



COMMUNITY FOR CHANGE

# HIGH SIGHT

A Better Education. The Choice Is Yours.

*Featured Organizations: HighSight*

## HIGHTSIGHT MEETS JOY

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# HighSight Meets Joy

*The core design ideas of the Community for Change are joy, non-obligation, and passion matching. But perhaps it all boils down to unleashing joy.*

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It can be so easy to feel pulled under by both the mundaneness of day-to-day work life and the regular, overwhelming realization that in the non-profit world you have a standard to “solve” problems that are somewhat unsolvable even in a 10 to 20-year time frame...typically much longer. We can bend under the pressure of deadlines and budgets and the suffering itself that non-profits intend to alleviate.

Fear and its many undermining forces can supplant even the remote possibility of joy. Guilt and obligation and “giving back” can displace the far greater power of passion in all aspects of operations.

Maybe the pathway of reducing suffering is connected to compassion... and joy...

The Gandhi quote “Be the change you want to see in the world” is so well “known” I think people don’t bother to actually examine it. Any nonprofit has the opportunity to challenge the status quo of a joy-less culture just by operating in a way where joy radiates through everything they do. Of course, this is often difficult. Joy is not our collective habituated social norm. But through community, it can more easily be drawn out. Knowing you are not alone in the challenges you face with fundraising or programs, having a system of accountability towards big milestones, and being able to work through “rocks” without judgement are all ways we have seen joy manifested through the Community for Change...and joy truly is the goal when our nonprofit partners come together.

A few months ago, I had the privilege of witnessing joy as a critical community thread through HighSight, a nonprofit partner in Chicago that supports students in their four years of high school and then (more indirectly) through college.

HighSight’s theory of change could perhaps be summarized as this: the best way for young students in Chicago to move out of poverty is to graduate with a college degree, and the best way for students to graduate with a college degree is to attend a college that has a high graduation rate. HighSight’s programs are therefore designed to equip students with what they need to get into and stay in those colleges.



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When Mark Duhon originally founded HighSight, the mission was just to help students get into good private high schools through mentoring and scholarships. But this changed when Mark looked at the research being published on college graduation rates of Chicago students, primarily from Melissa Roderick at the University of Chicago. The data revealed that only 6% of Chicago students would go on to graduate from college and that narrow subset of students were all going to the same 10 colleges, all of which had graduation rates below 60%.

Mark saw a simple answer to this challenge – students at HighSight would no longer be encouraged (even permitted) to apply to those 10 schools.

Since then, the objective for HighSight has been to get students into schools that are a good fit for them academically and have relatively high graduation rates. It's a matter of probability.

Now, 100% of HighSight Students attend a 4-year university, and 85% graduate in at least 6 years.

These numbers can really speak in deeply...

**6%** of students across Chicago graduate from college.

**85%** of Chicago students from HighSight graduate from college.

They've cracked the code.

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In his 1914 poem Chicago, Carl Sandburg writes how the city is simultaneously destitute, cruel even, as shown through injustice and inequality, but also...

*Come and show me another city with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.*

*Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job, here is a tall bold slugger set vivid against the little soft cities.*

There is a paradox in holding pride and strength in one hand and a whole lot of bad in the other hand. It takes a certain level of intelligence to be able to find joy while knowing that, most likely, everything will not be 'alright' most of the time.

Usually, we won't even let ourselves get to that feeling of joy out of fear that we are, in the end,



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only going to be disappointed. As Brené Brown likes to put it, we somehow convince ourselves to dress rehearsal disaster in order to beat pain and disappointment to the punch. In that sense, to be joyful despite the potential for things to go awry is an act of bravery.

Carl Sandburg's poem captures Chicago perfectly to me – it can be a tough city. When I lived there as an undergrad, I had to learn, with difficulty, how to hold the good and the bad simultaneously, to be okay with those paradoxes.

And the students that are a part of HighSight have undoubtedly seen a lot of the bad of Chicago – gang violence, broken political systems, racism, high rates of poverty, an epidemic of homelessness, police brutality, public school systems that are failing.

If anyone could justify dress rehearsing tragedy, it could be these high school students. But that was hardly what I witnessed. When I visited the space and met the kids, I got goosebumps while being in a space of determination and success and kindness and accountability and joy...

I had heard from Pip about HighSight's graduation statistics, but it wasn't until my second day visiting their offices where I actually got to see their programs in action. The main room in the HighSight building is an open space with a high ceiling, tables and desks creating lines that simultaneously looked purposefully placed but also casually moved around. When the students started to trickle in at around 4pm, they all quickly waved and said hello to staff, dropped their cellphones into a basket outside the door, and sat down to start on their homework. Jesus, HighSight's Program Coordinator, played classical music from a boombox by the door.

From an outsider's point of view, it would seem like HighSight runs a tight ship with dozens of students diligently working with their heads down. And they do. But the majority of students I interviewed also said one of their favorite things about HighSight is the boundaries that are set in place and the discipline that is enforced to stay within those boundaries.

Here is another paradox – normally humans associate order and discipline with bad things. Being strict, harsh, overbearing – like the stereotypical headmistress in *Matilda* or *A Little Princess*. But that is not the case here.

In my short time interacting with the Chicago Public School system, it became quite obvious that the kids whose parents were most involved were the kids who were most likely to succeed. I volunteered in a second-grade classroom every week for a few years and one of my responsibilities was to grade the students completed homework that was in their “take home folders” and insert any fliers from the school. The students who had thin, clean folders were the same students that completed their homework and got most answers right, who raised their hands and correctly answered questions in class, and voraciously read from the class library.



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The students who had thick folders full of old papers that were falling apart at the seams were the students who were academically struggling.

When you are a second grader, you couldn't care less about your folder. The folder is more of a reflection of a student's parents. There appeared to be a correlation between the parents who seemed to be more involved in what was going in and out of that folder and a student's likelihood of success.

The HighSight staff sets high expectations for the students when they are both outside and inside the HighSight building. Some students have to send weekly emails on things they are working on in school. Staff are on top of students about deadlines when they are applying to college and working through FAFSA documents. Students expressed to me feeling like a 'B' was not good enough when they knew they could have gotten an 'A.'

But students don't see this as a bad thing – they see it as a sign of love and affection. They expressed to me they LIKED how involved staff were in their lives, both academically and even personally.

Isn't this a universal human desire? I would much rather go into a performance review where my boss told me I had some things to work on, but talked me through how they think I can do better, rather than them saying I was doing great but not being able to explain why or give any advice for future growth.

It feels GOOD to be held accountable to things because it says that someone cares about you and your development towards certain future goals.

And every student that enters HighSight's program has one primary goal: get into the best school they can get into with the best financial aid package possible. There is incredible JOY when these goals are achieved, there is joy in committing to a goal and sticking with it in the long-haul of four years of hard work, focus, and dedication. There is joy in being held accountable to those commitments. In this sense, Founder Mark Duhon is hitting at an even deeper level beyond educational achievement and income inequality in Chicago – he is working to change the cultural underpinnings as to why people tend to not agree to or keep commitments.

The spirit of HighSight embodies what I see to be the spirit of Chicago – the ability to feel joyful and also remember that all is not well (and will never be totally well) at the same time... to find joy despite the "what-ifs" and to have a community that loves you –even if that looks like holding you fiercely accountable.

In the same poem, Carl Sandburg also famously calls Chicago the "City of the Broad



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Shoulders,” a reference to the legacy of Chicagoans as hardworking, industrial, even gritty. HighSight students are standing on those shoulders today – and one day, others will stand on their shoulders too.

