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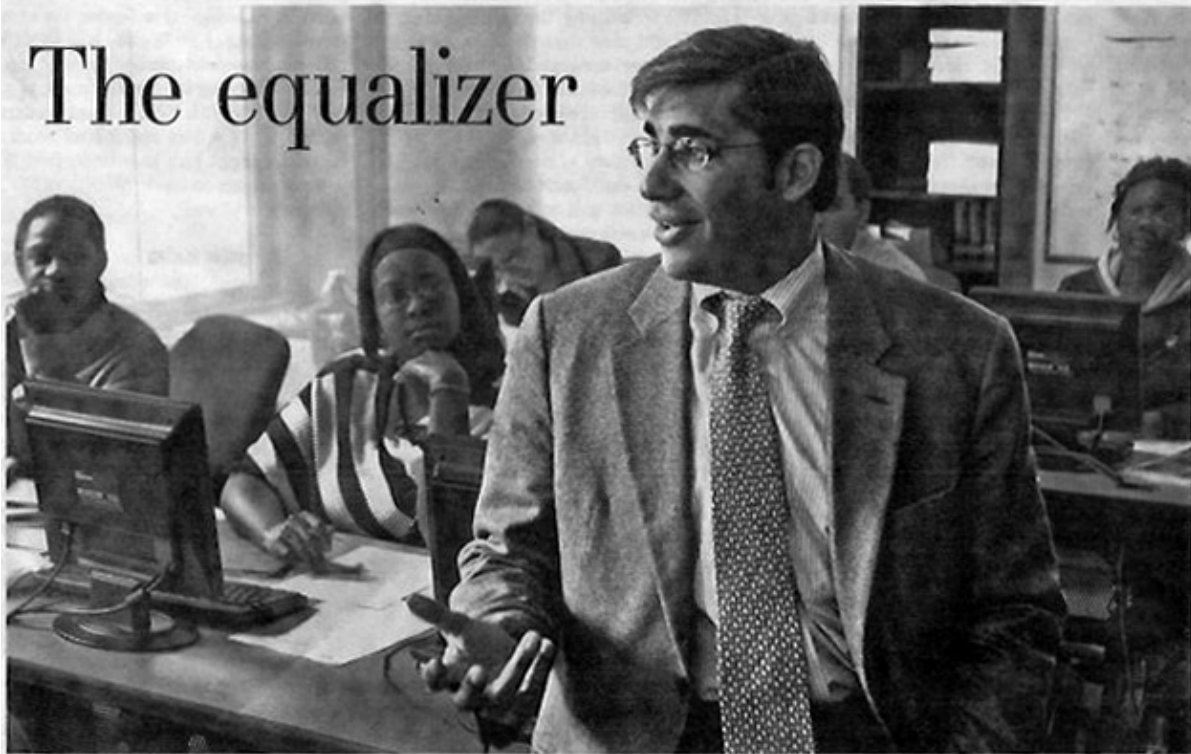
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| EXECUTIVE PROFILE |

Gerald Chertavian

The equalizer



W. MARC BERNSAU | BUSINESS JOURNAL

The Year Up program, which trains youth for jobs, expands nationally

BY NAOMI R. KOOKER
JOURNAL STAFF

Fresh out of college and working on Wall Street, **Gerald Chertavian** would make his way to Manhattan's gritty East Side on Saturdays to a housing project to visit his Little Brother, a shy 9-year-old Dominican boy he took under his wing.

That kid, **David Heredia** - who would live with Chertavian on and off through the years and who Chertavian put

through visual arts school - now lives in Los Angeles and works for **The Walt Disney Co.**

"I saw the innate potential he had," said Chertavian. "And progress shouldn't be limited because he had a limited social network, because he didn't know what a financial aid form was."

Chertavian is such a believer in equalizing opportunities for underprivileged kids that he founded **Year Up** in 2000 based on Heredia's success. In six years, Chertavian has gone from successful business entrepreneur to successful social entrepreneur, creating a business model and filling a niche that has Boston and regional companies knocking on his door for the skilled workers they need.

FROM THE FILE

Position: Founder and CEO, Year Up

Education: Bachelor's in economics, Bowdoin College, 1987; MBA, Harvard Business School, 1992.

Age: 41

Quote: "If you're tucked away in an office, you're missing all those teachable moments"

All this was created by the grandson of an Armenian immigrant who was taught early on to treat all people with equal respect.

Year Up trains urban youth between 18 and 24 in technical, computer, pro-

fessional and communication skills. The first classes in 2001 served 22 students; these days 204 students graduate annually. Year Up's staff has grown to 53 from 5. This year, Year Up will count 800 alumni - with 87 percent of those students being placed in jobs. The organization is bursting out of the two and a half floors it occupies at 93 Summer St. to occupy four floors. Its operating budget will jump to \$12 million next year from \$8.5 million this year.

While Year Up had been operating solely in Boston and Cambridge, it added a site in Providence last year and this year opened sites in Washington, D.C. and New York City. Chertavian said the organization is working to help solve a national problem.

Year Up reaps half of its operating budget from its corporate partners, which have escalated in number from its initial one — a partnership with **Alta Communications**, whose offices in the John Hancock building Year Up initially shared before moving to Summer Street — to more than 60, including **State Street Corp.** and **Children's Hospital Boston**. Foundations and grants fund another 25 percent; money from the state funds the remainder.

Throughout the interview with the Boston Business Journal, Chertavian never mentions that although he has invested more than \$750,000 of his own money in Year Up, he has never drawn a salary from the 6-year-old nonprofit.

A soft-spoken man with an easy laugh, Chertavian is more comfortable wandering the halls greeting kids and talking with staff than sitting in an office - in fact, he doesn't have an office. "If you're tucked away in an office, you're missing all those teachable moments," he said.

He places a gentle hand on kids' shoulders as he passes by and engages them in conversation.

"I was taught very early on how you treat people is actually what matters," he said.

He often talks about the inequalities inner-city kids face in entering mainstream working America and calls attending school full-time a middle class luxury. Most of Year Up's kids come from tough neighborhoods, and some are adrift.

But Chertavian makes it clear that Year up does not offer handouts.

Qualified youth take classes for six months, and, if successful, earn a corporate apprenticeship for another six months.

Each student works on a system of "contract and feedback" in which he or she signs a contract with clear expectations laid out and receives feedback from peers and administrators and mentors. They earn 18 college credits and stipends of \$180 per week.

"The concept is they have to eat," said Chertavian. "You earn your money here by working hard."

If students are a second late for class and haven't called, they lose \$25 from the stipend.

More egregious behavior can get students fired from the program. It's the crux of the model — holding these kids accountable and giving them the power to make choices — that has made Year Up so successful.

"One can fall into the 'soft bigotry of low expectations,' said Chertavian, adding that lowering standards for kids coming from a disadvantaged background is "disrespectful to their God-given ability and potential."

Companies coo over the Year Up trainees. They call them "assets," "high-achievers" and passionate about their work ethic.

George Russell, executive vice president and head of community affairs for State Street Corp., said he was impressed with Chertavian's connection to his students. "He knew every one of the students by name," Russell said. "He had a story he could tell about each specific

student."

Since 2002, more than 50 Year Up apprentices have worked at State Street. Of the first 46, nine have been hired as full-time employees and 16 have been given extended contracts.

"Every student I talked to looked me directly in the eye," said Russell. "I was most impressed with that."

Though he doesn't profess religious beliefs, Chertavian often uses the phrases like "I pray" and words like "blessed." He says his spirituality is expressed in how he treats people. "My commitment to this work is an expression of my spirituality."

Chertavian grew up in Lowell and attended public high school. His family life, he said, was "perfectly comfortable." Education was highly regarded.

Wall Street was just a weigh station, where he worked as an officer for **Chemical Banking Corp.** He moved on to be head of marketing at Transnational Financial Services in London.

In 1993, Chertavian co-founded Conduit Communications in London; the company grew to \$20 million in annual revenue. When he and his partners sold the company in 1999, he took \$500,000 of the millions earned in the sale to start Year Up. He knew if he could foster Heredia's potential and see him through to a successful career he could do it for many.

One of his biggest lessons he learned in making the transition to heading Year Up was how to curb his anger and not take it personally when a student did something inappropriate.

"I had my 'year up,'" says Chertavian, who coined the phrase, which he describes as having either a very supportive parent, mentor or a great boss — "someone who took an active interest in you."