MARK F. GOLDBERG

Portrait of James P. Comer

His mother's determination that he should succeed despite his humble surroundings inspired James Comer's quest to connect low-income children and their families with schools.

James P. Comer is Maurice Falk Professor of Child Psychiatry at the Yale University Child Study Center and Associate Dean of the Yale School of Medicine. His mother, Maggie, never completed 1st grade. She was born a sharecropper's daughter in rural Mississippi, and his father, "just as poor," was born in rural Alabama, barely completing 6th grade. Maggie Comer was fiercely determined that her children were going to get an education. And despite the handicaps of race and limited means, all five graduated from college. Among them, they have accumulated 13 degrees.

The Uphill Struggle

As her family grew up in East Chicago, Indiana, Maggie Comer worked as a domestic. As she tended other peoples' houses, she would watch and listen to learn how successful middle class families functioned. "It was like going to school for her," recalls Comer. "She picked the best of what she observed and brought that home and used it. She learned how to use the telephone to make things happen for us and to intercede and intervene for us. My parents took us to the Museum of Science and Industry and the Field Museum and to all places and events they considered educational."

This was not the case with other families in their neighborhood. "My three friends, black friends who went off to school with me from our neighborhood, were just as bright, just as able, as anybody in the school, and yet they went on a downhill course," he remembers. These childrens' parents did not know how to mediate for them and nobody helped the well-intentioned teacher "understand what happens to sharecropper's kids who come north—how afraid of the system and institutions they are."

Comer entered Indiana University in 1952, where for the first time he encountered a "severely hostile environment." On his first day there, stopping for a soda at the local sweet shop, he was refused service. During orientation two days later, he and other students were getting a tour of the university when they were caught in a rainstorm. Comer got into one of the dozens of cars sent to pick them up and found himself embarrassingly alone—no one else would get in. When he received an *A* on a paper in one of his first courses, the professor read the paper to the class as a model. Halfway through, he asked whose paper it was. Comer acknowledged it was his, and the professor "ripped the paper to shreds, every line. That was a devastating experience."

Photograph courtesy of Yale University

Comer credits his family's values and the continued support of his parents for his success in college. He eventually graduated with excellent grades, more than good enough to get into several medical schools. He chose predominantly black Howard University Medical School because he wanted "to be in a supportive setting."

An Awakening Sense of Purpose

Like other young medical students, Comer worked extremely hard and had little time to consider social issues. He married while in medical school and soon started a family. But two things that happened to this upwardly mobile doctor shortly after graduation from medical school made him pause and consider who he was and what he wanted to do with his life.

The first incident occurred during the time he interned at a hospital in East Chicago. He was called one day to a home in a very poor neighborhood not far away from where he used to play as a child. He arrived at the house, opened the door, and saw that "roach-

es literally covered the walls. There were two kids in a crate. Their mother was obese and depressed—no other physical problems. It turned out she had gone to high school with my brother. I knew nothing in my medical bag was going to address those problems."

Not long afterward, Comer entered the United States Public Health Service in Washington, D.C. On Easter Sunday, 1962, he, his wife, and their small son went to brunch at the Bolling Air Force Base Officer's Club. During the brunch, a group of white officers and their wives came in with white and black children from a local orphanage. Faced with this show of concern for less fortunate children, Comer had to ask himself, "What was I doing?" He remembered his boyhood dream to become a doctor with "the kind of power and influence . . . to bring about social change in my town."

After receiving his master's degree in public health from the University of Michigan, Comer entered the Yale School of Medicine for a three-year residency in psychiatry. He was attracted to the Yale psychiatry department because of the people there—people like Fritz Redlich, Al Solnit, and Robert Jay Lifton—"who supported social psychiatry and who understood the impact of social conditions" and who therefore understood Comer's devotion to improving the lot of poor people. He stayed two years at Yale, finishing his residency at the National Institute of Mental Health.

Convinced that the relationship between school and family is at the heart of a poor child's success or lack of it, Comer remembered his own family's involvement. "One of the reasons I made it in school," he says, "was that my parents had a relationship with the school, my mother in particular, with my father backing her up." He puzzled for several years over how to help poor children and how to connect their families with education. "I began to think about how you could make a difference for low-income kids, and I decided that the only place you could in our society—because you can't get to families earlier—is the school. It's a natural place because everybody comes down that pathway."

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Making Connections Between Schools and Families

In 1968, at Yale Medical School's Child Study Center, and with support from the Ford Foundation, Comer developed a school-based management team to help poor families and schools "develop trust and mutual respect." He began in the two New Haven schools with the lowest achievement scores (on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) and the worst attendance and behavior records in the city. Many of the students' parents had memories of their own experiences in school that led them to believe "the staffs really didn't like them or black people or poor people or people who live in the housing projects."

The students felt they had no stake in the school. They lacked any sense that "this is my place," Comer remembers. "They could perform adequately in the housing project, on the playground, and in a variety of other places, but not in school." The professional staff often responded "by controlling, or attempting to control, or having low expectations for these kids." The students either did not respond or responded in ways that made matters worse. One good, conscientious 1st grade teacher, Comer recalls, was telling her students on the first day of school what she would expect of them when a student raised his hand and said, "Teacher, my momma said I don't have to do anything you say." The teacher was black, but Comer explains, "That's the old alienation between home and school."

Comer and his colleagues "established administrative teams representative of the stakeholders: parents, teachers, administrators, mental health team people." He used the teams to establish a comprehensive plan for each school, including goals and staff development.

Comer's intention was to develop a social climate in the schools to make them "an oasis for the children and parents." Parents, he thought, should be brought into the schools and given a role. Teachers needed training to work with poor children, and children needed to feel that the school was their place. "Mutual trust and respect among all involved had to be established."

"The idea," he says, "is to use people where they have expertise and not expose them to things that will make them feel bad. The greatest parent contribution is in the social area. In the academic area the staff plays the greater role, and the parents support that." Parental participation was encouraged: it started with potluck suppers and was followed by a whole series of social activities. These activities got the parents into the school so that they could work cooperatively with the staff.

Most of his ideas worked slowly at first and more powerfully as they evolved. The teams taught the parents and staff to work together. The social climates improved; each school became a "good place." Everyone learned the important elements of a positive school culture, including a no-fault atmosphere—"You don't spend your time blaming others." Decisions were reached by consensus, so there would be no winners or losers. There was a governance agreement that "the team can't paralyze the principal, and the principal can't use the team as a rubber stamp."

Two special features of the schools were the Discovery Room and the Crisis Room. The Discovery Room incorporated elements of a playroom and play therapy to teach students that school could be a good place for them. If students acted out, they could "redeem themselves" in the Discovery Room. They learned healthier, more self-satisfying ways to behave in the Discovery Room; it "helped them feel comfortable" in the school.

The Crisis Room was designed for a student in real crisis, someone not ready for the classroom—like an 8-year-old boy who arrived one day from North Carolina to live with his aunt. Feeling alone and frightened, he kicked his teacher and ran out of the room. In the Crisis Room, he and the teacher talked about what "it's like to be eight and have your entire support system removed."

The model that Comer slowly perfected is now in place in all New Haven elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. Comer is proud because the two schools in which he made the greatest investment—Martin Luther King, Jr. and Katherine Brennan—"internalized our way of working," and in 1980 were placed completely on their own. By 1984, these schools ranked third and fourth in the city on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, "ahead of many of the middle-income schools." They were also first and second in attendance, had virtually no serious behavior problems, and had dramatically slowed their teacher turnover rates. Now Comer's program is operating successfully in 100 schools around the country, including schools in Prince George's County, Maryland; Benton Harbor, Michigan; and Norfolk, Virginia.

Still So Much to Do

These days, Comer is still a busy man: he made more than 50 speeches in 1989, not unusual for him. He is a member of the MacArthur Foundation Committee on Healthy Adolescent Development, the Carnegie Foundation Board of Trustees, and the Field Foundation Board of Trustees. A consultant to "Sesame Street," he also writes a monthly article for *Parents* magazine and serves on many other committees "that have to do with schools, poor children, and families."

All of his siblings have experienced their own successes. His brother Norman is Superintendent of Schools in East Chicago, and Charles, an optometrist, is president of the National Optometrists' Association. Louise is a retired East Chicago teacher, and Thelma is still teaching 1st grade in East Chicago. Their father died more than 30 years ago, but at 85 Maggie is still "feisty and tough." Her children credit her with their success: she wanted them to share in the American dream, and she's lived to see her dream come true.□

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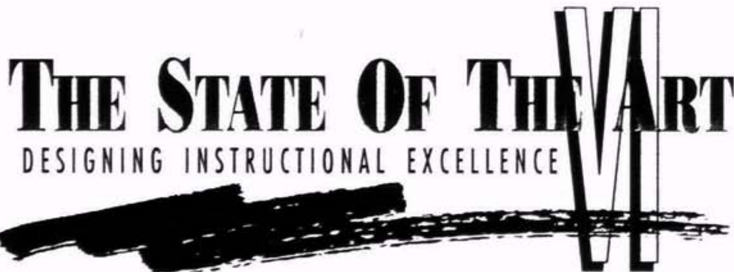

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