baby College turned out to be a great experience—nine Saturdays in a row, four or five hours a day, discussing immunization schedules and asthma prevention and the importance of reading and singing to your baby. The discipline classes, especially, were real eye openers, where she learned about time-outs and alternatives to corporal punishment. After Scott graduated from Baby College, she wanted more, so she enrolled Yanice in Harlem Gems, an all-day pre-K with a 4:1 child-to-adult ratio. After half a year in the program, Yanice was shining, learning the basics of reading and math, singing songs in French, coming home armed with words like “astronomy” and “meteorologist.” Scott hoped Promise Academy would mean more of the same. She couldn't stand the thought of sending Yanice to a regular Harlem public school after this.

In the second row, right next to the aisle, Wilma Jure sat wearing an “I Love New York” T-shirt and a red nylon jacket, her head bowed in an anxious prayer. Jure wasn't here for her own child. She was praying for her niece, Jaylene Fonseca, a four-year-old who was a classmate of Yanice's in Harlem Gems. Jaylene's mother, Jure's sister, was living in the city's shelter system for homeless families, and most nights, Jaylene slept with her mother in a shelter on Forty-first Street, then spent the day in Harlem Gems. Jure sometimes felt that the Gems program was the only thing keeping Jaylene alive.

In the front row, Virainia Utley sat with her daughter Janiqua.

Utley was something of a model parent in the Harlem Children's Zone. Janiqua was in the Fifth Grade Institute, an academic club that the organization ran here at PS 242, and her three younger siblings—Jaquan, Janisha, and John—were all enrolled in the afterschool computer-assisted reading program. Utley was the vice president of her tenants' association, which was part of Community Pride, the Harlem Children's Zone's community-organizing division, and she was a regular presence at Zone events. She had been talking for months about Janiqua going to Promise Academy.

Onstage, Ken Langone, the board member, was reaching into a plastic bucket filled with ticket stubs. As at many Harlem Children's Zone events, one of the lures Canada had used to pack the house tonight was a raffle. Langone, an owlish, balding man in his late sixties, read the winning numbers into the microphone like he was calling a church bingo night, and one by one, parents came to the front to display their tickets and collect a twenty-five-dollar gift certificate from Old Navy, the Gap, or HMV, the music store. The winners looked happy, and there was mild applause for each one, but the audience was beginning to grow a little restless, and the noise level was rising again. It was approaching 7:00 P.M., and not a single child's name had been called.

But Canada still wasn't quite ready to spin the drum. He called up one last guest: Rev. Alfonso Wyatt, a friend of Canada's since the early 1980s and now a minister on the staff of the Greater Allen Cathedral in Queens. Wyatt was on the school's board of trustees along with Langone and Druckenmiller and Kurz, but not because of his fundraising acumen. He was there for less tangible reasons—a moral authority, maybe, or maybe it was just that unlike the businessmen, all of whom were white, Wyatt shared a culture and a history with Canada: the peculiar joys and sorrows of inner-city black activism in the post-civil rights era. Wyatt and Canada were a decade or two younger than the men who had marched with Martin Luther King Jr., the generation that now

made up the nation's civil rights establishment; their perspective was shaped not by Selma and the March on Washington but by what followed: Black Power and busing riots, drugs and AIDS and hip-hop.

Wyatt pulled the microphone from its holder and walked to the front of the stage. He wore a white turtleneck under a dark suit jacket, a modified version of a clerical collar. A stylized cross hung around his neck. "Some people don't believe that there are folks in Harlem who really care about their children," he began, his voice a sonorous baritone, his cadence deliberate, straight from the pulpit. "They don't believe that on a day when it was raining all day, that they would come out and that they would sit and that they would wait. People don't believe that there are folks who don't mind being inconvenienced." As he warmed up, the attention of the crowd, which had been wandering, was pulled back to the front of the auditorium. "But I know that the people here in this room don't mind waiting. Because if they can wait a *little* while tonight, they can change their children's life over the *long* while." Wyatt began pacing the stage, and suddenly even the people who did mind waiting didn't mind waiting. "So I want to salute you," he said. "We're going to show people all over the world that with a good staff, with dedication, with teamwork, that we can turn out first-rate scholars." There was a loud burst of applause. "Oh, you *better* clap," Wyatt continued. "We're not cutting no corners. We're going to *do* this." He pulled out one of his favorite stories, one he often used in front of a crowd like this one. "I want to tell you something that maybe you don't know," he said, his voice rising. "The people who run prisons in this country are looking at our third-graders. They look at their test scores each year to begin to predict how many prison cells will be needed twenty years from now." Some scattered murmurs of disapproval were heard. "And so I want the people in this house to tell them: You will not have our children!" The applause was louder now, a Sunday-morning feel on a wet Tuesday night.

“Let me hear somebody say it,” Wyatt called out, and he led the crowd in a chant: “You! Will! Not! Have! Our! Children!”

“Let me hear somebody else say it,” Wyatt cried, and the parents shouted again, louder:

“You! Will! Not! Have! Our! Children!”

“Let’s make some noise in this place!”

AND THEN THE drawing began, starting with the kindergarten class. Doreen Land, the academy’s newly hired superintendent, read the first name into a microphone: “Dijon Brinnard.” A whoop went up from the back of the auditorium, and a jubilant mother started edging her way out of her row, proudly clutching the hand of her four-year-old son. Land smiled and took the next card: “Kasim-Seann Cisse.” Another whoop, some applause, and then, a few seconds later, “Yanice Gillis.” Yasmin Scott clapped her hands and leapt to her feet.

At the front of the auditorium, Canada congratulated each mother (or, occasionally, father) and child. Proud parents shook his hand and introduced their children, beaming on their way back to their seats. In the front row, Wilma Jure was praying harder than ever, her eyes shut tight, her lips moving, reciting one supplication after another. And then Land read out, “Jaylene Fonseca,” and Jure’s eyes flew open, and the next thing she knew, she was on her feet, hugging Canada, tears brimming in her eyes, and then running out of the auditorium to call her sister with the good news.

As the evening wore on, though, the mood in the auditorium started to shift. The kindergarten lottery ended, the chosen students trooped out to the cafeteria for a group photo, and the sixth-grade lottery began. In the front row, Virainia Utley sat with her daughter Janiqua, listening to the names and trying not to worry. But the lottery numbers were rising—fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six—and Janiqua hadn’t yet been called.

After Land read out the one hundredth name, Canada took the stage again and explained to Utley and the other remaining par-

ents that it wasn't likely there would be room for their children in the sixth grade. Land would read out the rest of the names and put them on a waiting list, he said, but this part wouldn't be much fun. He encouraged everyone to go home. Land went back to reading names, and Utley and Janiqua sat and listened, still in their seats, as the waiting list grew and the number of cards in the drum dwindled. By the time Land got to the eightieth place on the waiting list, they were just waiting to make sure Janiqua's name was called. Maybe her card got lost or stuck to another card.

The room was thinning out, and the only remaining parents were angry ones. They were lining up to let Canada know how they felt. One by one, the parents came up to him to find out what could be done to get their children into the school, and he had to tell each one the same thing: nothing. Nothing could be done. One disappointed woman spat out her complaint to anyone who would listen. "I think it's not fair, and I want someone to know," she said, her voice loud and bitter. "It's *very* unfair. Drag people out and they sit here all day, half their night is gone—they can't cook dinner, they can't do nothing—because they said that our child's going to get in here, and then our child don't get in here. But we're still sitting here, waiting to do what? On a wait list? It's not fair, and I don't like it."

Finally, at number 111 on the waiting list, Janiqua Utley's name was called, and her mother rose, took her by the hand, and started up the aisle to the back door.

AS WORKERS BEGAN sweeping up coffee cups and deflated balloons, I sat down next to Canada in the front row of the auditorium, off to the side. I had by this point been reporting on his work for almost a year, following him to meetings and speeches and events around the city. But I had never seen him look so exhausted; he was overwhelmed, it seemed, not only by the emotion of the evening but also by the enormity of the task ahead of him.

"I was trying to get folks to leave and not to hang around to be

the last kid called,” he said. “This is very hard for me to see. It’s very, very sad. People are desperate to get their kids into a decent school. And they just can’t believe that it’s not going to happen.” His eyes were watery, and as we talked he dabbed periodically at his nose with his folded-up handkerchief. “These parents really get it,” he said. “They understand that if the school is good, the odds that your child is going to have a good life just increase exponentially. So now they just feel, ‘Well, there go my child’s chances.’”

Canada often spoke of a “competition” that was going on in New York City, and by extension in the nation, between the children he called “my kids,” the thousands of children who were growing up in Harlem in poverty, and the kids living below 110th Street, mostly white, mostly well off, with advantages visible and invisible that shadowed them wherever they went. The divisions between these two populations had grown more stark than ever. The average white family in Manhattan with children under five now had an annual income of \$284,000, while their black counterparts made an average of \$31,000. Growing up in New York wasn’t just an uneven playing field anymore. It was like two separate sporting events.

“For me,” Canada said, “the big question in America is: Are we going to try to make this country a true meritocracy? Or will we forever have a class of people in America who essentially won’t be able to compete, because the game is fixed against them?” Canada’s voice sounded raspy and solemn. “There’s just no way that in good conscience we can allow poverty to remain the dividing line between success and failure in this country, where if you’re born poor in a community like this one, you stay poor. We have to even that out. We ought to give these kids a chance.”

The creation of the Harlem Children’s Zone had brought Canada to a strange new moment in his life. He had known since he was a child that this was the work he wanted to do. In college, he was a political activist, and he led angry demonstrations against the injustices that he and other black students saw on campus

and in the nation. He went to work as a teacher after graduation, and for thirty years now he had been a passionate advocate for children. It was a very emotional business he was in, and the approach that he and many of his peers had always taken was an intensely personal one: if you could reach one child, touch one life, your work was worthwhile. But the old way of doing things wasn't working for Canada anymore, or at least it wasn't working fast enough. He had seen it happen over and over: you reach one child and ten more slip past you, into crime or substance abuse or just ignorance and indolence, menial jobs, long stretches of unemployment, missed child-support payments. Saving a few no longer felt like enough.

"We're not interested in saving a hundred kids," Canada told me. "Even three hundred kids. Even a thousand kids to me is not going to do it. We want to be able to talk about how you save kids by the tens of thousands, because that's how we're losing them. We're losing kids by the tens of thousands."

In starting the Harlem Children's Zone, Canada was asking a new set of questions: What would it take to change the lives of poor children not one by one, through heroic interventions and occasional miracles, but in a programmatic, standardized way that could be applied broadly and replicated nationwide? Was there a science to it, a formula you could find? Which variables in a child's life did you need to change, and which ones could you leave as they were? How many more hours of school would be required? How early in a child's life did you need to begin? How much did the parents have to do? How much would it all cost?

The questions had led Canada into uncharted territory. His new approach was bold, even grandiose: to transform every aspect of the environment that poor children were growing up in; to change the way their families raised them and the way their schools taught them as well as the character of the neighborhood that surrounded them. But Canada had come to believe that it was not only the best way to solve the relentless problem of poverty in America; it was

the only way. Across the country, policymakers, philanthropists, and social scientists were carefully watching the system that Canada was building in Harlem. The evidence that he was trying to create, they knew, had the potential to reshape completely the way that Americans thought about poverty.

Canada realized that if he was going to make this new approach work, he couldn't take each child's success and failure as personally as he used to. Promise Academy was a crucial new step, but it was just one link in the chain that Canada was constructing, and he knew he needed to stay focused on the big picture. It wasn't easy for him, though, especially on nights like this one. For all his attempts to be cold-hearted and analytical, when he looked into the eyes of the parents he was turning down, he still felt the pain in their lives viscerally. At the end of what was supposed to be a triumphant event, he couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't doing enough, that he had failed.

"What I'm going to remember about tonight," he said, "is how those mothers looked at me when their kids didn't get in." It made him think about his own young son, Geoffrey Jr., who was at home with his mother, Canada's wife, Yvonne. "When I go home tonight to my own kid, whose life is pretty much secure," Canada said, "it's not going to make me sleep well knowing there are kids and families out there that *don't* feel secure. They just are terrified that their child is not going to make it, and they think this is another opportunity that slipped by."

It was a waiting list that had started him on the path to the Harlem Children's Zone a decade earlier. And now, despite everything he had accomplished and all the millions he had spent, here he was, still setting up waiting lists. "We've got to do more," he said with a sigh. "We've got to give these people a chance for hope."