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SAVED BY THE BELL

By the time he was 2 years old, the odds of Earl Martin Phalen becoming a successful adult were already stacked against him. But now Phalen is proof that long shots make the best stories.

By Brett Hoover
Ivy League Associate Director

Idealists are forever outnumbered. Even the dictionary mocks them. "One whose conduct is influenced by ideals," it reads. But then adds, "That often conflict with practical consideration."

So when someone offers an opinion for the betterment of mankind, there always is a pessimist available to chime in, "Who are you to think you can change the world?" Earl Martin Phalen has an answer.

Abandoned at birth in 1967, he could have been another of many black children who struggle unsuccessfully through state foster care systems. At that time, Earl would later note, 70 percent of black males in his situation eventually would wind up in the penal system.

But in 1968, the Phelans – George and Veronica – intervened. In their mid-40s, they had a happy home in Norwood, Mass., a blue-collar suburb of Boston. It was a big family with seven kids, the oldest of whom was finishing up at college while another was just heading off to school. The other five were growing up fast, but the Phalens had room for one more child.

"We had always been so involved in the civil rights struggle that we thought that if nothing else, we could adopt a male child. We had a happy home, so we decided to do that," said Veronica. "We started with adoption agencies and got in contact with the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange. One woman saw our request and wanted to make sure it happened. She had fallen in love with Earl. He was the greatest kid. It took a year to go through the system and the faint of



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heart might not have continued. But it wasn't just some impulse."

A year later, little Earl finally had a home. It was a home that embraced Earl's color rather than looked past it. The Phelans deliberately taught him to have pride in his heritage. That's why he felt free to question his junior high school teacher about Thomas Jefferson, wondering why he was treated as a hero of freedom when he treated Earl's ancestors "like cattle."



Veronica Phalen with her four sons — Jim, Steve, Earl and Dave — on Earl's high school graduation day in 1985.

"My parents, particularly my mother, helped instill a sense of social justice in me," Earl said last week. "When you think about a white family adopting a black child in the '60s, you realize how important that was to them. They brought a focus and a perspective and a sense of equality to me. Their adopting me was a very intentional decision."

Veronica's parents had emigrated from Ireland and broke local tradition by sending their daughter to public school while others were headed to parochial school. "My parents sent me to public school because they wanted diversity," she said. "That's why they had come here. That was our cup of tea."

Earl came from a long line of idealists. He recalled a racial incident on the playground at the Aaron Guild School when he was in second grade. Not only did that treatment puzzle him, it also motivated him. He knew right then he was going to do something with his life to bring about justice for kids like himself. The family idealism had been successfully passed along.

Earl grew up in an environment full of love and support. He got good grades, worked hard and gained a reputation as an athlete, although he downplayed his basketball skills at Norwood High. "I was not very good," he said. "I was athletic and a good defender. I thought I was the best defender on the team and I had a strong work ethic. Our teams were very successful, but I wasn't the star by any means."

But he was good enough to draw some attention from Division I scouts and wound up at Yale University, where he earned two varsity letters.

His memories of Yale may not include basketball heroics, but he did begin to have confidence in his journey to discover a way to affect change for other's less fortunate than himself. He found Yale to be an environment that fostered thought and expression with professors and classmates. Earl soaked up the atmosphere and learned lessons both in the classroom and outside it.

More lessons were to come after his 1989 graduation, when he headed south. "In the year between Yale and law school, he spent a whole year volunteering at a homeless shelter with the Lutheran Church in Washington, D.C.," said Veronica. "That put something in his head. We could feel him growing there."

Earl had gotten a taste of working with young people and it was not about to wear off. In his



first year of law school at Harvard he was distracted by the thought.

After finishing that first year, Earl went to Jamaica to work on human rights cases – trying to find justice for victims of police brutality and other abuses. But when he returned to Cambridge, he told Professor Charles Ogletree that he wanted to work with children.

"Here was this bright kid," Ogletree told the Boston Herald in 2003, "who had graduated from Yale and was attending Harvard Law. But he approached me with this idealistic view of the world and told me that he wanted to save the next generation of inner-city kids. I told him to come back when he was serious."

Earl kept coming back. He landed a job as a teaching assistant at an orphanage, working with children from ages 5 to 18. But when he got there he was told that there was both good news and bad news. "The good news was that I was going to be able to do a lot of teaching," he said. "The bad news was that the assigned teacher had left."

He went from being a completely inexperienced assistant to a completely inexperienced teacher on his first day. By the end of the day, when he saw the face of a 6-year-old light up when she learned how to add, he knew he was hooked. Law school was suddenly in the way. He wanted to quit right then.

"We had been through this before, so we told him that having a law degree was the best basis for anything he wanted to do," said Veronica. "Having a law background prepares you for anything, like starting a business or a foundation."

So Earl stayed at Harvard Law School and continued to tell Ogletree of his idealistic world-saving notions.

That second year, he and some other black students at the Law School began mentoring children at a community center in Roxbury, a low-income section of Boston. Earl wanted to tell those kids that through education, anything was possible. That their wildest dreams could come true. But then came reality.

The 15-year-old kids they were to tutor were considered among the best at their schools, but most could not even read at a sixth-grade level.

"We were blown away," Earl remembered. "No, it was worse than that. We were sick to our stomachs. These kids weren't getting the basic skills that they needed, and here we were talking about working hard and going to law school and there was nothing in their reality that was pointing in that direction."

Never before had his thoughts been so crystalized. He knew he had to help provide those kids with the opportunities he had been afforded.



That year, with a \$12,500 grant, he and Andrew Carter, a fellow law school student, started a rigorous non-profit tutoring and mentoring program – Building Educated Leaders for Life – with a good dose of advice from Ogletree, who has been on BELL's Board of Directors ever since.



To learn more about BELL, its programs and how to help sponsor them, click the logo above

"Charles Ogletree at Harvard was a focal point in all of this," said Veronica. "Professor Ogletree made a big impression on Earl. He thought that Earl was crazy, but he didn't say 'no' to him."

Earl himself wasn't convinced that he and Carter knew what they were doing, but he thought they were making a difference for that initial class of 20 students (the BELL program calls them 'scholars') with their enthusiasm and commitment.

"We knew nothing, except that we had a deep love and a deep belief in black and Latino students," said Earl.

Things did not come easily for the BELL Foundation, which today reaches children between the grades of kindergarten and sixth grade. But the results foretold a program on the rise.

"He got space from Cambridge College on Massachusetts Avenue and I remember his first PTA gatherings," said Veronica. "Only the mothers showed up. But then we saw a change in that. Both parents started coming and then other members of the family."

Carter graduated from law school and moved on to legal aide work, but Earl stayed with the program. His first national recognition was a Presidential Service Award in 1997 from President Bill Clinton.



"He has given hundreds of African-American young adults the chance to be role models and tutors to inner-city elementary school students throughout the greater Boston area," the president said at the ceremony. "Under their tutelage those children are thriving, their futures are brighter and therefore so are ours. Tonight we honor Earl Phalen for his remarkable contribution to our American community."

The depth of the change has been remarkable. The BELL Foundation requires parental involvement, including picking up the children every day. In turn, the parents have become far more active in their children's education. That interest has resulted in the parents holding their public school teachers responsible for higher expectations and a better education for their children.

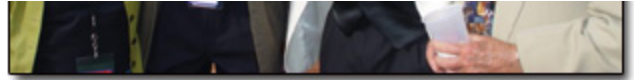
BELL now serves 10,000 scholars a year in Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. Earl has plans to expand to 50,000 within five years. And each of those scholars is trained to be a difference maker for society.

"He never stopped dreaming that way," Veronica said of Earl's plan to enroll 50,000 scholars. "He is such a joy. He clung to his dream. People were always saying, 'Earl, you could do so much with your law degree.' But it fell upon deaf ears. You know, he has worried about making payroll for 13 years. These people are his friends and he has had to worry if he would be able to pay them."

New opportunities continue to emerge for Earl and the BELL scholars. The program



is getting more attention than ever and it has become a scholarship partner with the Boston Red Sox. Twenty-five BELL scholars are individually acknowledged on the field with the players prior to a game and awarded \$5,000 each toward their higher education.



Veronica Phalen, Boston College men's basketball coach Al Skinner, Earl and George Phalen at the 2005 Red Sox 'Field of Dreams' Day.

Earl's model has been cited in two recently-filed legislative proposals, one from New York Senator Hillary Clinton and another by Illinois Senator Barack Obama, a friend of Earl's from his Harvard Law School days.

Earl has been named as an "Angel Among Us" by the American Red Cross of Massachusetts Bay. He has earned a Social Capitalist Award from Fast Company magazine as one of the top 25 entrepreneurs solving the world's toughest problems with creativity, ingenuity and passion.

One wonders how far he could go. When California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger was looking to fill a state education post, he called upon Earl to come to California and consider it. Ultimately, Earl wasn't ready to leave the BELL program that has been at the center of his adult life.

His mother doesn't think he'll ever leave BELL. His investment is too great and, in many ways, the payoff is just beginning – like that initial class of 20 BELL scholars. They have all attended college, including Mousson Berrouet, who carries a perfect grade-point average at Bryn Mawr and plans to move to her native Haiti to serve the underprivileged as a doctor.

She was offered payment to tutor a child recently. She did the work, but turned down the cash. Earl dreams of the day that thousands of his scholars are sharing the wisdom and leadership they learned at BELL.

Veronica, now 82 years old, couldn't be more proud of her youngest son. "What he's done blows our minds," she said. "I wish we could be around for another 25 years to see it through."



Mousson Berrouet, her mother and Earl at BELL's 13th anniversary