



# TRANSFORMING SAN FRANCISCO WITH HEART

Sheryl Evans Davis carries a distinctive blend of success as an educator, community organizer and city leader.

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As a 21-year-old undergraduate student at San Francisco State University, Sheryl Evans Davis was placed through a fellowship training program as a kindergarten teacher's assistant at Stuart Hall. On her first day in the classroom, some life-altering alchemy was at work.

"I remember a moment where the clouds opened up and the sun was shining on me," she recalls. "For the first time, I felt like I had found a job that brought me joy."

Seven years later, in 1997, Joanne Oppenheimer, the lead teacher in that kindergarten classroom, was a guest at Sheryl's wedding. "Before she left, she told me to apply for her job as she was moving to another area," Sheryl says. "That was probably the best wedding gift I received that day."

First as a kindergarten teacher and then as Convent & Stuart Hall's first Outreach Coordinator, she became the force behind linking the school with community organizations in the nearby Western Addition neighborhood serving marginalized children and families.

Sheryl, who was born in Texas and raised in Berkeley and West Oakland, is a woman of deep faith. As a teen, she learned about social justice through church programs and was inspired by gospel music and Baptist sermons, but never thought about teaching. "Education found me," she says, "I never really found it — it was a calling." Her mother and grandmother — two strong women who, Sheryl says, helped shape her life — encouraged her to pursue higher education. "I always knew they expected me to go to fulfill that dream."

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## 'HEART TO HEART WAS BORN'

When she noticed the proximity — and vast wealth and opportunity disparity — between Convent & Stuart Hall, sitting on a perch overlooking the Bay, and its neighbors a few blocks to the south, occupying a long stretch of historic Fillmore Street, her instinct was to put the teachings of her faith into practice.

She wondered how she could bring these communities together. "The RSCJ started schools to address inequities and create opportunities," Sheryl says, referring to the school's commitment to social justice rooted in its founding mission. "Knowledge is the key to social justice and education."

After Sheryl applied for a grant to start a summer program for youth with limited access to resources, the then Head of School, Dr. Mary Smith, called her into her office. "She told me I would not be getting the grant but went on to say the school wanted to support the effort — and Heart to Heart was born," Sheryl remembers. "Mary told me I should work in the summer camp to learn how to coordinate and develop the program."

She was fortunate in the sense that she had mentors as she laid the foundation of a program that would connect two distinctly different populations through educational activities designed to promote friendship and understanding, but she still had to confront the big question: What now? "We put out a call to teachers to volunteer and for parents to support the program through sponsoring food and field trips or providing other resources," Sheryl says. "I was blown away by the response!"

But she had bigger plans. With a penchant for community organizing and social justice work, she shifted from teaching into a role where she could focus solely on developing the Heart to Heart program and building Convent & Stuart Hall's ties in the community. What started as a summer camp with 40 students has, 22 years later, grown into a thriving and multifaceted program that fosters innovative partnerships among area organizations and offers numerous peer-to-peer learning opportunities. The signature initiative is the Summer Reading Program.

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## 'BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS AND WORKING TOGETHER'

Each summer, as part of a collaboration with Collective Impact, a community-based organization that Sheryl would eventually lead as its Executive Director, Convent & Stuart Hall hosts a five-week reading program to help bolster the reading skills of about 150 elementary students from under-resourced schools. University of San Francisco graduate students pursuing degrees as reading specialists do the teaching, while Convent & Stuart Hall provides classroom and playground spaces, school supplies, daily hot breakfast and snacks, iPads and a full-time on-site program coordinator. Convent & Stuart Hall high school students often serve as teacher's aides.

Reading comprehension and retention are two of the chief skills that the reading program is charged with teaching. Studies show that reading loss over the summer months has especially far-reaching consequences for economically disadvantaged children.

Over the years, the Heart to Heart program has increased its impact with a peer tutoring initiative, an annual benefit concert, and backpack and holiday toy drives. "I am grateful that Convent & Stuart Hall continues the work of Heart to Heart," Sheryl says. "It represents a commitment to help our neighbors, make the community better and do the work — the hard work. When I see people building relationships and working together when they don't have to, it gives me hope."

Looking back, Sheryl says she was lucky to work at a school where she had a chance to develop her chops as a community leader and program developer. "I don't know if much of the work I have been able to do would have happened anywhere else," she notes. "I learned so much from Heart to Heart."

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## 'ADVANCING EDUCATION EQUITY'

So, when former Mayor Ed Lee appointed Sheryl in 2016 to her current post as the Executive Director of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission, the transition from Convent & Stuart Hall to serving a broader demographic felt natural. "I am happy I have been able to continue to advance education equity and work to share the strategies and best practices for quality education to youth across the city," she says.

In some ways, Sheryl's ongoing work addressing the city's complex issues is an extension of what she did building partnerships and programs for two decades at Convent & Stuart Hall. In her current role, she advocates for programs and policies that improve outcomes for people of color, mediates complaints of discrimination and works to protect human rights for all San Franciscans. Sheryl cites her efforts to grow the Opportunities for All initiative, which expands access to youth employment, and curate culturally affirming literacy materials as a source of pride, adding: "I love that I am able to work with the San Francisco Public Library to develop a book list, purchase books, and create and design the activity pages for over 2,000 young people."

In addition to all the hyphens Sheryl has collected on her résumé — elementary school teacher-organizer-administrator-program director-college professor — she has also continued her education by earning a master's degree in Public Education from the University of San Francisco and a doctorate in 2021 from the USC Rossier School of Education. For Sheryl, education is a love affair that never ends — and she's not slowing down. She teaches classes on the sociology of education at USF and has her sights set on writing a children's book this year.

The dualities that have defined Sheryl's career all trace back to a lifelong theme: "In every job I do," she says, "you will always find a song, a poem, a prayer and a little social justice."