

# Urban Compass Points Watts Kids in the Right Direction

By **CHRISTINA HAMLETT**  
The Outlook

To add to Ben Franklin's short list of human certainties — death and taxes — there's a third reality: Fortune is a transitory privilege that few appreciate until it has been lost through ignorance or arrogance.

Whether it's a celebrity's fall from grace, a politician's seduction by power or the toppling of corporate empires through betrayal of public trust, the line between those who have nothing and those who have it all is much thinner than the latter might like to believe.

For Don Morgan, co-founder of Urban Compass, the capricious nature of fate is reinforced every time he looks in the eyes of the young constituency his organization serves in Watts, L.A.'s most dangerous neighborhood. As Morgan candidly observes, "How many CEOs would feel comfortable with the knowledge that the same skill sets that put them in a corner office — leadership, intelligence, competition, distribution, pricing and an understanding of supply and demand — are also used by gang members on the street to control empires governed by drugs and violence?" he said.

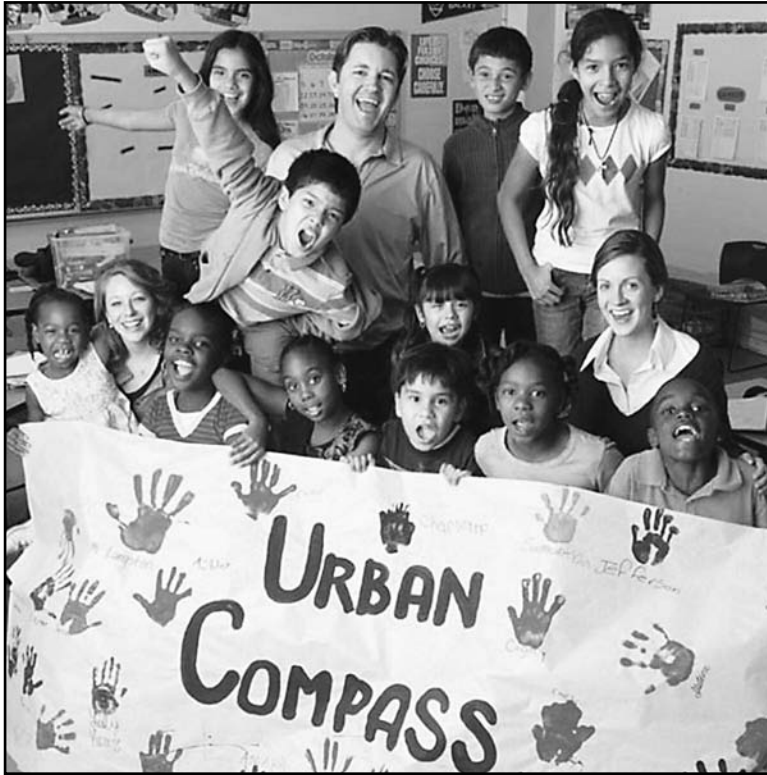
The third-generation Arizona native reflects that his own life might have turned out differently had it not been for the influence of a teacher who recognized his potential.

"I grew up with a single dad, and we moved around a lot when I was kid," Morgan said. "I was always put in special ed classes, and when you know it's just a matter of time before things change again, there's not as much incentive to focus and bond and figure out what it is you want to accomplish down the road. I was fortunate to have an instructor who thought I could do better if I really applied myself."

It was while he was attending a Jesuit high school in Phoenix, one stressing public service and social justice, that he caught the first glimpse of what his life's passion would become. "I was able to put myself through college at University of San Diego and then did a program called the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, which is like a domestic Peace Corps," Morgan said. "I wanted to understand the root causes of homelessness, so I worked and lived with other volunteers at a shelter for homeless and runaway youth in the Tenderloin District of San Francisco. We got \$75 a month for spending money. That experience really teaches a person the difference between what they want and what they need."

During his subsequent employment by the Arizona Diamondbacks' community relations office, Morgan unexpectedly received a call from his former high school asking if he wanted to do fundraising for them.

"I was only 24 and had never done fundraising in my life but thought it would be a piece of cake," he said. "It was an interesting juxtaposition between affirming how much I loved nonprofits as a result of my work at the homeless shelter and realizing that I'd probably never be a counselor. On the fundraising side, I realized I could help nonprofits as well as have access to a different world. I've



Photos courtesy Urban Compass

**At Urban Compass, at-risk children in South Los Angeles are reached at an early age.**

been doing fundraising ever since for schools and nonprofits."

Following his move to Pasadena seven years ago, Morgan set up a small consulting firm and started helping nonprofits raise money. "Companies hire me to run capital campaigns, write grants and such, and it's given me the chance to do amazing work all over Los Angeles," he said.

None of these, however, would prove quite as daunting — nor shine quite as brightly — as the inner-city enterprise he launched with one of his donors, attorney Pat McNicholas.

"Pat was asked by a guy who had been in Watts for about 11 years whether he could help expand some of their field trip programs for kids," Morgan said. "Since Pat isn't a nonprofit expert, he called me to see if I had any ideas. I told him I'd be happy to go to Watts and talk to some people but, to be clear, I didn't think it made a lot of sense for Pat from Malibu and me from Pasadena to go in and pretend we had any answers on how to resolve problems in Watts."

"I recommended as a first step that we meet with the community and ask people what they wanted."

Verbum Dei High School, a Jesuit high school and one of the great success stories in Los Angeles, hosted a meeting for the men, attended by parents, kids and gang members.

"We drove down there wearing our suits, and sitting across from these people we probably looked like we'd just landed from another planet," Morgan said. "We basically told them that we didn't have any answers — we didn't even have any proposals — but we wanted to do something positive that could make a difference."

Verbum Dei is amazing, he continued, because it takes kids who enter high school as freshmen performing at fifth- and sixth-grade reading and math levels and not only sees 100 percent of them graduate but 100 percent go to college. This against a 70% drop-out rate at the local high school in Watts.

"Our first thought was just to focus on Verbum Dei," Morgan said, "but we were told, 'If you wait until kids are in high school to reach

them, you're already too late.' It's sobering to realize that these kids are entering gangs in fourth grade. Sadly, they do this for the same reasons we join Little League or Girl Scouts. They're doing it for acceptance, for security, for food and shelter — it's an unbelievably logical decision they feel they're making."

He went on: "You need to engage these kids as early as kindergarten and first grade and then provide continuity for them all the way through high school. That requires a pretty significant commitment."

"What we were told was, 'Look, no offense to you guys, but we've seen it before where people come down and make promises without realizing what a challenging community it is to serve. If you're going to work with our kids, you've got to see it through and not pull a disappearing act after a couple weeks or months. If you can't make that commitment, don't bother to even start.'"

That was six years ago, and Morgan and McNicholas are proud that they've kept their word.

Urban Compass partners with 112th Street Elementary School, which borders Verbum Dei.

"Both schools share a fence line with Nickerson Gardens, which is absolutely the baddest of all the (housing) projects in Watts," Morgan said. "The elementary school gave us the target-rich environment of 700 kids who are all well below the poverty line and living in the worst situations, and brought the Verbum Dei students over each day after school to be the tutors and mentors in our enrichment activities and field trips."

The strategy of having older students from the same community telling the younger kids that they can go to college has been a successful one, since it carries a far more potent message than if they're hearing it from adults who operate in a completely different world from the one they know.

In fact, Morgan added, every Verbum Dei student is now required to do Urban Compass volunteer hours.

It's interesting, Morgan continued, that some of the kids have never been to a beach or a museum.



**Don Morgan, co-founder of Urban Compass, works with a student.**



**Urban Compass Director Theresa Gartland instructs students.**

"These are the kinds of things that other kids — and a lot of adults — just take for granted," he said. "I remember a field trip where Verbum Dei took a group of kids to the US Bank building, and we overheard two 14-year-olds in the elevator. One of them was saying, 'I've never been up this high before,' and the other one responded, 'I've never been in an elevator before.'"

One of the stories he likes to share is about a friend of Urban Compass named Gary Gray, who is a movie director. "Gary is from South L.A. and was telling kids why he got involved with making movies," Morgan said. "It was a very unpopular thing to do (at a young) age, but he looked around his community and realized that none of the guys who was a big deal in the neighborhood lived to have gray hair. He said, 'I wanted to live a long time and get gray hair instead of ending up dead.' That's a pretty profound realization and one made all the more unsettling when you just look at the inner city mortality rate."

When Morgan and McNicholas first went to Watts, it was never with a pronouncement that they were going to combat gangs. Theirs is first and foremost an educational program that attempts to engage the kids and show them that they have options available to allow them to live a different life than the one they've grown up with.

"Because we took that

approach," Morgan said, "we've actually had the leaders of gangs say to us that they want something better for their children and grandchildren. It's important for people keep in mind that the public middle school in Watts borders three different gangs. For our participants to go to the middle school, they literally have to run for their lives through gang territories and often arrive at our programs out of breath because of what it took for them to cover the distance."

The two men started Urban Compass to end the cycle of poverty and violence in the inner city. "To take a pragmatic view," Morgan said, "I've always felt that if we could start small and do it right in Watts, we could do it right anywhere and create a model that could be plugged into other communities. So often in the nonprofit community you're reinventing the wheel and having multiple nonprofits reaching the same demographic but not talking to one another. I don't know if it's the fear of competition or the worry that donors will have to support certain groups at the exclusion of others, but we believe it's important to bring everyone to the same table, literally and figuratively, and determine how to share resources and collectively support a common vision."

Morgan is aware that whatever positive influence Urban Compass

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Felipe Velasquez, Vivian Suarez, Don Morgan and Grier Ross are among the local residents involved in Urban Compass' outreach into Watts. (Not pictured is Dave Walsh.)

## URBAN

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can make during the after-school programs is subject to being undone in the negative home environments, where parents are on drugs, in gangs and unable to provide enough food or even a bed for the kids.

"Educators in any setting — whether it's an upscale private school or the worst public school in the country — want parents to be actively engaged in what's going on," Morgan said, "but, unfortunately, that's not always going to happen. We do invite parents along on our field trips and to the holiday parties we have, and the ones who come really seem to enjoy it as much as their kids."

Urban Compass enjoys the support of a large contingent of Pasadena people and organizations, including Mayfield Junior School and Valentine Elementary, but as with other nonprofits throughout the

country, getting money to stay afloat can be challenging.

"Where individuals were once able to support eight or nine favorite charities during the year, they're now looking at maybe only two or three, and those are very hard choices to make," Morgan said. "We're pleased we've been able to operate on a shoestring budget and to bring a priceless difference to the lives of kids who might otherwise be perceived as doomed from the start just because of the zip code they were born in."

"As we learned at the beginning, though, what's even more important than the money is the time and commitment of our volunteers to provide a stable and trusted presence."

Morgan encourages anyone who is interested in learning more about supporting Urban Compass to visit [www.urbancompass.org](http://www.urbancompass.org) and watch the video on how Urban Compass offers direction and promise. "The faces and voices of the kids themselves say it far better than we could," he said.

## Armory for the Arts to Celebrate 20 Years at March 13 Benefit

The Armory for the Arts, a Pasadena community treasure, is celebrating 20 years of building on the power of art to transform lives. Its 20th birthday bash and benefit will be held on Saturday, March 13, at the Armory, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena.

"We hope to raise awareness and build support for the armory and its various programs," said Denise Mathews, benefit co-chair. "Many people know the armory offers great classes and world-class art exhibits. We want people to understand that it does so much more — we have dozens of programs throughout the community that are transformational."

Carol Goldthwait, benefit co-chair, added, "We have wonderful process-oriented art classes at Washington Middle School, which focus on identity. For some, this is the only creative outlet they have ever had to explore their sense of self."

The armory hosted an exhibit last year showcasing art created by homeless artists. The sale of their artwork proved to be a validating and life-affirming experience for them, allowing them to believe in bigger possibilities for themselves.

"I am proud that the money we



The 2010 Armory Benefit Committee members include (front row, from left) Allison Withers and Martha Chowning. Second row: Denise Mathews, Carol Goldthwait and Julie James. Third row: Lisa Galloway and Louise Brinsley. Fourth row: Sally Bickerton, Jane Abascal, Emily Burke, Paige Hobey and Honorary Chair Susan Caldwell.

raise at the 20th birthday bash and benefit will sustain programs like these," said Goldthwait.

The Armory Center for the Arts is a nonprofit, donor-supported organization offering innovative approaches to creating, teaching and presenting the arts, through classes and exhibitions at its main location in Old Pasadena, as well as

a range of free programs in the community. For two decades, the armory has trained professional artists to use their expertise and enthusiasm to teach and inspire individuals of diverse ages and backgrounds.

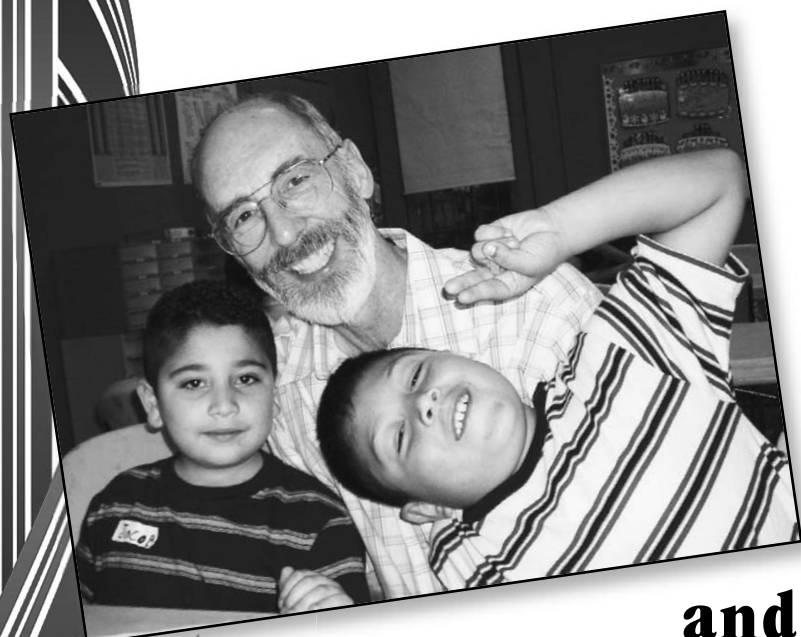
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