

For U. City mogul: When a school fails, (re)build a new one

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(http://media.dpn.s3.amazonaws.com/43053_karp3f.jpg)

Michael Karp is sitting in the faculty office at Belmont Charter School, the elementary school he founded in 1997. “I think we need more teacher assistance,” he tells 2008 Graduate School of Education alumna Claire Cohen, the school’s director. Before she can respond with her usual curt: “Michael!” Karp adds, “I’m willing to pay for it.”

Karp, a 1964 College graduate, will use every outlet within the system to end poverty in West Philadelphia. And if that isn’t enough, he’ll buy a new outlet. Tapping the ball of his hand on the table, he explains, “With my economic circumstances, if I don’t have the confidence and the willingness to say what I think, then who does?”

Although Karp labels himself as an “advocate for change,” then-Mayor John Street labeled Karp as a “disruptive force” — firing him from the Philadelphia Board of Education in 1999. But Karp wouldn’t have it any other way.

“It’s important that people don’t say that an appointment to a board ... is an honor where you only say the politically correct thing — where you go along all the time because you enjoy your position on that board,” Karp said, reflecting on his “controversial” rejection of Coca-Cola’s partnership with the schools. “You should really stand for something.”

So call him what you like, but the results of his commitment to literacy can only be called significant. Since Karp purchased Belmont and converted it to a charter school, it has had a 35.8 percent increase in proficient/advanced scores in Reading on the PSSA. The school is also one of two charter schools in Philadelphia with a full health clinic staffed by a nurse practitioner and is the only school with a full-time social work department.

“You could say I am being the force that says, ‘Let’s change the system,’” Karp smiles. He bangs his fist on the table, “It’s not about the money.” That’s why Karp transferred out of Wharton and into the College years ago. “I knew I didn’t need my college degree to make money.”

He notes that some of his biggest disagreements with city politicians were over money. “You have to have the kids feel [the teachers’] love. If I changed all my teachers salaries, it would not change one iota what the teachers do with my kids.”

But Belmont Charter is only five blocks away from where Karp began in real estate. The 71-year-old GSE and Wharton dropout started buying student homes in University City when he lived next to White Dog Cafe as a GSE student. With a Penn International Relations Diploma and a \$30,000 loan from his father, Karp bought 3908 Walnut (which is now Du Bois College House), 3701 Chestnut, and 3916 and 3914 Pine. As the founder of University City Housing Company, he was the first University City landlord to make over West Philly homes with the goal of optimizing them for students.

He currently owns roughly 20 percent of the undergraduate housing market. Although his University City properties only account for 15 percent of his real estate holdings, West Philadelphia runs “in [his] blood” because of his 40-something years of residency here.

“I learned the needs of the community by becoming part of the community,” Karp says. Since he moved out of West Philadelphia to Haverford in 1988, he has sold ATX Telecommunications for \$900 million, served on Penn’s Board of Trustees and taught every single one of his five kids Hebrew before kindergarten.

Although Karp’s main source of revenue comes from his privately owned companies that he’d “rather not list,” every dollar he earns fortifies his commitment to Jewish and educational philanthropy.

That’s why he purchased the Mantua Family Center, Belmont Academy Charter School and, most recently, the Joseph Leidy Elementary School at 131 Belmont Ave. Cohen, who has worked with Karp since he founded Belmont Charter 12 years ago, notes that many of the employees at Belmont Charter have worked for Karp in one of his many other endeavors. One teacher at the Belmont is someone Karp met on the street.

Cohen attributes his hiring practices and work ethic to his passion. “He seeks passion in other people and when he finds it, he wants to make sure it’s put to good use,” she says.

So when a teacher comes into the room and asks about a teacher recruitment fair and whether the school can afford it, Karp interjects: “We have to have it.”

DISCUSSION
