


## Chapter 2

# Suspending the Laws of the Universe

 On April 12, 1989, the day after I turned in my thesis, I went back to the computer room to turn it into a thirty-page proposal. I was excited to be moving forward but anxious about what needed to be done in the less than two months before graduation. I needed a seed grant so I could survive after college with no other source of income and so I could spend my summer traveling around the country meeting with education leaders, school districts, and as many potential funders as possible. Without a grant, I would have to get a real job and there would be no teacher corps.

So I went to Princeton's library. This time I wasn't searching for volumes about the state of education or the history of the Peace Corps but for a reference book. I needed the names and addresses of the chief executive officers of major American corporations. I picked companies I recognized and also those that had surfaced in my thesis research as being committed to education reform.

Within a week, I had photocopied my proposal, stapled a red card stock cover on top, and sent it off to Ross Perot and the CEOs of thirty companies such as Mobil Oil, Delta Airlines, and Coca-Cola. In each packet I enclosed a letter requesting a meeting to discuss how the company might be able to help me with my plan. Then I started calling to follow up on the letters.

I didn't get through directly to the CEOs, but my letter did make its way down various corporate ladders, and I got meetings with six or seven executives. It didn't occur to me to be surprised that I was securing any meetings at all. Instead I mostly just wondered why the CEOs themselves didn't think this idea was worthy of their time. But I was happy to have any audience, so while my classmates spent April and May unwinding from our thesis ordeal and celebrating our imminent graduation, I dressed up in suits and took New Jersey Transit into New York for one appointment after another. More than once, as I struggled out of bed to catch the 6:30 A.M. train into the city, I wondered why I hadn't chosen a normal path.

That May I met with executives at Xerox, IBM, AT&T, Metropolitan Life, and New Jersey's Dodge Foundation. I also met with an official in the Department of Education; the dean of Harvard's undergraduate teacher education program; the head of the Education Commission of the States, which advises states in their efforts to improve education; and Stanley Kaplan, the founder of the test preparation company and a man deeply committed to education reform.

Everywhere I went, I described my idea and why it had to happen. I talked about the impact a national teacher corps would have on America. I explained why it would work—how all around me college students were searching for a way to assume a significant responsibility and make a difference, and how they would jump at the chance to act on

their ideals. I described my plan and why there had to be at least five hundred corps members the first year. And then I explained what I was looking for: a seed grant and \$2.5 million within the first year. I wasn't feigning confidence; I really *was* confident. I was sure that my plan would work and that it would work in exactly this way. Looking back, it seems somewhat astounding that anyone would take me seriously. But at the time I didn't see any reason for these funders to doubt me.

One of my letters landed in the hands of several executives at Union Carbide, which had just formed a task force to explore how their company could contribute to education reform. One afternoon I got a call in my dorm room. An executive from Union Carbide told me that he and another task force member would be in New Jersey the next day. Could they take me to lunch? Of course, I replied. I was nervous with anticipation: Anyone interested enough to take me to lunch was bound to help me. The next afternoon not only did I get a free salad at a fancy restaurant off campus, but I was offered office space in Manhattan and an introduction to Union Carbide's CEO. It was my first big break.

This was good, I thought, but not good enough. What I really needed was a seed grant. Although I was doing everything I could think of, I was running out of time. Still, I didn't develop an alternative plan. Something had to work out. This was an idea that simply had to happen.

Another letter landed on the desk of Rex Adams, Mobil's vice president of administration. Mr. Adams agreed to meet with me. Throughout the meeting, he kept asking, "What are you going to *live* on?" And I kept responding, "That's exactly why I need a grant." At the end of our meeting, he suggested I send him a budget. I put some ambitious numbers down on a sheet of paper, held my breath, and

mailed it to him. Less than a month before I graduated I got word that Mobil would be offering me a seed grant of \$26,000.

My organization was not incorporated, let alone granted tax-exempt status. So on Mr. Adams's advice, I decided to ask Princeton University to act as my conduit of funds. I called the director of development I had met just weeks before at Professor Bressler's suggestion. He must have been shocked. I phoned him at about 6:00 P.M. He checked with Princeton's general counsel, and I got a call back that night confirming that the university would be happy to act in this capacity.

### **Getting Started**

I graduated in June. After the ceremony, my parents drove me to New York City. I was nervous about what lay ahead. Would I be able to convince enough people to support my plan? But I was also elated to be on my own finally, without classes and without anything to distract me from my mission. And I was thrilled to be moving to New York City, where I had yearned to live ever since my first visit to Manhattan during my freshman year.

My parents dropped me off at a brownstone on West Seventy-eighth Street, where I would share an apartment with two other women. I had found the place on a bulletin board. It cost \$500 a month, which wasn't bad for New York City at the time. I hauled my belongings—three trash bags of clothes and a sleeping bag—to the second floor. The apartment had four rooms with tall ceilings and hardwood floors; mine was a tiny room in the back with white-painted brick walls. It was perfect. After laying out the sleeping bag

and stacking my clothes in organized piles, I left to wander the streets. I quickly discovered Café La Fortuna, a dark coffee shop a few blocks away on Seventy-first Street. I was in heaven.

The next day I made my first trip to my donated office in a skyscraper at Forty-fourth and Madison. There I would work, all alone, from nine in the morning until well after midnight all summer long. It was somewhat lonely; the only people in the building who knew I existed were two clerical staff who worked for Union Carbide and seemed completely uninterested in why I had invaded their space and the evening security guards, who would inquire sympathetically about why I was working so hard. Yet as lonely as it was, I loved the independence. In a letter home to my parents in the middle of June, I expressed my sense of freedom: “I just love living like this,” I wrote. “I love looking at a calendar and seeing that tomorrow is blank and just deciding what to do with it.”

My summer goal was to meet as many potential funders as I could, convince them of my idea, secure start-up grants, talk with educators who could help me refine the plan, and generally test its feasibility. There were the legal issues of setting up a nonprofit corporation, but those were soon taken over by Union Carbide’s lawyers. And there was also the challenge of settling on a name. I considered a few options and landed upon “Teach America,” which I felt captured the national importance of the endeavor. As it turned out, a medical company had already laid claim to that name. In the fall I would spend hours trying to come up with an alternative. One night on the subway in Washington, D.C., where I had gone for a day of meetings, it struck me that the answer was as simple as inserting an extra word. Thus, we became Teach For America—even better than Teach America, I thought, in that it was a call to action and communicated a sense of service.

ONE DAY, ALL CHILDREN . . .

In pursuit of as many meetings as possible, I would spend days in the office sending out hundreds of letters and making hundreds of phone calls, generally with limited results. At times things got a little depressing, but I persisted because I was just certain that my message would ultimately get through to enough people. And there were breakthroughs. One day Roby Harrington, an executive at Young & Rubicam who had been involved in the first Peace Corps advertising campaign, called me and said, "Wendy, I just read your proposal. It's stunning. Let's meet tomorrow." That single phone call kept me going for a week.

As few and far between as those types of calls were in that first summer, it's amazing how much encouragement I did receive. Here I was, a twenty-two-year-old with \$26,000, a donated office, and a plan that within twelve months I would have five hundred corps members in training. How incredible that experienced executives, seasoned enough to know that this was an unrealistic scheme, would even listen to me! Alden Dunham, the program chair of education at the Carnegie Corporation, sent me a positive letter. "My suggestion is that you come down the street and we could chat further about what appears to be a very worthwhile undertaking," he wrote on June 27, 1989. "As a former dean of admissions at Princeton and as the guy who has helped to stimulate much of the concern about teachers in this country today . . . I am delighted to see that another Princetonian is taking the lead in trying to get at a very difficult problem." Harold McGraw Jr., who since retiring from McGraw-Hill had spent a great deal of time working on literacy issues, called and said he had read my letter and was impressed by it. Jennifer Eplett, a recent graduate of Harvard Business School, called out of the blue to say that she was working for

a new foundation that had heard about what I was doing and wanted to work with me. It turned out that she was helping to start the Echoing Green Foundation, which invested in “social entrepreneurs” and would become a strong force in the development of Teach For America.

Other interactions were less encouraging. Many people could not accept that a young woman with no real-world experience could possibly run such an ambitious, untested enterprise.

“Who’s going to *run* this?” asked a foundation officer in a major insurance company. I told her we would have between five and ten recent college graduates working around the clock. “You know, let me tell you something,” she responded. “That’s just not going to work. I mean, people need defined job assignments and goals.” Now, looking back, I can see the wisdom in her counsel. But at the time I thought it was the most shortsighted, nonvisionary, bureaucratic advice imaginable. I was not discouraged.

The CEO of Union Carbide also had his doubts but offered his support anyway. “You know, Wendy, most people who do these things are professional administrators with lots of experience. This is a big job,” he said. Yet he agreed to join our advisory board and write letters of introduction that would get me through the door to Vernon Jordan and the chief executives of several major companies committed to education reform.

When I asked for \$100,000 from Union Carbide’s foundation, however, I ran up against an obstacle I would later encounter again and again: The person heading the company’s education task force believed Teach For America ran counter to conventional thought about what needed to be done to fundamentally improve teaching. I was

baffled. How could Teach For America do anything but raise teaching standards? We were talking about recruiting the most talented graduates in the country to teach. Where was the conflict?

I learned that the dominant belief held that teachers, just like doctors and lawyers, needed to be trained in campus-based graduate programs before entering the classroom. From this vantage point, the only acceptable way to improve teaching was to ensure that schools of education raise their selection standards and make their programs more rigorous. Proponents of this view were reluctant to invest in Teach For America, whose recruits would go through only a short pre-service training program before entering the classroom.

Beyond the fear about our corps members' receiving inadequate teacher education, there was another concern. Although some educators were eager to encourage new talent to enter teaching in our lowest-income communities, others were worried about the negative effect that such young people, unfamiliar with the challenges facing disadvantaged students, could have. In one case I met with a highly regarded urban school superintendent. As I explained my plan, he became very upset, indeed downright angry. He told me I was wasting his time, that he didn't need more do-gooders teaching in his district. His reaction, which was more fervent and heartfelt than any of the skepticism or naysaying I had heard before, reduced me to tears. I tried to hold myself together when I was in his office, but once I got into my rental car, I broke down completely.

I had a similar encounter with another gentleman—a foundation head and longtime advocate for children in low-income communities—who had agreed to meet with me for the express purpose of counseling me out of my enterprise. He was concerned that despite the corps members' good intentions, two years in the classroom

wouldn't be enough to do any good. Worse still, he thought our teachers would simply add to the unpredictability of their students' lives. He said that after "finding themselves," our inexperienced, privileged teachers would leave their kids feeling abandoned.

What these two men told me had an impact. I thought and thought about their concerns. Ultimately, their counsel heightened my awareness of the challenges inherent in what we were doing. But I felt they were under-estimating the commitment and humility of the recent graduates who would join the corps. These would be caring people who would go above and beyond to meet their students' needs and who would be driven to learn from their students, their students' families, and their colleagues. I was sure these qualities would enable corps members to have a significant impact in the lives of their students during the years they taught them, and also that many corps members would be pulled into a lifetime of teaching and working in low-income communities.

I was also determined that we would be a diverse group; we would include college graduates from privileged backgrounds and middle-class backgrounds and people who had grown up in the kinds of communities where we would be working. I felt we needed to make a particular effort to recruit individuals who shared the socioeconomic and racial backgrounds of their students. These teachers could be powerful role models. At the same time, I felt we needed to recruit as broadly as possible, since students needed as many teachers as possible who were talented and driven to help them reach high expectations. Moreover, as I thought about our goal of influencing future leaders, I knew our corps would need to be reflective of our future leadership—inclusive of people from low-income communities and also inclusive of people from more privileged communities.

One thing that inspired me to persist was the enthusiastic response I received from most school districts. I remember one visit in particular, to the personnel director of the Los Angeles Unified School District. When he looked over the list of colleges where we were planning to recruit, he laughed out loud. “You’ll never get people from these colleges to teach here,” he said. “You think someone from Stanford is going to want to teach here? I’ll tell you what: If you can get them, we’ll hire them. We’ll hire all five hundred of them!”

So that first summer after college took me all across the country at a crazy, exhausting clip. In Boston I met a number of nonprofit leaders, including Alan Khazei and Michael Brown, who upon graduating from Harvard Law School the year before had cofounded an urban service corps called City-Year and who would provide much support and guidance from that point forward. In Michigan I met executives from the Kellogg Foundation, the foundations of the big three automobile companies, and a couple of education reform organizations. In Washington I spent some time gauging the interest of the D.C. public schools and talking with people who had led the federal teacher corps of the 1960s. (That corps, which started with a mission similar to that of Teach For America, evolved dramatically so that it did not resemble our model by the time it was eliminated by the Reagan administration.) I also traveled all over California and to Chicago, Pittsburgh, Rochester, and cities in New Jersey and Connecticut, talking with all the potential funders, educators, and school system officials who would meet with me.

Almost everyone advised me to start smaller: I should recruit fifty people for one site, learn from that experience, and then expand from there. I didn’t consider this perspective seriously, even though I heard it several times a day. It was counter to my very conception of what

Teach For America would be. I figured that if people really understood what we were trying to do, they wouldn't be giving me this advice. This was not going to be a little nonprofit organization or a model teacher-training program. This was going to be a *movement*.

Through my travels I assembled my first board of directors. I wasn't exactly clear on what this group was supposed to do for me, but for legal reasons I needed a board. I asked a few people—social entrepreneurs and educators—who shared my enthusiasm for the idea. They were Jim Clark, who had started ACCESS, a nonprofit dedicated to helping people find employment in the nonprofit sector; Rick Belding, who had started Recruiting New Teachers, an initiative to get people into teaching through advertising campaigns; Jennifer Eplett, who had helped start City-Year and then worked for the Echoing Green Foundation; Sue Otterbourg, a consultant active in education reform; and Wayne Meisel, who had started COOL, the campus-based organization that recruits young people into volunteerism. At the same time I assembled a board of advisers composed mostly of the corporate chiefs whom I had met through the head of Union Carbide.

I also managed to snag a new donated office, one big enough to accommodate the staff members I planned to hire that year. I asked for this space in a meeting with Richard Fisher, the CEO of Morgan Stanley, who may have agreed to meet with me because he was also a Princeton alum. At the time I was quite amused at the irony of my request: Here I was asking for prime office space from the same company that had decided not to hire me just a few months before. I doubt that Mr. Fisher knew what he was getting into when he agreed to house us on a pro bono basis, pay for our phone service, and let us use Morgan Stanley's print room for free. This arrangement proved in-

valuable over the next five years; by the end of our time there, when our national staff numbered forty people, our chief financial officer estimated Morgan Stanley's gift was saving us at least \$500,000 a year.

When September rolled around, I was utterly convinced that the national teacher corps made perfect sense. Many people agreed. They just didn't believe that thousands of outstanding college graduates would join. The most common concern I'd heard all summer was that college students would not want to teach in public schools in low-income areas. This was one thing I had absolutely no doubt about. I was sure my peers would want to be part of something this important, that they would give anything for this opportunity. Because this was exactly the area where I had the greatest confidence, I decided to move forward and launch an ambitious recruitment effort. Once Teach For America succeeded in inspiring thousands to apply, I figured, the skeptics would be won over, school districts would hire our teachers, and funders would give us the money we needed. Such certainty was the benefit of inexperience.

## **Building Our Team**

That fall I was ready to move ahead full force. I decided to hire four people—one to manage the recruitment and selection of corps members, another to design and organize the summer training institute, a third to manage the placement of corps members into teaching positions, and a fourth to help with overall administration. I was terrified of bringing on these additional staff members. Wouldn't they question

why I was in a position to manage them? But I didn't see any other option.

I didn't figure that anyone but other recent college graduates would be willing to take a risk on an untested idea. Neither did it seem that seasoned people would roll with the less conventional aspects of my plan, like the idea of starting out with thousands of applicants and hundreds of corps members, or the idea of moving forward without any money in the bank. So I set out to find some other young people to work with me.

One day in late August, I was back at Princeton for meetings with potential supporters when I ran into the director of Princeton in Asia, a program that sends Princeton grads to teach in Asia for a year. The director asked me to stay and attend a dinner for the students who had just returned from their year abroad. I sat through the dinner wondering why I was there. When asked to address the group, I said no more than a few sentences about what I was trying to do with Teach For America. Immediately after I finished, Daniel Oscar, one of the teachers who had returned from China, ran over to introduce himself. With great urgency he said that he wanted to talk more about Teach For America and would be happy to drive me back to New York. All the way up the New Jersey Turnpike, Daniel interrogated me about my plan. By the time we reached Manhattan, he had announced that he wanted to work with me part time. He was taking Chinese at Columbia and looking for something to do on the side. I told him I needed to think about it. Two days later I received a five-page memo from him outlining why he should work with me.

We got together at a sandwich shop near my office. Our meeting was tense; having never hired anyone before, I had no idea what I was supposed to do. Daniel, who had a mop of curly brown hair on top of

his wiry frame, seemed as uncomfortable as I was. He's an intense person, and it seemed that he really, really wanted to help make Teach For America happen. Because he only wanted a part-time position, I figured I had nothing to lose. So over a Diet Coke, without even the pretense of an interview, I agreed to take him on as my first employee.

It turned out to be one of the best decisions I made. Not only is Daniel an immensely responsible person, but he is one of the most brilliant thinkers I've ever met. He would play a significant role in shaping the way we thought about everything from selecting and training our corps members to office technology and compensation structures.

Daniel was the first to come on board, but he wasn't the first person I had hired. Back at Princeton I had offered a position to a friend of my younger brother's. Whitney Tilson was a Harvard grad who was sitting on a job offer from the Boston Consulting Group. He had other obligations for the summer but wanted to join me in the fall. I couldn't believe that someone from Harvard would give up a great career option to take part in my effort without even meeting me.

Whitney finally showed up in October, a very blond, very tan guy with a large smile and a lot of energy. He started managing the administrative and financial matters that were beginning to pile up. A few days into his tenure he produced a memo showing exactly how little money would soon be left of Mobil's original \$26,000. I already knew we were running low on cash. I was counting on potential funders to come through with additional grants to make it possible to pay the salaries of my new team. Each of us was to make \$25,000—which seemed appropriate since it was slightly less than the first-year teacher salary in New York.

Kim Smith, a 1989 graduate of Columbia University, was the next

person to join our team. She had several years of part-time and summer experience working on business-education partnerships with Sue Otterbourg, the educational consultant who had agreed to become a member of our first board. I met Kim during one of my meetings with Sue, and she struck me as smart and spunky. Education and teaching were in her blood—her dad was a professor of education at Teachers College—and she agreed to take charge of designing and organizing the summer training institute.

Our start-up team was rounded out by Susan Short, a Stanford graduate who had just finished her two years of service in the Peace Corps. She had seen a job announcement I had run in the Peace Corps newsletter for returned volunteers. Susan was a tall, quiet, thoughtful woman, with two years of real-world experience at that. She assumed responsibility for finding the teaching placements for our recruits.

By October the five of us had moved into our new digs, courtesy of Morgan Stanley, on the thirty-third floor of the McGraw-Hill building at 1221 Avenue of the Americas, in the heart of midtown Manhattan. The space was nothing fancy—it was a shell of white, scratched-up walls and gray industrial carpet that showed the wear and tear of previous tenants—but it seemed positively palatial to us. One of my first nights in the office, well after midnight, I stacked together some red, white, and blue wire in/out boxes to serve as staff mailboxes. We scrounged some mismatched donated desks and chairs and took over four of the offices on the otherwise empty floor. I set myself up in a small room with no windows in the middle of our space. This would be the national headquarters of our powerful movement.

No sooner were we settled than I realized we would need more people. Other recent graduates had heard about our effort, through

Daniel or Kim or the potential funders I was meeting, and they would come in to see me. If they seemed enthusiastic about our mission, I would offer them rather undefined jobs.

In November I mounted a search for people who would travel around the country beginning in February to interview the thousands of people I expected would apply to Teach For America. I had written the chairman of Hertz a letter over the summer, and he had agreed to donate six rental cars for this purpose. My hiring criteria were simple: I was looking for a dynamic and racially diverse group of people capable of inspiring college students to join the cause.

I found twelve people who fit the bill. Two in particular would end up playing a significant role in Teach For America's development: Ian Huschle and Richard Barth. Ian had graduated from Harvard in 1988 and had spent a year teaching in Tangier. Upon his return, he had joined a prominent New York law firm as a paralegal. He complained so bitterly to a friend of my roommate's about the boredom of his position that she suggested he call me to see if he could volunteer. After a brief meeting, I realized we needed Ian. He struck me as exceedingly thoughtful, and there was no doubt in my mind that his outgoing personality and striking presence would enhance our reputation on college campuses. Ian's classic good looks were so impressive that literally every member of our small team came into my office after he left and asked, "Who was *that*, and what was he doing *here*?" Ian wasn't actually seeking a full-time job, but I offered him one anyway. He ultimately accepted.

Richard stopped into the office one day for an impromptu interview. His mother had sent him a *New York Times* column about our fledgling effort while he was traveling in Europe after graduating from Harvard that June. I was so overwhelmed with work that I only allo-

cated about ten minutes to our discussion. Richard seemed smart and personable, but I wasn't sure we could use another preppy white guy from an Ivy League college on our small team. Lisa Bornstein, another new hire, knew Richard from Harvard. After he left, she told me that he needed to know right away whether he had a job or not. I gave it about fifteen seconds of thought—it was all I had to spare—and said that we would have to say no. She never conveyed the message to Richard, and a week later, when I began to panic about not having enough recruiters, she placed a yellow adhesive note with Richard's number on my desk. He came on board.

## **Meeting the Magic Number**

Within two weeks, Daniel's part-time job had turned into thirteen-hour days. His responsibility was to inspire college students to apply to Teach For America. Our strategy was to identify two student leaders to be our "campus representatives" at each of one hundred colleges. We selected public and private schools from all over the country on the basis of their academic competitiveness and ethnic and racial diversity. There were small and large campuses, historically black colleges and Ivy League schools. We planned to bring the two hundred campus reps together at a conference in December and then rely on them to spread the word about Teach For America through grassroots strategies. We found the representatives by calling friends and friends of friends and contacting student organizations and deans of student affairs. To ensure the diversity of the group, we aimed to find one rep and then have that person find another rep who was from a different racial background.

The fall was not easy. As exciting as it was that many college stu-

TEACH AMERICA  
P.O. Box 5114  
New York, NY 10185  
October 23, 1989

Dear College Student,

I enjoyed talking to you on the phone about TEACH AMERICA.

We know, contrary to what the media would have us believe, that today's students are as willing as ever to "give something back" to America. Perhaps what lacks is a common spirit, a common mission. And yet our nation faces a number of internal threats that call for the help of our brightest young minds. Foremost among them is the dilapidated state of our educational system.

You have probably heard the statistics—that 700,000 students drop out of high school *each year*, and 25 percent of all our children never finish high school, that students in the United States score below those of almost all other industrialized nations in science and math, that only 25 percent of 17-year-olds are able to write what the National Assessment of Educational Progress terms an "adequate" persuasive or analytic essay. One thing on which business and government leaders from different industries and political parties agree is that the state of the educational system is threatening America's future.

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*Pages 30–32:* This was the first letter Daniel Oscar sent (before we changed our name to Teach *For* America) in the effort to recruit campus representatives.

We are a group of recent graduates who believe that today's brightest, most motivated students of every race and academic major should join together to help the United States in the places they are most needed—the schools. Therefore, we passed up jobs in management consulting and investment banking and Senator's offices to create TEACH AMERICA.

TEACH AMERICA will use the Peace Corps model—lots of publicity, a selective application process, active recruitment—to attract top recent graduates, train them, and place them as teachers in inner cities and rural areas which suffer from persistent teacher shortages. Recruits will commit to two years in teaching.

The success of TEACH AMERICA relies on our ability to develop a broad base of student support. That is why I am writing to you. In order to develop that essential network, we are targeting one committed individual on each of 100 college campuses to serve as our “link” to that school. As Campus Representative, you will create TEACH AMERICA “YOUR COLLEGE.” Your organization will work to ensure widespread campus awareness of the problems in education and of the need for teachers and will help in TEACH AMERICA recruitment efforts. On the evening of December 1, TEACH AMERICA will fly each of the campus representatives from the 100 schools to Princeton University where we will all sit down together to brainstorm how best to publicize on campus the frightening state of our schools and incredible need for teachers.

Almost thirty years ago, an enthusiastic group of college students pushed for the creation of an organization that would enable them to serve the United States by furthering the development of non-industrialized nations. Today, as a result of those students' efforts, thousands of America's brightest, most motivated graduates travel abroad to serve in the Peace Corps.

With your help, we can assemble a similar group of people—the graduates with the most other career opportunities—to TEACH AMERICA, and to help improve our own dilapidated schools.

Because our Campus Representative conference begins on December 1, time is very short. Our team of campus representatives must be assembled by November 11. Please read the enclosed booklet and return the enclosed information sheet so it is in our office no later than November 3. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call me at 212-974-2456.

Sincerely,

Daniel Oscar

P.S. If you want to be the Campus Representative but are unable to return the information sheet by the necessary date, please call our office *immediately* so we can make alternative arrangements.

P.P.S. If you are not able to be the Campus Representative for your college, but agree that our schools are in dire need of teachers, please do your best to find someone else on your campus who you think would do an absolutely amazing job as Campus Representative. One quick look at your calendar shows that we do not have a lot of time left and so I am relying on people like yourself to help TEACH AMERICA build the Campus Representative team by finding a committed individual on your campus to take on the job. If your friends are unavailable, your Dean of Students or Dean of Minority Affairs might be a good person to suggest qualified students. I cannot stress enough how big a difference you can make in the TEACH AMERICA effort by bringing to our attention a person determined to help make a difference.

dents were signing onto our mission, we faced several crises before the December conference arrived. First, we weren't anywhere near our goal of two hundred campus representatives. I decided to pull our four staff members from whatever they were doing so we could all focus on recruitment. To make things worse, we didn't have enough money to buy the plane tickets to get the two hundred representatives to Princeton, which had agreed to host the conference for free. Thankfully, a friend of Daniel's family who was a travel executive with connections at American Express got us a \$70,000 line of credit.

On December 1, 1989, after a week of all-nighters by our small team, about two hundred campus representatives descended upon the Princeton campus. I should have been excited—this was the first clear sign that a greater movement would actually develop out of my initial idea—but I was too exhausted to even think about celebrating. I should have been terrified, too.

On the first morning, I stood at a podium for two and a half hours, answering dozens of questions that the reps fired at me in an unplanned session. They were searching for details that had not yet been resolved. Where would people actually teach? When would the summer training start? Where would it be? What exactly would happen there? Would corps members be able to choose where they taught? How would the corps members and their belongings get to their teaching sites? Where would they stay until they found a place to live? When would they get their first paycheck? How would they get cars if they didn't already have them? How would we decide what subjects they would teach? What kind of support would we be providing once they assumed their positions?

Knowing that we needed to inspire their confidence, I did the best I could. I came up with answers and delivered them with resolve, as

though they'd been decided months before. I'm not sure I succeeded completely, but most of the reps seemed fired up by the end of the weekend. "Imagine how you all will feel next summer when hundreds of top graduates are in training for Teach For America," I said in my closing speech. The group stood and cheered.

The conference generated quite a bit of momentum. Fred Hechinger wrote a column about our efforts in the *New York Times*, and *Newsweek* ran a two-page piece. We had called a few major media outlets and told them what was going on, and they sent reporters out to cover this display of idealism from the Me Generation.

Moreover, there were indications that our recruitment strategy was working. Jonathan Snyder and Melanie Moore, our representatives at Yale, slid flyers under the door of every senior on campus several days before school let out for winter break. Within three days Jonathan had received 170 calls on his answering machine. Later in January, the representative at Carleton College called to say that 100 of the school's 450 seniors showed up at an information session.

As soon as the campus representative conference was over, Ian began developing the selection criteria and interview process for new corps members. Beyond ensuring that our first corps members were up to the challenge, our goal was to appear selective. We needed to counteract teaching's image as a "soft" and downwardly mobile career. So Ian developed a tough interview with a number of potential teaching scenarios and pointed questions to gauge each candidate's persistence and commitment. It was the following question, though, that may have done more than any other to shape our image on campus:

(1) What is wind? Don't describe it, just tell me what it is. (2) Phenomenologists draw an analogy between religion and the wind, claiming that one can't

see religion, only the manifestations of it—like synagogues, churches and mosques. Similarly, one can't see the wind, only manifestations of it—waves in a wheat field, moving branches. What's another analogy you can draw to the wind?

Looking back, I have to laugh at the thought of our recruiters asking this question of every applicant. But it created the desired effect. Teach For America was clearly not something for the intellectually meek.

The interview was complemented with an essay application and a five-minute sample teaching session in which candidates were asked to teach other candidates on a topic of their choice. Daniel had learned this strategy during his time working at the test-prep company, The Princeton Review.

Through these selection tools, the recruiters would identify candidates who, based on twelve criteria, were either “exceptional” or “outstanding” on a six-point scale. Some of our staff had researched possible selection criteria by interviewing school principals and reading a few books and articles on the subject. Then we refined the criteria through night after night of intense staff debates. The twelve desired characteristics, which we carefully defined (and have refined over time), were persistence, commitment, integrity, flexibility, oral communication skills, enthusiasm, sensitivity, independence and assertiveness, ability to work within an organization, possession of self-evaluative skills, ability to operate without student approval, and conceptual ability/intellect.

While Ian worked away at the process for selecting corps members, Richard began helping to coordinate the efforts of the campus representatives. Almost immediately he came back with a handwritten

## ***SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT***

December 6, 1989

Dear Yalies:

*Teach For America* is a national effort beginning this year to attract talented graduating Seniors to teach for two years (regular pay) in schools which most need teachers in New York City, Washington D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, Indian reservations in New Mexico, the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, rural areas in North Carolina, Louisiana, and inner cities in New Jersey. Begun by a Princeton student, it has brought together an unprecedented combination of student talent, teachers, non-profit heads, and corporate CEOs. Due to this combination of idealism, experience, clout, and funding, *Teach For America* has great chances for success. It relies on only one thing—the most important factor of all: YOU.

Do you have the least bit of indecision about your plans after graduation? Would you consider devoting two years to teach for America, in either elementary or high school grades, to make her a continuously competitive nation, one capable of continued sustenance of her democratic institutions, with equal opportunity for all? Math and science majors—remember that America has been steadily sliding in her technical and scientific capability.

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*Pages 36–37.* This is the front page of the flyer our campus representatives at Yale distributed to college seniors. The back page was a copy of the *New York Times* column about Teach For America. A total of 170 students responded to this flyer within three days.

People of color, recall that perhaps the single greatest key to achieving full equality lies in achieving high levels of education. Liberal arts majors, remember that America is headed towards dangerously low levels of literacy, at precisely the time that they need to be high. Yalies, remember the great privilege we've been given, and please consider, before embarking on your ambitious careers, to devote two years towards bolstering the general strength and well-being of our nation.

If you find this interesting, no matter what year you are in, just call 436-0740 and leave your name, number, year, and interest on the machine. *It's important that you call before the break.* There is no obligation; this is just so that we can get you more complete information before break. In any event, think about it—talk about it, with your parents and friends, and feel free to call and ask questions.

Sincerely,

The *Teach For America* Reps, Yale

Jonathan Snyder  
JE '90

Melanie Moore  
MC '90

***Teach For America***

***Teach For America***

***Teach For America***

memo stating the absolute improbability that we would meet our goal of 7,500 applicants. With some simple math, the memo showed the level of interest that would have to exist on each of our 100 campuses in order to meet the goal compared to the level of interest indicated by the evidence we had. Richard was clearly right. But what could we do? In response to the memo, Daniel stepped up our efforts to motivate the reps. I crossed my fingers.

Our twelve recruiters went on the road, two to a rental car: Sonnet Retman and Ian Huschle, Richard Barth and Guilaine Jean-Pierre, Bruce Baker and Sonja Brookins, Allison Jernow and Paul Hagan, Kim Smith and José Calero, Michael Gilligan and Joelle Fontaine. Excited about their mission but anxious about the gravity of their task, they fanned out to their assigned regions with a map and the phone numbers of each of our reps and the career service office contacts who had been collecting applications. Each night they called in to tell us about campuses where we were flooded with applicants and campuses where there were none, about how well or how poorly they were getting along with their recruiting partners, about getting lost in their travels.

With the recruiters on the road, I was left back in New York with about eight new hires who helped answer phones, plan the summer training institute, and hunt down teaching positions for our recruits. We quickly realized that we had no system to process the applications that the recruiters sent back to the office. The result was chaos. Acceptance and rejection letters were two months late.

Along with everything else, I soon found myself trying to develop a scientific method for matching applicants' site preferences and qualifications to districts' requirements and needs. The work was piling up. My solution was to begin sleeping every other night.

Daniel captured the extent of the crisis in a memo that he distributed to our staff.

**Teach For America: The Crisis**

More than a month ago we were at Reed College. We have yet to enter the applications into the computer. More than two weeks ago we were at Georgia Tech. We have yet to receive the applications from the interview team. More than 6 weeks ago we were at Yale. Yesterday we finally informed all of the 68 applicants of their status. We promised two weeks in all of our promotional material. We are barely responding within 6. Investment banks, management consulting firms, private schools are busy wining and dining their recruits; we are unable to even call ours. Every hour phone calls come into this office from angry applicants wanting to know their status. We cannot respond.

After months of unprecedented labor by all of us, everything we have done may disintegrate in the next 30 days. The scariest part is that the crisis continues to loom and we are wandering aimlessly among the thick fog of impending failure. Our intensity of two weeks ago and last week has waned, but the crisis only garners strength and flourishes. Its depth is far greater than I can imagine. We are falling further and further behind, not catching up. . . . We do not know to whom we have sent letters and to whom we need to send letters. We have stacks of incomplete applications sent in by our interviewers. We have received 16 commitments, but have no matriculation packets to send them. We are on a path which is leading us to an empty training institute, empty classrooms, and a non-existent teacher corps.

What we need now is immediate action, energy and stamina. Our last two weeks of intensity must only intensify until we have finally eliminated this threat to all that we have done. . . .

The people most directly involved with this crisis need to meet immedi-

ately to come up with a plan to get us out of this crisis immediately. We need to figure out how we can most effectively utilize all the resources available, and we need to become scared. Very very scared.

—Daniel

As it turned out, we did not have 7,500 applicants, but thankfully, we had miscalculated on another score: The quality of applicants was higher than we expected. From the 2,500 applicants, we easily chose 500 great candidates.

### **The Mysterious Source of Our Confidence**

The recruitment and selection effort was only one of many challenges. We also had to design and organize an eight-week training institute for five hundred new teachers and find school systems in five or six areas across the country that would commit to hiring the teachers sight unseen. And even more daunting, there was the challenge of raising the funds to pay for all this.

It seems to me something of a miracle that I maintained my confidence throughout that first year. Why didn't I crumble under the stress or the workload? Why didn't I despair that we would never get the applicants we needed, that we wouldn't convince school districts to hire our teachers, that we wouldn't raise the necessary funds? I think it was a blind faith in the power of the idea that kept me going. I'm not sure that the prospect of failure was real to me, although there were a few moments when it crept into my mind.

I was worried when the Echoing Green Foundation found a gradu-

ate student to write his thesis about Teach For America. Of all the potential anxieties I could have, it was this poor guy I was concerned about. What would he do if our plans fell apart? I also remember sitting in front of an office computer at two or three in the morning, trying to imagine what it would be like if five hundred college graduates actually showed up at the summer training institute we were planning. At that moment it didn't seem possible. What was I thinking? But these moments of doubt were few and far between. More often, I took for granted that if we worked hard enough, our plan would work. It simply had to. This country *needed* a national teacher corps.

What's amazing is that I was surrounded by others who felt this same sense of sheer confidence. Richard wrote me the following note during his recruitment tour:

3/25/90

Dear Wendy,

It's two in the morning and Guilaine and I are now safely tucked away in the Baltimore Best Western. Guilaine is presently immersed in a deep sleep, and so I am forced to stare at the hideous powder blue walls that surround me. . . .

What a fantastic group of people I got to meet at Georgetown. And at all the schools for that matter. I can't tell you how exciting it is to meet these people, and to see how much they want to make a difference. To contribute in some positive way to our nation's future.

Even on the days when I've had little sleep, and dread asking the same questions, I can't help but be energized. So many people want to be a part of Teach For America, and their excitement is fantastically contagious.

I guess I just wanted to tell you how glad I am to be a part of this

## ONE DAY, ALL CHILDREN . . .

program. Of this team. I *know* we have a winning combination. I *know* we are going to succeed. I just wish you could see all the amazing people I'm meeting as we move up the coast.

It was funny tonight when we talked on the phone. I asked how you were doing, and you said, "You mean how is fundraising going?" I wasn't thinking about fundraising when I asked you that question, but the fact that you brought it up made me realize how much weight must be on your shoulders.

Well, for what it's worth, I want you to know that I am also 100% confident that we are going to raise the money. (I doubt that you really need any assurances.) It's going to be tough, but I know you and I know our staff. *Nothing* is impossible.

Take care,  
Richard

## Raising \$2.5 Million

My approach to fundraising—beyond sending at least ten unanswered letters to Ross Perot—was to continue writing hundreds of letters to corporations, foundations, and wealthy people. Most of my letters seemed to disappear into a big black hole, despite persistent follow-up calls.

For the hundreds of meetings I didn't get, however, I found a few people who decided to invest in our idea. Alden Dunham at the Carnegie Corporation, the Princeton alum who had written me during the first summer, sent me another letter exactly one year later committing \$300,000 toward our goal. Jack Mawdsley, the director of education programs at the Kellogg Foundation, later told me he didn't really believe I could pull off such a feat but was so taken by the con-

cept and my conviction that he invested \$40,000 and a great deal more in credibility. Robin Hogen, the vice president of public affairs at Merck & Company, told me over the phone that he wanted to be our first major corporate sponsor before I ever met him.

We gained some recognition in the funding community. *Fortune* magazine was focusing heavily on the business sector's involvement in education, and I remember a reporter calling and saying that she had received six letters from corporations suggesting she cover us. "Why is this such a hit?" she asked. Part of the answer, I think, was timing. The failures of our public education system had begun to receive national attention. Blue-ribbon commissions were reporting on the extent of the problem, and companies were just beginning to search for education reform initiatives they could support. But they hadn't been searching long enough to latch onto a different big idea.

Still, I was becoming extremely worried. We weren't enough of a hit. As of April 1990, we had inspired 2,500 people to apply to Teach For America, selected 500 of them to join the corps, begun organizing the institute, and convinced school districts in six sites to hire our corps members. Yet I had not raised even half a million dollars toward our goal.

Then one day a staff member yelled down the hall of our makeshift national office, "Wendy! Ross Perot is on the phone." I assumed the caller was a friend of mine playing some kind of sad joke, but in fact it was Ross Perot. My heart was thundering. I could hardly breathe, let alone speak. I told him that I would be in Dallas the following week and asked if we could meet. He agreed. I got off the phone and scheduled a trip to Dallas.

I have never ever been so determined in a meeting in my life. I knew that I had no option but to leave Ross Perot's office with the

October 17, 1989

TEACH AMERICA, Inc.  
P.O. Box 5114  
New York, NY 10185  
(212)974-2456

Dear Chief Executive,

I graduated from Princeton this past June and have been working to put my senior thesis into action ever since. I proposed the creation of an organization that would use the Peace Corps model—active recruitment on a national scale, a selective application process, lots of publicity, a short initial time commitment, and a centralized application, training, and placement mechanism—to attract top recent graduates into teaching in the United States. With the help of a number of business and education leaders, I have created the organization as a privately funded non-profit called TEACH AMERICA, Inc. I am writing to request your help.

Currently, a “development team” of five of us is working to create a national recruitment effort, to construct a unique summer-long training institute, and to attain commitments from school districts in five major inner-city and rural areas to hire TEACH AMERICA recruits. Our Board of Advisers, still being compiled, includes: David Kearns, chairman & CEO of Xerox; Robert Kennedy, chairman & CEO of Union Carbide; Tom Payzant, superintendent

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*Pages 44–45:* This was one of the letters I wrote to funding prospects in the fall of 1989.

of the San Diego School District; Felice Schwartz, president of Catalyst; and George Sella, chairman & CEO of American Cyanamid. Initial financial and in-kind support from Mobil, Union Carbide, Morgan Stanley, Young & Rubicam, American Cyanamid, Apple Computer, and General Atlantic Partners has made possible our activities to date.

Our vision is that teaching becomes the “thing to do” on college campuses, that thousands of top graduating non-education majors decide to commit themselves to teaching; that they mitigate the persistent teacher shortages which exist in our inner cities and rural areas; and that thousands of incredibly sharp individuals, whether they remain in teaching or enter business or government or law, will have the knowledge and commitment to be spokespersons for teacher professionalization and educational reform.

We’re certainly a lot closer than we were three months ago, but we will need a lot of help between now and next September if we are to see our vision become reality. I would love to meet with you to discuss TEACH AMERICA, to hear any ideas and input you might have, and to talk about how you might be able to help us in the effort. I will call your office shortly.

Sincerely,

Wendy Kopp

funding necessary to train and place our corps members. Before I walked into his office, I formed an image in my head: I would stay firmly glued to my chair until I had a commitment. I was terrified—not by the prospect of meeting Ross Perot but by the thought that Teach For America’s fate rested on the success of this one meeting.

I entered Mr. Perot’s ornate office and sat down on what I remember to be a red leather couch. I must have explained my mission, but all I remember is Mr. Perot talking. He talked a lot, and I had trouble following much of what he was saying. I was mostly just thinking, “I need to stay here until I get \$1 million from this man.” When Mr. Perot suggested that I contact Sam Walton and other philanthropists instead, I insisted that he himself was the best possible prospect. Finally, after two hours of back and forth, Mr. Perot agreed to offer us a challenge grant of \$500,000. We would have to match his money three to one. I’m not sure what ultimately led Mr. Perot to this idea. He must have realized that I wasn’t planning to go anywhere until he committed to something. Or perhaps he felt that he had nothing to lose. His grant proved to be the catalyst we needed: Other donors (some who had been skeptics and others who were just waiting for a sign that additional funding would come together) came through with the remaining \$1.5 million in relatively short order.

I left Mr. Perot’s office, charged to the nearest pay phone, and called Daniel. Before I could open my mouth, Daniel started in, frustrated that I was off in Texas while he was pulling all-nighters trying to process applications. After listening for ten minutes, I told him Ross Perot had made a challenge grant of \$500,000. “That’s just great,” Daniel told me, and then he hung up. As I would see many times in the coming years, the stress and chaos of an enterprise like ours meant

that real accomplishments were rarely adequately celebrated. We were all too busy grappling with the next challenge.

Exactly one year and ten days after I graduated from college, 500 teacher corps members gathered in the University of Southern California's auditorium for the opening ceremony of Teach For America's first summer training institute. They were some of the country's most sought-after recent college graduates. They came from 100 colleges, including Ivy League schools and historically black colleges, state schools and private universities. Twenty-nine of the corps members came from Yale, with the other colleges most represented being Tufts, Princeton, the University of Wisconsin, Vanderbilt, Harvard, SUNY Binghamton, Cornell, Brown, and the University of Michigan. They were unified in a collective commitment to increase the opportunities available to kids in low-income areas. There was an electrifying energy in the room. It had happened. This was exactly what I had envisioned. I could hardly believe we had finally reached this day.

The media caught onto what was transpiring. "Princeton Student's Brainstorm: A Peace Corps to Train Teachers," read the headline on the front page of the *New York Times* on June 20, 1990. Two days later *Good Morning America* followed with a feature. Several weeks later *Time* magazine printed a page-long article.

For years, whenever I was asked how I had accomplished this feat, I would reply that there was nothing magical about it. I simply developed a plan and moved forward step by step. Teach For America came together because my idea was good and my plan made sense. But now I see that this answer is insufficient. I once heard that when an idea is

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meant to happen, the laws of the universe are suspended to make way for it. When I look back over the first year of Teach For America, it's clear to me that had something to do with it. Here was evidence that even the most idealistic visions can come to be.