

Letter to the editor

Wonder Bread

It was the summer of 1935 at 195 West Central Avenue, Pearl River, New York, and one of those hot, sultry days made hotter by the pushing of our old lawn mower over grass that I had let grow for too long. I was happy to be called by my Mom from the porch of our \$35-per-month rented four-room bungalow. Anything to interrupt mowing was fine with me.

"I'm looking for a penny and I'll bet I can find one before you can. I have a dime and need eleven cents for you to take downtown to buy a loaf of Wonder Bread."

"What do I get if I win?"

"You get to have a piece of bread with dinner tonight," she replied.

I ran to my room, opened the lower drawer of my dresser and, as I suspected, there among bubble gum cards, bottlecaps, unusual colored stones, and pieces of colored ribbon was a penny.

I had never, at age seven, thought of our family as poor. But at this point my Dad had not worked for three years except for brief stints as a playground supervisor at \$18 dollars per week. After three years of college he commuted to a good job in New York City with an up-and-coming advertising firm. He was the last person to be let go before the firm folded in 1932. He and my Mom had planned to save enough to build their own home but my mother died in 1958 and my Dad three years later, both in the little bungalow.

I had never known the magnitude of the debt incurred over the span of the three and a half years my father was without a job. However, when he died in 1961 his total estate consisted of a single term-life insurance policy with a benefit of \$6000. As his sole heir, I used all of it to pay the remaining balance on the loan he had taken from the Pearl River State Bank in 1936 to pay off his creditors. He had added six percent interest to each account in appreciation for their

kindness and patience.

I was thirty-three years old in 1961, married, with a three-year-old daughter, and completing my research fellowship at UCLA prior to starting my academic career as a full-time assistant professor of Medicine at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City. My starting salary was \$13,000 per year. From my perspective this was a huge income, given that I made it through Colgate University as a pre-med with a \$1,000 per year scholarship, through Columbia medical school with a \$4,000 per year scholarship, and then internship, residency and fellowship with \$9,000 per year. All in all close to \$74,000 in supplemental scholarships over sixteen years of post-high school education. This made it possible for this Great Depression kid to start his career unburdened by debt and that made a huge difference in my life. I retired in 1997 as Castera Professor of Medicine and Physiology and Director of the UCLA Cardiovascular Research Laboratory.

A year prior to retirement I began to volunteer at the 2,400-student Lennox Middle School as an advisor for their Science Fair and speaker for their Career Day. The Lennox Community occupies just 1.3 square miles immediately east of Los Angeles International Airport. It is extremely impoverished, with ninety-six percent of its students qualifying for free lunch. Sixteen gangs operate in the district. Progression of a student through high school to graduation was problematic; entry to a four-year college, a rarity. Many of the students had never travelled outside the district in their lives! This Depression kid immediately identified with these twelve- to thirteen-year-olds.

My wife, Marianne, and I launched what we called "The Partnership Scholars Program" at Lennox in 1996 with the following goal: That motivated but economically and culturally disadvantaged students are limited not by their environment but are assured of

progressing to a level determined only by their own considerable talents to the end that they will be competitive for entry into four-year colleges with scholarship aid.

A volunteer college-educated mentor is assigned to a seventh grader and mentors him/her extracurricularly for the next six years through high school graduation until college entry. An annual stipend of \$2,100 per year covers scholar and mentor expenses for extra books, calculators/computers, museum trips, concerts/plays/meals with mentors and other scholars, campus visitations, educational travel, summer enrichment programs on college campuses, SAT prep—all the things that a middle-class family would provide for their college-bound child.

As of June 2013 we have graduated a total of 286 high school seniors from nine school districts, both urban and rural, in California. Of this group 265 (ninety-three percent) have been accepted to, are attending, or have graduated from sixty-one colleges across the country. The 265 have received more than \$25 million in scholarship/financial aid, averaging over \$94,000 per scholar for their four years of college or more than seven times the monetary investment of the Partnership Program over six years.

One of our current scholars recently wrote in thanking his sponsor: "You have given me the opportunity to prove I can be someone, that I can be more than a high school graduate working at Wal-Mart. You see, I have dreams; dreams that are one step closer to becoming true. At first I had no dreams, but now, knowing that there are people out there that see the potential in me, everything is changed."

Glenn Langer MD
(AQA, *Columbia University College of Physicians & Surgeons, 1953*)
Founder, Partnership Scholars (www.partnershipscholars.org)
P. O. Box 361
Little River, California 95456
E-mail: glang@mcn.org

