

BREAKING THE CYCLE

Helping inner-city youth find new directions is the goal of Urban Compass



by Nathan Dinsdale

Don Morgan '95 motions across the parking lot toward a sprawling cluster of squat, white buildings just beyond the tall perimeter fence surrounding Verbum Dei High School. He doesn't point, lest the group of color-coordinated gang members strolling just outside the fence misinterpret the gesture.

"That's Nickerson Gardens," Morgan says, nodding towards the notorious housing project. "Everything bad you can imagine happens there. That's where our kids live." The kids he's referring to are students from nearby 112th Street Elementary School. They participate in programs — ranging from after-school tutoring and assessment tests to filmmaking workshops and field trips — offered by Urban Compass, the non-profit organization Morgan co-founded four years ago to assist youth in the Watts section of Los Angeles.

"Three years ago, if you asked most of these kids where they wanted to go to college, they'd just laugh," Morgan says. "Today, if you ask most of our kids where they want to go to college, they'll tell you. That's a huge shift in their perception of what's possible."

But that shift hasn't come easily in this poverty-stricken and crime-ridden neighborhood, a place where local public high schools often have dropout rates that parallel the graduation rates of their suburban counterparts.

"It's just a totally different reality here," Morgan says. "Some of these kids sleep on the floor because bullets go through the window. They've all seen dead bodies and other things that most of us can't even imagine. They talk about it very casually because it's normal for them."

Morgan, co-founder Patrick McNicholas and Urban Compass community outreach coordinator DeAnthony Langston have faced an uphill battle winning over local residents accustomed to well-intentioned organizations tucking tail whenever these mean streets bare their teeth.

"You have to prove to the community that you won't leave the first time somebody throws a rock through your window," Morgan says. "We sat down with people from the community and had a very honest conversation. They were very skeptical but we were also very earnest. Gradually we've been able to build that respect."

After more than a decade of working for nonprofits — while also earning a doctorate in public policy from the University of Southern California (where he teaches as an adjunct professor) — Morgan has used his expertise to help build a partnership model that Urban Compass hopes to eventually replicate in other cities and neighborhoods.

"The best and the brightest kids in this neighborhood often become the leaders of gangs because that's where they can excel the most," Morgan says. "Many of them are entering gangs by the fourth grade, so if you want to get through to them you have to engage these kids in kindergarten or first grade and create a path all the way to college."



Morgan has fostered partnerships with 112th Street Elementary, St. Michael's Middle School, Verbum Dei (the Jesuit-run home base of Urban Compass), local nonprofits and private sector donors to ensure that path doesn't have cracks. Morgan — who works for a Pasadena firm to help nonprofits and schools find executive-level recruits — also is the organization's primary fundraiser and teams with his wife Whitney (née Symington) '99 to coordinate various benefit events and the annual Christmas party.

Morgan says one of the most critical components to ensuring Urban Compass students stay the course is to provide them with mentors and tutors that can relate to the daily struggles of growing up in a hostile environment.

Langston is the bedrock example: He grew up in Nickerson Gardens, attended 112th Street Elementary and Verbum Dei. After college, he played professional basketball overseas before returning to serve his community.

"The idea of empathy is ridiculous when, at the end of the day, I'm driving home to Pasadena," Morgan says. "You and I can come down here all we want and tell these kids 'Trust me, you can go to college' but it's not the same as hearing it from someone who really knows what these kids go through every day."

The focus is not just academic but cultural, with field trips to museums and the beach, experiences many of the students have never had.

"The more we can show them different things, the more it opens up a new world of possibility," Morgan says. "We've had some of the toughest gang members in Nickerson Gardens come to us and say, 'I want you to take care of my kids so that they have a different life than me.' That's a huge step for us — and for them."

For more information, go to www.urbancompass.org.