



REACH: An Urban Experiment

Penn Charter's youngest and newest overseer, Mark Hecker OPC '99, doesn't do anything halfway, and he rarely gives himself a break.

Only weeks after graduating with a master's degree in education from Harvard University (which is in addition to a master of social work from the University of North Carolina), Hecker founded Reach, Incorporated, a nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C. aimed at improving literacy rates in D.C. public schools.

Hecker's organization will train struggling high school readers to be tutors for elementary students also having difficulty with reading. Reach will pay the high school tutors, making the role very attractive and, Hecker expects, motivating the students to improve academically and to behave appropriately in the workplace. "The Reach model itself could be broader than just literacy, and it is," he said. "I think this is a different way to do schooling; the literacy model is a first step toward that."

Hecker was busy when he was a student at Penn Charter. He was involved in music, band and chorus; he sang with the Quakers Dozen, played water polo and swam. Hecker also was senior class president. "Mark was the nicest guy and was respected by everyone in his class," said Chuck Hitschler, Upper School mathematics teacher and a varsity football coach. "He always gave all of himself to everything he did when he was here, in academics and sports." Hecker received the Alumni Award at Penn Charter's commencement, then went on to Duke University and more involvement with music and service. He sang with the Pitchforks, Duke's oldest a cappella group, for four years, and was their music director for two years and president for one. He also volunteered in public schools in Durham, N.C., in the adolescent ward at a nearby state psychiatric hospital, and at a local grief counseling center. At Duke, Hecker majored in psychology

"in part because they didn't have social work or education," indicating he'd determined his career plans early.

Working in the psychiatric ward convinced Hecker of his desire to get his master of social work, "I knew I wanted to do case management and therapy, and you need the master's to do that," he said. He credits a personal tragedy for sparking his desire to work with teenagers who need support. "When I was at Penn Charter, between seventh and eighth grades, my father died. Penn Charter is an environment where you're not allowed to fail. If you go from being a B+ student to getting Cs and Ds, you have 35 people talking to you, helping you, being in your face about not doing well. In this world, there are lots of kids going through similar things but not getting the support [that I did at Penn Charter]," Hecker said. "I wanted to figure out how you can help kids recover to answer the question of how you build teens back up from something like that."

As a social worker in Washington, D.C. with the National Center for Children and Families (NCCF), Hecker coordinated services and was a counselor for children and adolescents with behavioral and emotional disorders. He also advocated for the best interests of his clients in criminal, civil and educational proceedings. True to what his PC teachers knew of him, Hecker put all of himself, and more, into his work. "To be fair," he said, "one of the reasons I got a lot of credit for my work [at the NCCF] is because I was willing to take on the most difficult clients." Despite having a very challenging caseload, Hecker helped his clients make positive changes in their lives, and he contributed to improving the stability of numerous adolescents and families. Hecker was named NCCF's 2006 Employee of the Year, and, in 2007, was the Social Worker of the Year, awarded by the Consortium for Child Welfare in D.C.



Mark Hecker OPC '99,
Director of Reach, Inc.

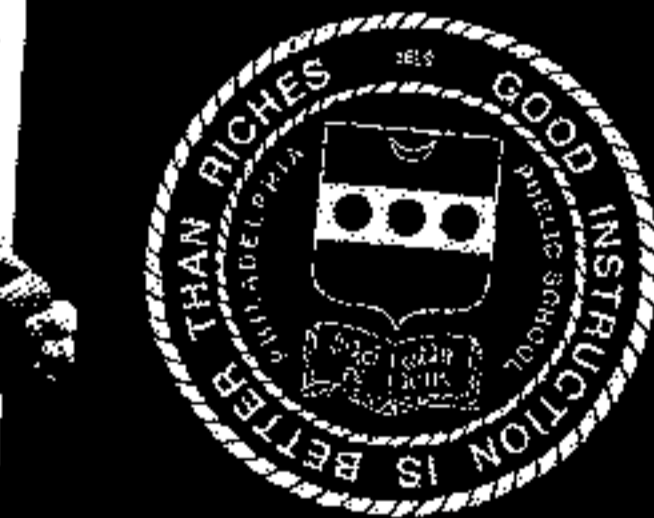
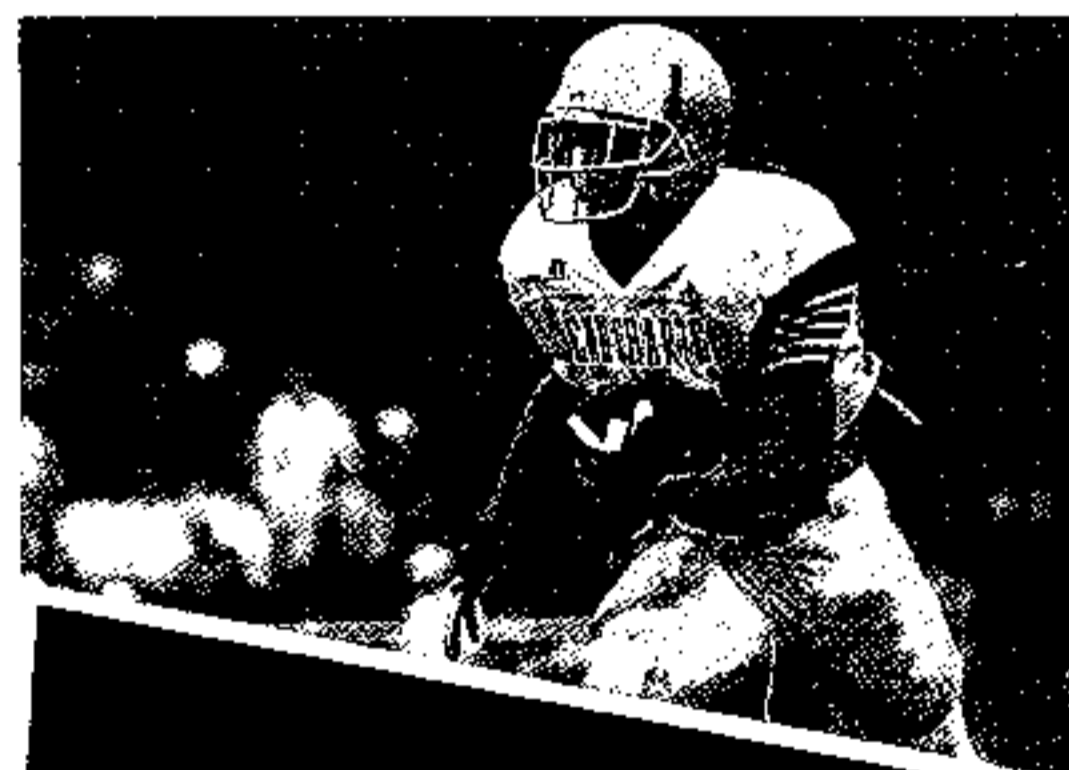
“We need to learn how we can educate the kids that tend not to do very well, instead of giving up on them.”

While working at NCCF, Hecker recognized that many of his teenaged clients faced issues around education. “My clients are in public schools, and they struggle for a long time, and the schools struggle with them. We need to learn how we can educate the kids that tend not to do very well, instead of giving up on them. I went back for a degree in education because I wanted to figure out how to combine social work and education; social work tends to focus on giving behavioral and social help. But you don’t want a kid who can behave well but cannot read, nor do you want a kid who can read but cannot behave properly. You have to figure out how to help kids do well at both.”

Hecker chose Harvard specifically to be better equipped to answer that question. At the Graduate School of Education, his program focused on designing and implementing new approaches to the education of children in non-classroom settings. Hecker arrived at Harvard with an idea of how to simultaneously improve literacy rates among struggling students in public high schools and elementary schools, an idea sparked

by an addiction-recovery program he visited while getting his MSW at UNC. In the year he was at Harvard, Hecker developed Reach, Inc. and won the Educational Enterprise Innovation Competition held at the university. He delivered Harvard’s Graduate School of Education commencement address in 2009.

In the few months since Hecker graduated from Harvard last spring, he has returned to Washington, D.C., founded Reach, recruited a board of directors, established it as a tax-exempt nonprofit organization, and raised more than \$21,000 — which is less than half of the annual budget he needs for this year. “The biggest hurdle was just deciding I was doing it — starting the organization,” he said. “It was an active decision not to seek other employment.” Despite having completed the challenge of officially establishing Reach, Hecker is aware there are more challenges to come. “For Reach to find an entry point in the schools and to discover a school that will give me a shot, that’s hard.” Hecker outlines the struggles alongside his achievements on a frequently updated blog on the Reach website, www.reachincorporated.org. PC



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