

GRAND VISION

A comprehensive commitment to children in one Chicago neighborhood



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Gary Comer wanted to help the children of **Greater Grand Crossing**, the neighborhood where he grew up. With an investment of more than \$75 million and help from SSA, the scope of his impact keeps growing.



THE BELL SOUNDS and students clad in their uniforms of khaki slacks and navy blue polo shirts pour into the airy, day-lit halls of Gary Comer College Prep.

There are some playful nudges and peals of laughter from the students, but the scene is devoid of traditional high school hallway mayhem. Even more surprising is that within five minutes, the corridors are practically clear and students are settled in their classrooms ready to work. You can tell because nearly every classroom at Comer Prep, a gleaming post-modern structure tucked in the northeast corner of the Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood, is walled with a glass panel that offers passersby a birds-eye view of the goings-on inside.

“We believe in transparency and accountability,” says Comer Principal James Troupis. “Our teachers know they’re always on stage. And that’s fine. We want people to see what’s going on here.”

Opened in 2008, Comer Prep is one of 10 schools in Chicago’s Noble Network of Charter Schools, which means that it chooses students by lottery, not based on grades or test scores (children living in the immediate community receive priority admission). As a non-selective school, however, Comer’s mission to ensure that “every single student graduates and goes to college” is lofty. Students enter, on average, reading at the fifth or

sixth grade level. To get them up to speed, they take double reading and double math classes in the first year. The Noble schools operate on a longer school day and a longer school year.

“We’ve been called draconian at times,” says Troupis of the school’s strict demerit system. “But consistency is king here. Every kid, every parent, every teacher knows what the rules are and knows what the consequences are.”

Greater Grand Crossing is a low-income, African-American neighborhood just south and west of Hyde Park and the University of Chicago campus. For a community where gangs and violence can derail a young person’s future, a school like Comer College Prep can be a powerful resource. But one school can only do so much. Luckily for local residents, Comer College Prep isn’t the only resource that has been built in the neighborhood by the Comer Science and Education Foundation (CSEF), the private philanthropy created by and named for the late founder of the Lands’ End clothing line.

Gary Comer, who died in 2006 of cancer at age 79, grew up in the neighborhood. “He knew he couldn’t fix all the ills in the city of Chicago,” says Comer’s son, Guy, now president of CSEF. “He

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knew he couldn't even fix all of the ills affecting Greater Grand Crossing. But he thought that if we concentrate our resources on increasing the educational opportunities of the current generation of kids in the neighborhood who would eventually become adults, then we could transform the neighborhood in a holistic way."

All told, CSEF has now pumped more than \$75 million into the troubled 15-block swath of Greater Grand Crossing that encircles Paul Revere Elementary School, which Gary Comer attended as a child. Before Gary Comer College Prep opened its new 40,000-square-foot high school in August, the high school was housed inside the adjacent Gary Comer Youth Center. Now the two buildings share a campus; students walk across the footpath

CSEF's core focus is on the success of every young person at the youth center and high school. But attendant with that mission is an ambitious plan, shaped by Gary Comer and his staff and supported by faculty and alumni of SSA, for changing not only the fortunes of the community's young people, but for transforming the community as well. "We started thinking about how social work played a part in the various programs and how we could involve SSA more in that. We consulted with community representatives to pull groups together and get people more engaged in the center," says SSA adjunct clinical faculty member Barbara Jackson, A.M. '69.

Revere Way, CSEF's community development project, has also built 60 affordable single-family



in local job training, adult education and block club organizing.

"We're very fortunate that Mr. Comer had the foresight to understand that in order to improve the quality of life in a community you should start with the youth," says Ayoka Samuels, senior program director of the youth center. "Young people can really make change. After all, they're the ones who are going to inherit these communities."



HOW GARY COMER CAME TO THIS dynamic involvement in his childhood neighborhood is the stuff of local legend. After a career in advertising, the sailing buff launched a company that in 1963 became Lands' End, which was sold to Sears in 2002 for \$1.9 billion. Throughout the building of the Lands' End empire, Comer developed a reputation as a generous benefactor, particularly around children's health care, education and climate change. He and his wife, Francis, were major contributors to the expansion of the University of Chicago's 155-bed Comer Children's Hospital, Pediatric Emergency Department and Center for Children and Specialty Care.

Comer had a strong attachment to his old neighborhood. "In the '70s, we would always go back

to there," says Guy Comer, 40. "We would visit the house where he grew up." In 1998, Comer visited his old elementary school and was shocked and dismayed by what he found. Most of its students were performing well below grade level on standardized tests. New computers sat unused because the school didn't have the staff or money to get them installed or to train teachers how to use them.

"He realized that he had been incredibly fortunate to grow up at a time and in a place where you could do what he did without a college education," Guy says, "but he realized that was no longer the case. So he wanted to share his good fortune with others and provide them with some of the opportunities he had."

Comer donated computers and reading and math software programs to Revere Elementary and paid to have teachers trained. When Comer learned that the 8th graders who benefitted had missed the deadline for enrollment in the Chicago Public Schools' most selective public high schools, he paid to send several of them to Catholic high schools and tracked their progress through graduation. Over the years, CSEF has supplemented Revere's CPS funds for teachers, administration and curriculum and funded capital improvements such as renovating the school auditorium and gym.

Through his involvement at Revere, Comer learned of the efforts of teacher Arthur Robertson, who founded the South Shore Drill Team, which engages more than 300 adolescents and teenagers in precision color guard performances while serving as a safe haven from the gang violence that has claimed so many of the neighborhood's young people. Operating mostly



Gary Comer among neighborhood children in Grand Crossing.

to the youth center for gym and lunch and co-curricular activities like art.

"When people see this investment taking place around youth and education it makes them think and feel differently about the community," says Melissa Wade, A.M. '05, the social worker at Comer College Prep, who has been involved with the Comer projects since she did her second-year clinical field study at Paul Revere Elementary.

homes on vacant lots near the center and provided rehab funding for 30 others. The Comers, who many say have had the blessing of former Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley, have been able to enlist the city in his neighborhood transformation plans as well, spurring the construction of the first-ever public library in Greater Grand Crossing and partnering with the city on beautification plans for neighborhood streets. CSEF has also had a hand

out of Revere and a small building nearby, the drill team had outgrown its humble beginnings. Comer decided a youth center would be a key component to maintaining the academic gains that were occurring at Revere. “He began thinking that after-school programming was an integral part of the educational mission,” Guy Comer recalls.

“As Gary got more involved, he became increasingly sensitive to the dynamic that the issues and challenges that plague a community are going to impact the students inside that community’s school buildings,” says Gregory Mooney, executive director and vice president of CSEF. “So he wanted to engage in those issues, solely out of a motivation to create a better learning environment for the youth growing up in this community.”



IN 2004, COMER TURNED TO the University of Chicago, with which he’d had a long philanthropic relationship, for assistance in understanding and addressing the urban issues he was becoming immersed in. He was connected with Henry Webber, then vice-president for community and governmental affairs and an SSA senior lecturer, and Eddie Lawlor, then SSA dean. They helped assemble



a team of scholars, including SSA’s Samuel Deutsch Professor Emerita Dodie Norton and Mark Joseph, then a post-doctoral scholar in SSA, on the direction his efforts might take.

Joseph recalls that the conversations with Comer grew into discussions about putting the commitment to a youth center and Revere into a broader community context. They encouraged Comer and his team to do outreach not only to the parents in the community, but to non-parents as well, helping even those who did not have children see that they, too, were stakeholders in what was going on at the school.

“Grand Crossing is evidence of what can happen when a few key ingredients come together: a visionary leader with incredible tenacity, focus and resources, and an institutional anchor like the University of Chicago for support and guidance,” says Joseph, now an assistant professor at the Mandel School of Applied Social

Center of Attention

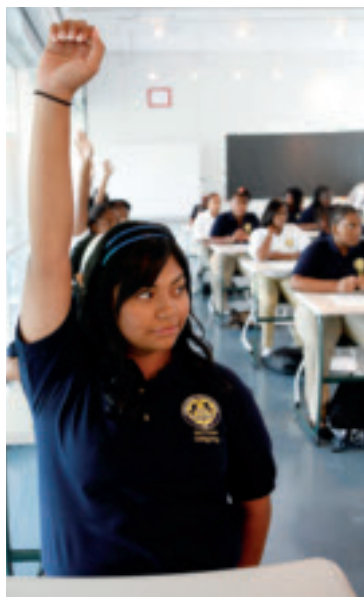
“This isn’t gym and swim,” says Ayoka Samuels, senior program director at the Gary Comer Youth Center. “We are serious here.”

If your notion of a youth center is a drop-in facility where kids lounge around playing pick-up basketball and foosball, think again. Sure, there is time to blow off steam at the five-year-old GCYC playing hoops or trying out programs in everything from art to African drumming. But the programmatic thrust of the center is to prepare kids for a productive future. That means homework help and training in topics like broadcast journalism and horticulture. The summer college tour is a big draw, sending teenagers as far away as Florida A&M University and Xavier in New Orleans. This summer counselors hope to arrange a trip to Boston to visit students at Harvard who have served as interns at the center.

The center also is a community resource, home to the South Shore Drill Team and Free Spirit Media, a youth-run broadcast and digital production company, as well as a health center run by Access Community Health Network. Though not intended to be a full-scale clinic, the health center is staffed with a nurse practitioner, a social worker and a medical assistant to serve both the center and the high school.

“Our focus is on being a resource around issues of health and wellness,” says Linda Diamond Shapiro, A.B. ’77, A.M. ’78, M.B.A. ’88 (Booth), vice president for strategy, planning and external affairs at Access. “We’re school-linked, because that’s what makes sense, but our goal is to mine the rich resources of the campus to build campaigns around health that will benefit the whole community.”

Put it all together and wrap it up in a stunning building (the center won a 2009 national design award from the American Institute of Architects), and the youth center is more than a sum of its parts. “The Gary Comer Youth Center serves as a positive anchor for this community,” says Samuels. “We’re making Greater Grand Crossing a destination, not just the neighborhood you pass through on your way to Hyde Park or South Shore.”



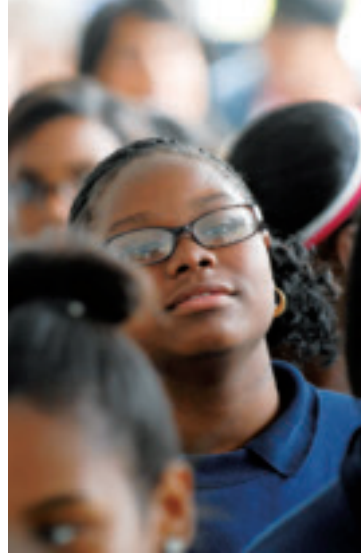
Sciences at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Mooney says the University of Chicago faculty, students and staff were instrumental in helping shape what he calls the ongoing dynamic integration of CSEF's programming. For example, Joseph, who was conducting research around the Chicago Housing Authority's Plan for Transformation, a massive effort to redevelop many public housing developments and relocate residents to lower-poverty communities, helped CSEF analyze data made available by the University of Chicago's Consortium on Chicago School Research about the impact of student mobility on educational outcomes. This helped jump-start Revere Way, CSEF's affordable housing initiative. "We realized that one of the

together. So we did community outreach to talk to residents about what the needs were, but also what the assets were in the community. Then we tried to tie all those together."

At the Comer Youth Center, Jackson trained and coached staff, facilitated the design of evaluation and tracking models, provided internal consultation to the executive director and created SSA's field placement program. Up to three students at a time have worked at the youth center since it opened, working on the clinical side with a licensed social worker, or on the administrative side with Samuels. "I lean heavily on them," she says. "The School's administration students bring energy and training to the table that I know I can rely on."

"Being at the youth center



focused agency one day. "I get to see all sides of how a program like [the Comer Center] works, and that's what I wanted from a field placement," he says.

Fellow evening program student Jocelyn Jones is the executive director at the Ark of St. Sabina, the community center run out of St. Sabina Catholic Church in the South Side's Auburn Gresham neighborhood. She says working at the Comer Center under Samuels has helped her get a clearer picture of how to run an effective program. "Even the basic tasks have been valuable to me because they've allowed me to see how detailed and precise you have to be to run a comprehensive agency like this," she says.


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MANY MARVEL at the speed with which CSEF became entrenched in the community and all that has come together in such a short time. "If Gary were here, I'm sure he would tell you it's not happening fast enough," Mooney says. A good example is the year-round roof garden on top of the youth center and the two-acre garden across the street, which together produce more than 2,000 pounds of food annually. The harvest is sold in a farmer's market in the neighbor-

hood and provides healthy meals for the students at the center and school. It also grows vegetables that end up on the tables of trendy Chicago eateries like Frontera Grill and West Town Tavern.

"Gary just had an 'if we build it, they will come' mentality about a lot of this," Mooney says. "There had been a lot of buzz around urban agriculture for eight to 10 years before we broke ground. Gary said, 'Let's just put in a green roof and let's do a green roof like they've never seen before.' So we gave the architect free reign and it has been one of the most dynamic components of our programming. We have more than 80 youth engaged in our Green Teens program, and we're teaching a gardening and environmental science elective for sophomores and juniors at the high school. None of that was because we had a partner saying, 'You should do urban agriculture.' It was just Gary's vision."

And the vision continues to expand. Next year, the youth center will house a middle school that is expected to grow to 150 students. Among the foundation's long range plans is the development of an early childhood education program, stemming from long-standing conversations with the Ounce of Prevention Fund, an early childhood advocacy group.

"Ultimately, our success will be judged by the lives our young people lead as adults," Mooney says. "That's a long-term proposition, but we're making a long-term commitment." 

To read more about Darryl Clayton and his experience as a master's student at SSA, visit www.ssa.uchicago.edu.



ways we could help stabilize the school would be to stabilize the neighborhood and reduce student mobility," Mooney says. "That got us looking at the development of affordable housing."

In 2005, Barbara Jackson was asked to join the Comer project as a consultant. "Gary Comer was a heck of a business person, and when he saw a need, he jumped right on it to try to find a solution," Jackson says. "He asked a number of us to help them figure out how all those pieces fit

has reinforced a lot of the core values that I have about doing this work," says Darryl Clayton, a student in the evening Master's program who is doing his first field placement with Samuels. "It also gives me the opportunity to apply a lot of the things we talk about in class." Clayton, the assistant project director for recruitment and kinship care services with Adoptions Unlimited Inc., is in the evening program for the master's program and hopes to be the executive director of a youth-