

# BRINGING NEW MENTORS – AND HOPE – INTO THE LIVES OF CHILDREN

## SUMMARY

Back in 1992, Jay Winsten, the associate dean at the Harvard School of Public Health, was asked by the Joyce Foundation to help create a campaign against youth violence. It was a logical choice. The Harvard School of Public Health had been credited with helping raise awareness about important social issues. What it came up with this time was “Squash It!,” street slang for walking away from a violent situation.

A few years into the campaign, public attitudes did indeed appear to be changing. By 1997, 72 percent of African-American teenagers were aware of Squash It! and more than 50 percent said they were more likely to respect someone who walked away from a fight. However, Winsten himself acknowledges the limitations of the campaign. “It would have taken a much longer time to fundamentally change this norm,” he explains. “I think we chipped away at it, but we didn’t fundamentally change it.”

Harvard ultimately concluded that it made more sense to promote the role of mentors so it could steer young people toward a better future instead of just away from violence. Winsten reflects, “Squash It! happened because we did focus groups and survey research with kids. It is where the data led us initially. But the more we talked to kids, the more we realized at a deeper level that they wanted an adult friend.”

Timing for the issue was also right. That year, then-President Clinton co-chaired the Presidents’ Summit for the American Future in Philadelphia, which included all the former presidents and Colin Powell, and challenged nonprofits and businesses alike to increase the number of children with mentors by two million. Harvard was joined by many organizations that also wanted to promote mentoring, including America’s Promise, Save the Children, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the National Mentoring Partnership, and the Points of Light Foundation.

Within this coalition, members of the team at the Harvard Mentoring Project saw themselves as facilitators. That meant, for example, working with broadcast and cable television stations to develop and run PSAs. “We went to the major broadcast networks and got a commitment from each to produce and sponsor mentoring PSAs, which frequently featured their celebrities and only ran on their networks,” notes Winsten. “We also went to cable networks, and with help from the National Cable Television Association we recruited 45 national and regional cable networks to air PSAs.”

HBO, for example, produced its own PSAs, then gave them to Harvard to distribute. The spots left off the HBO logo, so anyone could use them. One of the PSAs was targeted to African-American men because of research Harvard had just completed for networks and nonprofits, which highlighted the groups that still weren’t being reached by existing PSA efforts. Explains Richard Plepler, senior vice president of HBO, “Those of us who don’t do this for a living but have a certain orientation to do public service want to feel that when we invest time and energy in these campaigns the professionals have done the research, done the due diligence, and given us the best guidance. That’s certainly the case with Jay.”

Harvard officials stress their efforts to collaborate instead of compete. When Save the Children was getting ready to launch its Ad Council mentoring campaign, Harvard says it asked stations to run those PSAs and held off on sending its own. “The first key lesson I would share with advocates is collaborate,” emphasizes Liz Erickson, co-founder of Youth Noise at Save the Children. “It was important for the mentoring community at large to be a part of this campaign. It is not just our initiative.”

But campaign officials point out that, for them, working in partnership was important for more than just communications and research. While each organization has its own 800 number, many of those numbers now feed into one central place that connects interested callers with a mentoring organization in their area. “The Ad Council were real sticklers on this,” Erickson remembers. “They told us that unless we had an effective fulfillment system, we wouldn’t achieve our goals. And they were right.”

So far, more than 225,000 television viewers have called one of the toll-free numbers for information. Roughly 500,000 additional calls have been placed directly to local projects. Harvard estimates that some \$175 million in airtime has been donated to its mentoring messages. Surveys of people who called the national toll-free numbers indicate that about 20 percent have become mentors.

No doubt, mentoring has become a bigger part of our cultural and political landscape since that summit in Philadelphia. But will we meet its goal of finding mentors for two million more children? There are a lot of young people waiting to find out.

## Squash It! and the Mentoring Project

### BACKGROUND

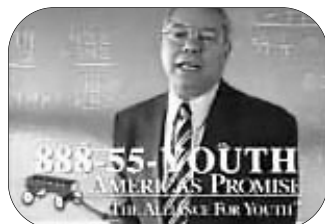
**Sponsor:** Harvard School of Public Health Center for Health Communication

**Purpose:** Squash It!: to encourage young people to walk away from a potentially violent situation; the Mentoring Project: to encourage adults to get involved in young people's lives

**When:** Squash It!: 1994-1996; the Mentoring Project: 1996 to present

**How Much:** Squash It!: no estimated overall media donation figures; the Mentoring Project: estimates \$175 million in donated airtime since the launch

**Paid/Donated:** Donated



### THE CAMPAIGN

In 1992, Deborah Leff, then the newly appointed president of the Joyce Foundation, contacted Jay Winsten, the associate dean at the Harvard School of Public Health, to ask him to help create a campaign to address youth violence. The choice made sense. Harvard had helped raise awareness about the importance of other public health issues and was recognized for its advisory role with Hollywood executives and policy experts alike.

Yet Winsten was reluctant because he doubted that a marketing campaign could effectively address street violence. Nevertheless, he agreed to explore the issue by conducting focus groups with Boston teens. And it was during those sessions that he became convinced there was an opportunity to make a difference. "To break the back of youth violence," states Winsten, "it will take a dozen different approaches. You also need gun control, after-school programs, etc. This is just one component. I always had modest expectations, but I thought this could make a contribution – and I think it did."

### DEVELOPING "SQUASH IT!"

Through focus groups and surveys, Harvard discovered that what teens did publicly about violence was often very different from what they felt privately. While privately they may respect someone who chooses to avoid violence, in public they didn't feel they could walk away and still save face. With this in mind, Harvard decided to create PSAs that would validate teens' privately held beliefs and give them permission to walk away.

In focus groups with Boston teens, some mentioned that during potentially violent confrontations, they would evaluate the situation, and just say, "squash it." After hearing "squash it" again and again, it became clear that, across the country, the term was street lingo that meant deciding to walk away.

Members of the team at Harvard wanted to use this existing lingo to promote peace, but they felt it would be more powerful if matched with a hand signal. They started playing with macho versions of the time-out signal used in sports and landed upon a signal using the left hand as a fist with an open right hand flat on top. When initially tested with the word "time-out," it was interpreted by teens as being for little kids. But young people picked up the hand signal quickly. So the "Squash It!" campaign utilized a combination of that hand signal and the existing street lingo.

"The key to the strategy was a very simple message that we were able to repeat over and over," notes Winsten. "However, it also needs complexity buried beneath the surface or all you have is an empty slogan. Squash It! was all about promoting a social norm – the social acceptability of walking away." In one of the campaign's PSAs produced in conjunction with MTV, rap artist KRS-One discusses the stupid actions – like a bump or a wrong look – that can result in violence. He urges listeners to "walk away from violence and squash the anger." Another shows young people talking about how kids in their community grow up with anger and get used to killing, and how it will take youth who are willing to make a change in themselves to make a difference.

## DEVELOPING THE MENTORING PROJECT

Scripts, PSAs, and posters were all heavily tested with teens and rewritten with their input. While members of the team at Harvard developed the strategy, they worked with partners such as television networks and sports organizations to produce PSAs and give the message more exposure. The outside organizations, many of which had worked with Harvard on the designated-driver effort, signed up immediately, but there was often a lag period before they fulfilled their commitments. “Other business priorities would push this to the side,” notes Winsten. “We just worked to nudge them along. They are doing us a favor, so you can’t get mad at delay. It is all part of a process to get them to act on their good intentions.”

Several networks developed and produced PSAs with Harvard and provided exposure for them. There was a lot of focus, in particular on sports partnerships, and the NBA, NCAA, NFL, and Fox Sports all produced PSAs. Yet while public opinion data showed some effectiveness with teens, Harvard decided to shift its focus. “It would have taken a much longer time to fundamentally change this norm,” notes Winsten. “I think we chipped away at it, but we didn’t fundamentally change it.” “Squash It! happened,” Winsten continues, “because we did focus groups and survey research with kids. We heard about usage of the phrase ‘squash it’ and about the barriers to walking away that can escalate into potentially lethal encounters. We naturally picked up how to change this norm and offer kids social permission to walk away. It is where the data led us initially. But the more we talked to kids, the more we realized at a deeper level that they wanted an adult friend. When we got started with Squash It!, the power of mentoring was mostly anecdotal.”

With resources to devote to just one major campaign at a time, Harvard made the transition from “Squash It!” to mentoring, which was being increasingly spotlighted on the national stage as an effective way to improve the lives of young people. “In 1995, Public Private Ventures in Philadelphia published a landmark study showing that mentoring works,” notes Winsten. “Rather than focusing separately on discrete problems such as alcohol and other drugs, school dropout, and youth violence – all of which may affect the same child – the strength of mentoring is that it deals with all of these problems simultaneously by addressing the needs of a child as a whole.”

This finding was consistent with what Harvard was hearing in focus groups and during conversations with young people – that they wanted more involvement with adults. Harvard felt it made sense to promote the social role of mentors – and give young people a positive action to take. “Kids will be more highly motivated to walk away from potentially violent situations once they recognize a hopeful future,” suggests Winsten.

At the same time, the Presidents’ Summit for the American Future in Philadelphia, which included then-President Clinton, all the former presidents and Colin Powell, had brought attention to the issue, pressuring businesses and nonprofits alike to help reach the goal of finding mentors for two million more children. “The presidents’ summit served to energize organizations,” notes Jonathan Alter, a *Newsweek* journalist who chronicled the mentoring issue. “It set an agenda, got press, and developed a commitment structure.” It also gave Winsten a forum for pressuring networks to participate.

After the summit, several networks agreed to run mentoring messages and many nonprofits picked up the mentoring mantle. Save the Children, an Ad Council campaign, for example, decided to feature mentoring as its U.S. program. “America’s Promise asked us to make a major commitment to mentoring,” explains Liz Erickson, co-founder of Youth Noise at Save the Children. “We started working with folks across the mentoring community to get a PSA campaign launched. Save the Children was the sponsoring organization, but it was really a collaboration.”

With so many organizations working to raise awareness about mentoring, Harvard officials note that they tried to foster collaboration over competition. They point, for example, to the time they held back on the release of their own PSA because Save the Children was getting ready to release its Ad Council campaign. Instead, the Harvard team asked television stations to run the Save the Children ads.

As time went on, some of the nonprofit partners included not only Save the Children and America’s Promise–The Alliance for Youth, but also Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the National Mentoring Partnership, the Points of Light Foundation, One to One Communities in Schools, the United Way, and the Partnership for a Drug Free America. They also shared information and worked with the Ad Council and the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services.

This far-reaching collaboration created a variety of mentoring PSAs, including testimonials by celebrities and sports stars as well as spots developed and produced by broadcast and cable networks. In one ad, Quincy Jones remembers his youth, explaining, “It wasn’t easy growing up...but I had people who stood me on their shoulders...They were mentors to me...You don’t have to be an expert to be a mentor. If we each help one child, we can change the world.”

Instead of one campaign with one look, campaign officials say, groups produced a variety of messages all stressing the importance of mentoring. After the campaign had been running for a while, Harvard did a content analysis of all the existing ads to see which demographic groups and issues were not being addressed – and then shared that information with the networks and other groups that were producing their own PSAs. Based on those findings, HBO produced a PSA to recruit African-American men as mentors and left the HBO name off so any organization could use it.

Media organizations say they welcomed Harvard's guidance. "I sent out our producers to talk to the people at Harvard largely to make sure we were on message," explains Richard Plepler, senior vice president of HBO. "Those of us who don't do this for a living but have a certain orientation to do public service want to feel that when we invest time and energy in these campaigns the professionals have done the research, done the due diligence, and given us the best guidance. That's certainly the case with Jay."

In addition to working with networks to produce PSAs for television, Harvard worked with Hollywood to depict mentoring on television and convinced the advertising agency Hill, Holliday, Connors, Cosmopolis Inc. to develop a series of print ads pro bono. The "Mentoring Changes Everything" print campaign, which was developed after conducting focus groups with target audiences, has headlines descriptive of youth in trouble (for example "Under Achiever") with the negative word crossed out.

"It was a tough process," notes Winsten. "Some ideas they believed would be impactful and generate attention, but we felt they would have downsides with how mentoring was perceived. This tension is not necessarily a bad thing as long as both sides stand their ground; you can end up with a great product. They are right to hold their ground too, because some of the changes we would have made to the ads, in retrospect, would have diminished their value."

But campaign officials caution that finding an effective message is only half the battle. They needed to be able to connect interested callers to organizations that could help them become mentors. "The Ad Council were real sticklers on this," explains Erickson. "They told us that unless we had an effective fulfillment system, we wouldn't achieve our goal. And they were right."

Initially, organizations had their own fulfillment systems. But one of the funders, who was supporting several hotlines at the time, suggested it would be more cost-effective to combine them. Harvard helped lead the effort to create one shared system, which is run by the National Mentoring Partnership.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

### Squash It!

Harvard did not track overall media usage for the Squash It! campaign, explaining that its focus was targeting African-American teenagers. Therefore it selectively chose network partners such as MTV, which could help reach that audience. MTV developed PSAs featuring rap artists, broadly distributed them, and aired them more than 50 times per month for the first couple of months. BET produced a one-hour prime-time Teen Summit special on youth violence prevention in July 1996 during which it ran three of the Harvard spots. CBS gave air-time for the spots during the Grammys two years in a row.

Among sports organizations, which were a critical partner in reaching the target audience, FOX agreed to run the PSAs during March Madness 1997, and 45 FOX affiliates in the top 50 markets gave them heavy exposure. The PSAs ran in 12 of 20 bowl games, and the NBA produced and ran Squash It! spots featuring professional basketball stars. The NCAA sponsored PSAs on network television during the regional playoffs and Final Four in both 1997 and 1998.

But the real demonstration of the campaign's exposure is the growth in awareness levels among the target audience. By 1997, 72 percent of African-American teenagers were aware of the campaign (up from 61 percent in 1995), and 60 percent had used the phrase "Squash It!" (up from 48 percent in 1995). "More than 50 percent surveyed said they were more likely than two years previously to respect someone who walked away from a fight," notes Winsten. "At the same time, a majority didn't think others would be more likely to respect them for walking away."

## FUTURE CHALLENGES

### The Mentoring Project

Six broadcast networks and 45 cable networks have donated over \$175 million in air-time. More than 225,000 television viewers have called one of the toll-free numbers for information. Roughly 500,000 additional calls went directly to local projects. Surveys of people who had called the national toll-free numbers indicate that about 20 percent have become mentors.

“The idea of mentoring in the late ‘90s did get more firmly implanted in the public’s mind,” stresses Jonathan Alter of *Newsweek*. “There were several contributing factors: Colin Powell, Jay Winsten’s work, Ray Chambers. You now see presidents talking about the importance of mentoring, and it is mentioned more in the popular media. Mentoring also became more broadly defined. The Big Brother commitment of the past was a big deal. Now it is possible to have more modest commitments, such as on-site mentoring, which we do at *Newsweek*.”

“Looking ahead, we were aware of the experiences of The Partnership for a Drug free America,” reflects Winsten. “They generated an enormous amount of media exposure, but eventually the media got bored, and the federal government had to step in and purchase media exposure. In the future, short of shifting to an expensive paid media effort, what strategies can we develop to keep the mentoring campaign going?”

In January 2002, the campaign will kick off National Mentoring Month, which is being created in collaboration with organizations such as the National Mentoring Partnership, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Points of Light, America’s Promise, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, and 25 local groups. It will include a month of promotions about mentoring at the national and local levels, including working with national media, the White House, and Congress to generate news and special events. The campaign has already recruited a lead nonprofit partner in each of the 25 top markets and is well on its way to securing a local TV station in each of the top 25 markets to commit to a month-long station-wide campaign that includes PSAs, local news coverage, joint promotions with local sponsors, and programming segments.