

A CONVERSATION WITH BREAKTHROUGH'S FOUNDING AND CURRENT EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS, JULIE FRIEDBERG (GFS '89) AND MICHELLE PALMER

By Mara Lemos-Stein

Under Breakthrough's Spell

Breakthrough's goal is to infuse a true love of learning and passion for education that will ripple through its students' communities and impact their futures decisively. A testament to that ripple effect is the launch of the program 30 years ago.

"I had such an incredible experience – an absolutely transformative experience – working with the program during college that I thought: Why isn't this in Germantown?," said Julie Friedberg, who spearheaded the opening of the Philadelphia site in 1995.

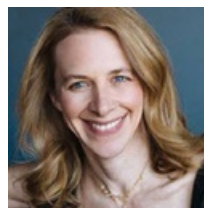
Julie had worked at three different Breakthrough programs (then called Summerbridge) around the country, even though education was not part of her career plan at the time; she was studying History, with a minor in Music.

An alumna of Germantown Friends School, she was intimately familiar with the school's values and community dynamics in the area. "I thought Breakthrough would be great for Germantown and for the school, a win-win situation," she said.

She reached out to Dick Wade, who was then stepping into his role as GFS' Head of School, with a proposal to bring the program to Philadelphia. Wade convened a committee of volunteers to assess the project's viability, and Julie was tapped to head Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia after graduating from college.

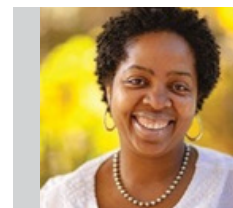
Now she needed to get the word out to the community at large and public schools to recruit students – it was time to build a shared vision.

"I had no idea if there would be interest, or how students would respond," she said. "But they were incredibly excited about it, and that was thrilling."



Julie Friedberg

Founding Executive Director, Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia (formerly known as Summerbridge)



Michelle Palmer

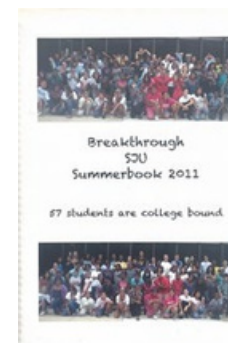
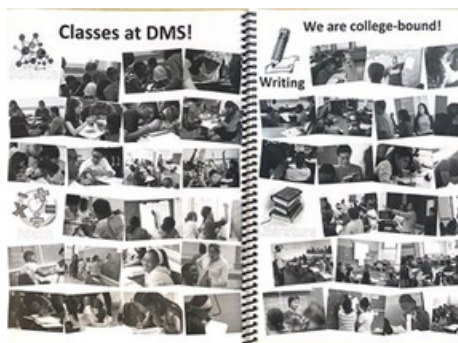
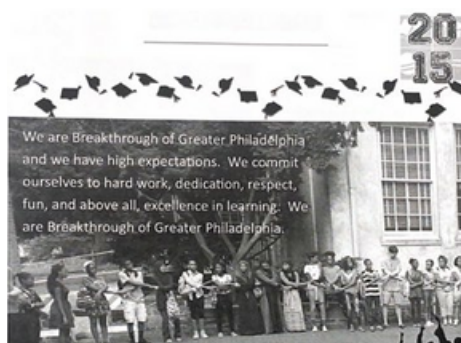
Executive Director, Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia (2020–present)

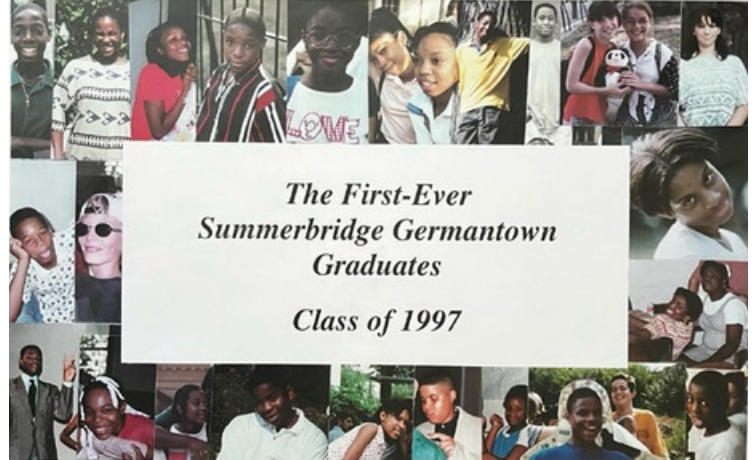
Working out of a desk with no computer, Julie was surprised when three students from Clarence E. Pickett Middle School, now a Mastery Charter school, walked onto the GFS campus to deliver their applications for the summer program.

"These kids had never been on campus before, but they wanted to come in and hand deliver [their applications]," she said. "I was really moved by that...and that was the beginning." That first class welcomed 24 sixth-grade students.

Julie leaned on her experiences of Breakthrough in Manchester, NH, Providence, RI, and New Orleans, LA, to design the program that would be taught in Philadelphia. Besides drawing from elements in those chapters' curricula, she added some of Germantown's own flavor to the program.

"Service learning was a big driver for me, and that was new to most programs back then," Julie said. "We had something called Build Up Germantown, in which the kids were basically in interdisciplinary projects...the academics were infused with or driven by community projects."





Indeed, the dual-mission of providing free academic enrichment for traditionally underserved youth and hands-on teaching experiences for college students creates an alchemy that is very unique in learning environments.

As Michelle put it: "The magic of Breakthrough is when middle schoolers come together with college students. Their eyes open up in a different way. They are eager to learn, and it gives them a new experience.

The Magic of Breakthrough

Some of the main priorities for Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia in the mid-1990s remain top of mind for current Executive Director Michelle Palmer.

"Educating the community and fundraising are among my top priorities for Breakthrough; we are really trying to take it to the next level," said Michelle. "We've had significant gains in the past few years, but I want us to get to a place where we could have an endowment, and one day maybe even provide scholarships."

Much of the momentum to gather the support and funding to open the Philadelphia chapter stemmed from the program's compelling vision and mission. But what Julie couldn't quite appreciate then was that the so-called "magic of Breakthrough" was already at work before any kid walked into a classroom that summer.

"It's the belief in the power of young people," she said. "I was young, the staff was young, we were all young, and that's the special sauce of this program."

They're impressed that their teachers are young, energized, and for a lot of them, they have teachers who look like them as well."

This near-peer learning experience breeds a joy of learning. Building cohesion through rituals, songs, special handshakes and "spirit checks," program participants forge deep connections while being offered consistent support to grow academically and socially.

"It is really fun for them, and that is so much a part of Breakthrough — we're not just your average academic enrichment program, we are much more than that," said Michelle.

The Next 30 Years

Since its 1995 launch, Breakthrough has grown despite a few bumps on the road. This year, the program will enroll approximately 200 middle schoolers, 50 high schoolers, and 40 college students hopeful for a career as educators.

All that growth serves as inspiration and affirmation for Breakthrough to continue evolving to accommodate the needs of Scholars and Teaching Fellows, and adapting to trends in education broadly.

“We started our College Bound program back up this year to make sure that our students are prepared for testing and supported as far as resume building and getting ready for college overall...including understanding finances,” said Michelle.

“We will continue to bring in professional development for Teaching Fellows and aim to give them a competitive stipend so they can enjoy the experience, learn about all aspects of teaching, and...get the full grasp of what it’s going to take for them to be in the classroom,” she said.

For Julie, who is now an executive and leadership coach focusing on education, Breakthrough is ripe for positively influencing the education ecosystem.

“[Breakthrough] has the potential to scale and absolutely be infused into how we do school,” said Julie. This is especially true as more people consider alternative ways for career advancement in light of the high cost of college education.

“There is a whole set of teacher apprenticeships around the country and it would be amazing to have [Breakthrough] funnel into the apprenticeship model, so that this could be a pathway for the Teaching Fellows and the Scholars as well,” she said.

Looking into a crystal ball – or drawing up a strategy plan – Michelle paints the picture for Breakthrough for the next 30 years.

“One day we hope that Breakthrough will not need to be in existence, because we hope to live in a place where educational equity is a reality, education is prioritized for all students, and all students have equal opportunities,” said Michelle. “That may not be the case...so we will continue to flourish and grow, we will stay the course and make sure that we are leveling the playing field for our students.”



BREAKTHROUGH BY THE NUMBERS

1,600
STUDENTS

served at Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia since 1995

500
TEACHING
FELLOWS

at Breakthrough of Greater Philadelphia since 1995

3 OUT
OF 4

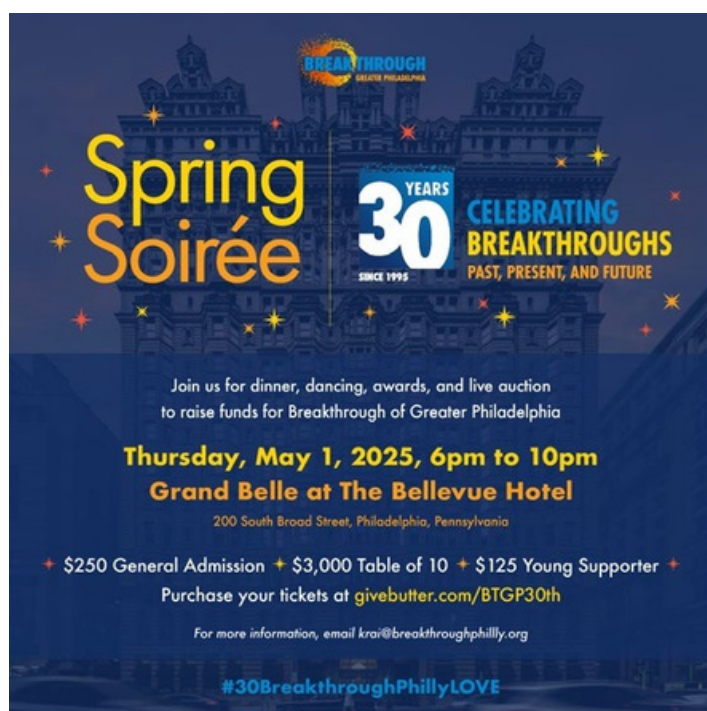
Teaching Fellows pursue teaching careers*
(Following BTGP fellowship, BT Collaborative 2024)

83%

Breakthrough 8th grade Scholars are admitted to top choice high schools*
(Responses from BTGP 8th grade class surveyed, 2024)

This year, we honor Scholars, Fellows, and other individuals and community partners for their outstanding achievements and unwavering dedication to Breakthrough. We are pleased to announce the following honorees in our 30th Anniversary year.

Awards will be presented at our Spring Soirée on May 1st. Join us... get your tickets today!

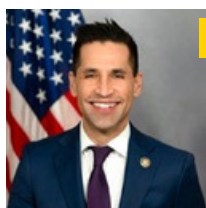


Community Champion Award

Recognizes leaders in Philadelphia who serve as supporters and champions to advance Breakthrough's mission in the community.



*Congressman
Dwight Evans*



*Representative
Tarik Khan*

Philadelphia Insurance Companies Breakthrough Award

Recognizes Teaching Fellow and Scholar Alumni who have dedicated their lives to educational pursuits, community impact, and/or teaching careers.



Kamryn Davis



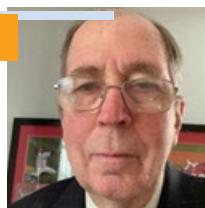
Matthew Greenawalt

Sponsored by



Karr Barth Equitable Force for Good Award

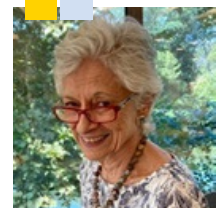
Recognizes long-time supporters who help Breakthrough realize and accelerate its mission.



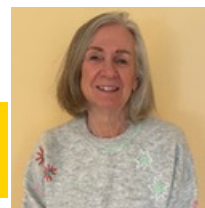
Jim Degnan



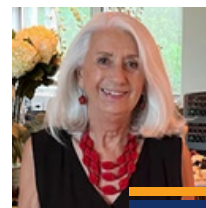
Jason Duckworth



Nanie Flaherty



Susan Fleming



Peggy Greenawalt

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