

# CHALLENGE DAY

35<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY



## IMPACT REPORT 2022



**CHALLENGE DAY** is a nonprofit organization committed to building empathy and compassion in our communities. We help youth and adults unlearn harmful habits, experience vulnerability as a pillar to restore strength, and experience the freedom of full expression through the lens of compassion, connection, and diversity. In the past five years we have supported 300,000 students and 60,000 adults directly.



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It is my great pleasure to share **Challenge Day's 2022 Impact Report** with you as we celebrate Challenge Day's 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In these pages you will meet remarkable people whose stories will inspire and move you. You will gain new perspectives on Challenge Day from its staff, board members, partners, and clients. You will witness the impact we have had on students and schools, on individual lives and whole communities. The vision and hopes of our founders Rich and Yvonne endure and remain our foundation today. You will sense the momentum that Challenge Day is building—across decades, in the midst of a pandemic, and in the face of future uncertainty. Our work is to close gaps between people by opening hearts and building connections. That work has never been more important. Thank you for joining us in our mission to create a world where every person in our communities feels safe, loved, and celebrated.

Sincerely,  
Victoria Gazulis  
Board President

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Entrepreneur



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Co-Founder, Challenge Day  
and Be the Change Movement



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**Anne Wilson**  
Interim Executive Director

# COMMITMENT

# Sharon HARRIS

BOARD VICE PRESIDENT



For **Sharon Harris**, education is central. Her mother was an elementary school teacher in Louisiana, but she was also the “psychologist, cook, and consoler” for all of her students. At home, education was always emphasized. Sharon was taught that it would open doors and allow her to access opportunities, that her trajectory in life would be determined by her education. She has come to believe that teaching is fundamentally about meeting people where they are and helping them through the most challenging and difficult moments of their lives. While she had the benefit of a happy, safe, and secure home, she sees that many young people don’t have those benefits. They live with food insecurity, pressures at school, bullying, violence, and more. This, for Sharon, is where Challenge Day steps in, by creating psychologically safe spaces where kids can work through their difficulties. Much of this, she says, is about simply allowing them to be vulnerable.

As Sharon sees it, “vulnerability is the cornerstone of growth and resilience, because it allows people to see who you are, and it opens you up to connect with people in a truly authentic way. It makes you fully present and connects you to others, heart to heart and head to head. Society teaches us not to be vulnerable,” says Sharon. “But for young people, that’s not possible.” This is why Challenge Day’s work is essential. Sharon sees that by allowing and encouraging vulnerability and the authenticity that resides in vulnerability, “Challenge Day helps kids find a way to survive, thrive, and move forward. At Challenge Day, they work through concerns and obstacles and uncover in themselves a narrative that provides hope.” They show up authentically, without compromise, and thereby experience a forward momentum that leads them to a strength and resilience that they didn’t know they had within.

“We are all much stronger than we think we are,” says Sharon. “Challenge Day gives you the tools and the perspective you need to discover that strength.”

*“Vulnerability is the cornerstone of growth and resilience.”*



# GROWTH



## David HERRON

BOARD TREASURER

*"Every crisis presents an opportunity."*

"All of us are watching hopefully as the health crisis of the last two years appears to stabilize. The long-lasting impact of the educational crisis it created, however, is unfolding along three axes, and we're going to be dealing with it for a while. Challenge Day will be an essential part of that.

First of all, we are facing an academic crisis. Data are flooding in from across the country that students are behind in math, reading comprehension, and all the building blocks of advanced learning. How do you move forward when there are such big gaps? School districts will need to focus for the next decade on adjusting their approach to academics.

Secondly, Covid has had a huge impact on young people's social experience. Children missed the very basics of socialization that the classroom teaches. Removing adolescents from the school environment meant that puberty and teenage identity were experiences they had to go through in isolation. We see the effects: Suicide rates among young people are up; general enrollment in schools is down. Hundreds of thousands of students have simply disappeared from the classroom.

Thirdly, there is a crisis in teaching and school morale. The alarm bells are going off: We know that teachers are actively looking to leave the profession. New Mexico has called in National Guard volunteers to serve as substitutes. Bus drivers are missing. People are in tears in school district meetings—I've seen this for myself. The fatigue of multiple years without regular schooling is weighing on us all.

But it's important to remember that every crisis presents an opportunity, and the current one is no different. I first experienced Challenge Day as a teacher with a group of students who were facing dysfunctionality, bullying, and destructive cliques in the classroom. I was skeptical at first. How could a single day make a difference in a student's life? But what Challenge Day provided for my students and me was an opportunity for rebirth and a resetting of behaviors. We experienced emotional breakthroughs and dismantled barriers. We discovered that sharing vulnerabilities unlocks emotional strength.

In today's environment, Challenge Day is more essential than ever. By providing clear, memorable moments of connection and community, Challenge Day reattaches students, teachers, and parents to what went missing over the past two years. Torn social fabrics get mended; isolation is replaced with strengthened identities and connected communities. It's not enough just to say, 'hey we're back to normal and back in school.' We need to provide ways for people to process what they have gone through over the past two years. That is what Challenge Day is here for."

# CONNECTION



## **Christine** KLAASSEN-ST PIERRE

BOARD SECRETARY

*"We got to see each other with new eyes."*

# COMPASSION

Eighteen years ago, **Christine** transitioned from teaching to becoming Vice Principal at F. H. Collins Secondary School in Whitehorse, in the Yukon Territory of Canada. One of the first things she did in her new role was to bring Challenge Day there. The effect was immediate, and it was the beginning of a new life for her community. With Challenge Day's help and through a focus on Restorative Justice, she flipped her school from one that students were running away from to one that was sought out for admission. This was especially transformative for the population it serves, 25% of whom are indigenous.

As Christine tells it, Challenge Day radically changed the way that students, teachers, and adults in the community related to each other. "We got to see each other with new eyes and thereby address and deal with our conflicts. We learned to hold ourselves and one another accountable, whether that accountability involved using our power negatively or not using it at all, shying away from challenges."

At her school in Whitehorse, a Gender/Sexuality Alliance was initiated as a result of Challenge Day. Traditionally accepted in indigenous societies as "two spirit," gender fluid and queer kids began seeking admission to F. H. Collins in large numbers. The result was an expanding network of diversity, connection, and community.

Christine perceives that people who are hurt end up hurting other people. "This means that when someone is hurting you, it's more about them than it is about you. When you get this insight, it's a game changer. The light goes on. A weight is lifted from your shoulders. It's no longer about me doing things to make me feel good about myself. Instead, you realize that you need to help others feel better about themselves. This is the effect that Challenge Day has." In her school, Christine saw popular kids and bullies alike speaking out during Challenge Day and reconnecting with those they had hurt. They personally apologized. Students realized their own, personal power to use in a positive way for themselves and for others. They realized they could stand up against injustice without fear.

The result of Challenge Day for these students, for their families and communities, and for Christine herself is a connection that goes from heart to heart. This connection replaces fear with love, judgment with curiosity, and punishment with accountability and repair. "It is an amazing experience," Christine says.

# Meeting the Needs

## Of 7,705 high school students surveyed by the CDC in 2021:

- 44% described persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness that prevented them from participating in normal activities.
- 9% reported an attempt at suicide.
- 55% reported emotional abuse from a parent or other adult in their house (up from 14% in 2013).
- 11% said they suffered physical abuse (up from 5% in 2013).
- 29% reported that a parent or other adult in home had lost a job.
- 24% reported experiencing hunger.

## According to a public advisory from the surgeon general in December 2021:

- the decline in the mental health of young people is “devastating.”
- emergency room visits for suicide attempts rose 51% for adolescent girls in early 2021 as compared to same period in 2019.
- that figure rose 4% for boys.

## In February 2022, a CDC report found that:

- emergency room visits by teenage girls relating to eating disorders had doubled during the pandemic.
- schools can be a profound mental health resource for students in providing a sense of belonging and support, called “school connectedness.”

## Surgeon General report from 2021

<https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/youth-mental-health/index.html>

## CDC report on school connectedness

[https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/protective/school\\_connectedness.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/healthyouth/protective/school_connectedness.htm)

## Rise in eating disorders in teen girls

<https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7108e2.htm>

## Over the past 20 years:

- Challenge Day has served 1.3 million youth and 337,000 adults in 49 states.

## Despite pandemic-related challenges:

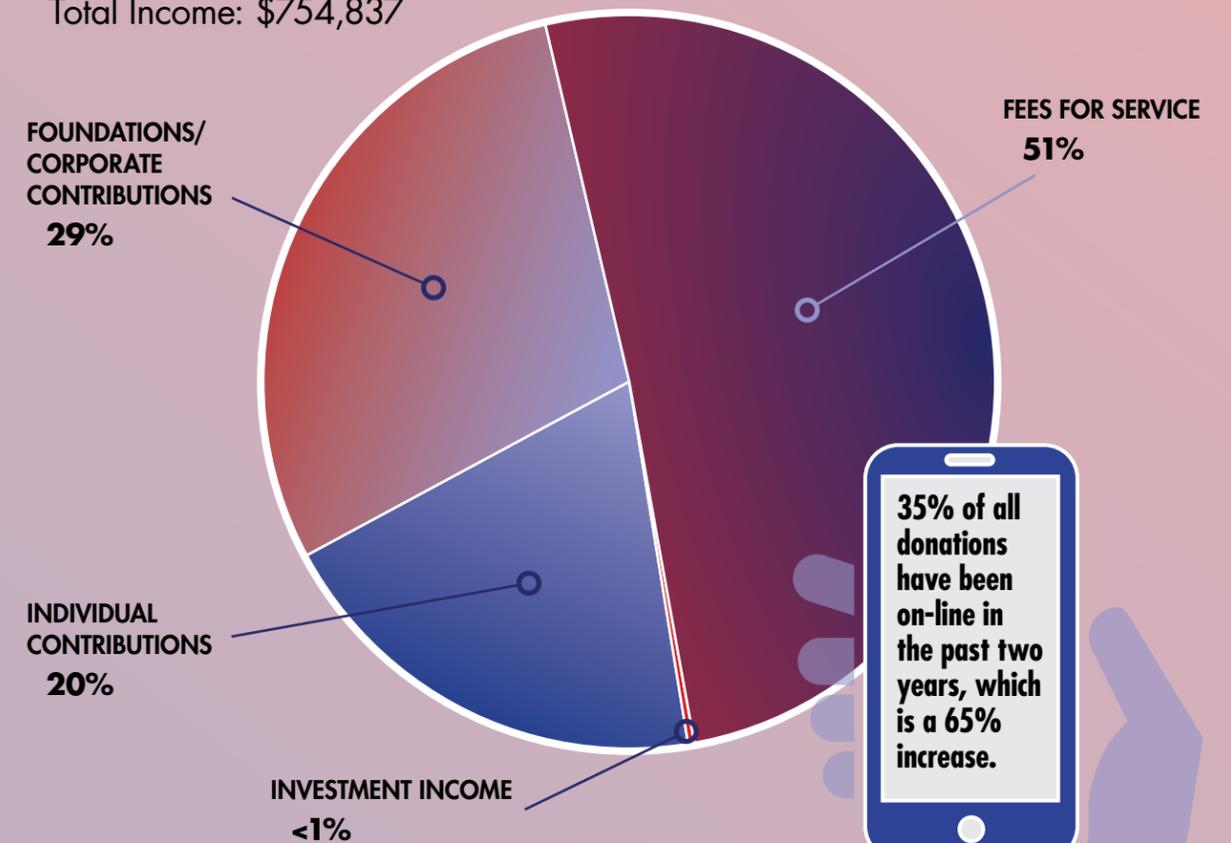
- 57,800 youth and 9,580 adults in 20 states have been served during the past two school years.
- Challenge Day is projecting a 38% increase in events held this school year over last school year.
- 56 schools requested their first-ever Challenge Day program over the past 2 years.
- More than 100 schools have already requested programs for the 2022-23 school year.
- At the request of the US Air Force, a new Adult Challenge Day program was developed and delivered to 300 airmen and women this year. In addition to the adult, in-person programs, 200 more service members participated in Virtual Self-Care Programs.

## Challenge Day's Impact:

- 65% of students surveyed felt they could better express their feelings to reduce stress and toxic behavior after participating in a Challenge Day.
- Over the course of 2022, our 7 trained program leaders are bringing a combined 57 years of Challenge Day experience to schools and classrooms.

# Funding Our Mission

Total Income: \$754,837



35% of all donations have been on-line in the past two years, which is a 65% increase.

**31 likes**  
Today was a roller coaster...in the end I made new friends, got to know people on a deeper level, and learned to better myself as a person. Thank you so much Shelley and Enrique for coming to our school and expanding our mindset!  
#ChallengeDay

**44 likes**  
If you've never had a chance to participate in @challengeday, you must! It is one of the most enlightening experiences you will ever have! Thank you to Enrique and Whitney for being amazing leaders. Thank you both for giving our students the ability to go below the waterline!  
❤️❤️❤️#ChallengeDay

**66 likes**  
Yesterday I had the honor of experiencing Challenge Day ❤️  
CD is a non-profit organization that comes to schools, communities, work places and even families for a day and facilitate interactive exercises to practice community, compassion and courage.  
I went into the day ready (yet nervous!) to focus my energy on helping students feel more connected and accepted! Well come to find out it wasn't just about the kids, it really hit us adults too.  
It was humbling and a great reminder we are all going through something or have and no one may know about, even our best friends or family. In fact, opening up to those people can be the hardest. 😊  
Challenge Day isn't an end all cure. It's an opportunity and a window to show us how things can be. It's a reminder of who we are supposed to be from the beginning.  
TRUE FREEDOM exists!!!! #ChallengeDay

**81 likes**  
The most wonderful part of my job is getting to know and work with some really incredible people, all in an effort to help kids. For the past two days, our 8th grade students staff, and community leaders came together for a full day of @challengeday. We laughed, talked, listened and cried together. It was nothing short of beautiful and it was led by two very talented individuals. Katie and Danny have amazing stories and their abilities to communicate those stories to us was powerful. So many of our kids were moved by their courage and we are very thankful for them.❤️#ChallengeDay

**99 likes**  
Of the many Challenge Days I've attended, one memory always comes first to mind. And that's Miss Whitney's vulnerability and open heart in sharing this story. It's more than obvious she speaks from the very bottom of her heart, with every intention of inspiring initiative and goodness in all else she meets. Put simply, her way of capturing an entire audience's attention is unmatched and her roll-up-your-sleeves attitude in the face of each hardship meant to test her resilience? Unparalleled. She's my Challenge Day hero. Thank you, Whitney.❤️  
#ChallengeDay

# Ana RUBIO

CHALLENGE DAY DEPUTY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FINANCE & OPERATIONS



*"A single day can shift a person's life experience."*

**Ana Rubio** has been with Challenge Day for fifteen years, occupying different roles throughout the organization. For Ana, working at Challenge Day has been more than a career. She is the mother of two children, one of whom is autistic. "A cornerstone of the Challenge Day experience is discovering resilience," Ana says. "Personally, I found it in myself through the support and tools Challenge Day provides. I have been able to be vulnerable about what autism means, which in turn has allowed me to find options and solutions for my son's needs while being able to live my life fully. I got those tools from Challenge Day."

She sees that resilience built into the very structure of the organization. "The pandemic was a huge challenge to us, but it also presented us with an opportunity to return to some of our core values. Resiliency is in part about sustainability, and over the past two years we kept moving forward. We succeeded in pivoting our programs to become online and virtual. This was no small task, but we jumped in and got it done. Along the way, we engaged in research around trauma and Social and Emotional Learning competencies. Covid actually opened doors for us to provide new options and products. It allowed the skill sets of our team to expand. It opened our eyes to different solutions—which is exactly what the Challenge Day experience does for anyone who participates in it."



As someone who has participated in Challenge Days herself, Ana gets inspired by the change she sees nascent in a single day. "Young people start unsure, every time. It's a very different atmosphere from what they're used to. You can see them saying to themselves, 'This is weird. Why am I here?' But as they go through the program you actually see the barriers falling away as they move to the next level and start voicing what they have experienced and what they are feeling at this moment." The result for Ana is that "they feel empowered. They begin to see that they are not alone and that they have support, that there are people in this world that they can reach out to." The incredible thing, says Ana, is that you get to see how "a single day can shift a person's life experience. It is transformative."

# RESILIENCE



## Anna DEROOS

OAKLAND SCHOOL FOR THE ARTS

*"It builds trust into the student-teacher relationship."*

# EMPATHY

**Anna DeRoos** currently serves as Dean of Students at Oakland School for the Arts in Oakland, California. She started at OSA as a 7th grade English and History teacher and quickly discovered that Challenge Day's reputation on the campus preceded her. "When I arrived at OSA, Challenge Day was already a legendary thing, almost a rite of passage," Anna says. "All of my students knew about it. 'It's a thing we get to do in the fall,' they told me. 'Everyone cries. It's mind-blowing!' And it was. I formed a connection with the people in my group that first year that held tight, even five years later. It's an unspoken thing between us, a recognition of each other that we gained that carried through the rest of our time together at OSA. Challenge Day is an experience that sticks with you."

When Anna took over as Dean of Students, she knew she wanted to weave Challenge Day into the very fabric of the OSA culture. "It's a way to bring a grade level together that carries over into their later life experience. We have our 7th graders do a Challenge Day, and then they get to do it again as 10th graders." The results are, for Anna, palpable. "After a Challenge Day, you literally see deeper levels of compassion, understanding, and empathy among the students. And as a teacher, you get to create an emotional connection with them that leads to more effective communication. It builds trust into the student-teacher relationship."

Challenge Day also complements the Social and Emotional Learning initiatives and programs that OSA already has in place, says Anna. "The only way to make headway with SEL is when students begin to see each other fully, when they begin to listen to and feel safe around each other. Until we realize that this person in front of me is actually really amazing, until we have an opportunity to make a connection with them, we can't improve ourselves and we can't make the place we're in a safe space. People get targeted out of ignorance and assumptions and hearsay. Rumors grow around them and become toxic over time. It's not having connection with the people around you that leads to toxicity and negative reputations. And it's dangerous to live that way. You have to connect in order to avoid it. Challenge Day provides us with an opportunity to make connections."

Anna says that she would recommend Challenge Day to other schools "absolutely and without hesitation. If I'm speaking to another administrator or teacher with problems at their school, Challenge Day is the first thing I suggest." Anna would also stress to them the benefits that come from building it into the curriculum. "You have to integrate it into a campus as something that students go through and know about. As long as people understand the intention and purpose behind Challenge Day, it will be helpful to any school. You have to build it in."

*"We're going into classrooms to promote change."*



## **Annalouisa** GONZALEZ-ORTEGA

FREEDOM HIGH SCHOOL

**Annalouisa Gonzalez-Ortega** is a Spanish teacher at Freedom High School in Oakley, California. She also serves there as World Department Language Chair and faculty advisor to Latinos Unidos. Annalouisa first experienced Challenge Day in 2005. At that time, there were issues between two Latino gangs in her school that included physical altercations and muggings. "These were old school fights. There were no weapons involved," Annalouisa recalls. "And as one of the four or five Latinx teachers at Freedom, I was asked to lead a group."

According to Annalouisa, her students were quite hesitant to join in fully during that first year. "They had their guard up. But at least they still got to experience Challenge Day and see what it was all about." The following year, however, was quite different. "It was incredibly emotional for me, personally. I had always told my students that in my class they were on neutral ground. They didn't have to like each other, but they had to respect each other. During the wrap-up at our second Challenge Day, I asked them to respect each other enough to leave each other alone. I told them that if they were going to see color then they should see brown, which is what they were, rather than the red or the blue of their gang colors. Well, at the end of my turn with the microphone, the leaders of each gang came up to me. They gave me a hug. And then they looked at each other, shook hands, and agreed to respect each other. It was very emotional."

After that, Annalouisa remembers, things definitely started improving. "It was slow at first. Some years were better than others. But by the end of 2010, things really started to improve. There was talking. There were discussions about the importance of graduating, about honor, and about how both of these things tied into a respect for one's family. We continued to work with the student leaders and helped them to see how there were systematic issues at work in their conflicts. Then new students started coming in and passed the message along. It was Challenge Day that got that ball rolling for us, and the continuing change I have witnessed in our school is in place because of Challenge Day."

Annalouisa is unstinting in her belief that Challenge Day effects change. In fact, she would recommend that schools even deepen Challenge Day's curriculum. "Schools should set up programs with student leaders to support the event after they leave. That is the key to success. Challenge Day initiates change, but change needs to be supported from within, by student leaders working in tandem with the school leadership team of principals, vice principals, and diversity coaches. The message is simple but powerful: 'Hey kids, during this period we're going to go over the Challenge Day curriculum. We're going into classrooms to promote change.'"

# CHANGE

# Richard PRINZ

MONTA VISTA HIGH SCHOOL

**Richard Prinz** serves as a therapist at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, California. Challenge Day has been visiting Monta Vista twice annually for the past thirteen years, and Richard has attended every one of the sessions. "Ours is a highly-ranked high school, and our students take academics very seriously," says Richard. "We don't have problems with absenteeism or violence. Our challenges are more around Social and Emotional Learning, how to manage the conflicts between mind and emotions that kids in academically rigorous environments experience, often in isolation."

That isolation was particularly acute during the pandemic, Richard remembers. "Last year was very hard on the kids. They were at home and isolated. Some took advantage of it, developing hobbies and spending time with their families. But it was rough for the great majority. The academics were not as vigorous, so their return to in-person learning was harder. Many of them are still wearing masks. 'We hide behind them; we feel comfortable with them,' they tell me. It's been difficult."

According to Richard, that difficulty is part and parcel of the negative stigmas that attach to mental health. And that is precisely why, for him, Challenge Day is crucial. Over the course of a decade, he has seen first-hand the environment at Monta Vista change as a result of Challenge Day's presence on campus. "One of the big things has been to witness the stigma around mental health issues erode," he says. "As a result of Challenge Day, we have been able to create in-school programs that reduce stigma. We now have a 'Random Acts of Kindness' club and a Social and Emotional Learning taskforce in place. Challenge Day was the seed that got that growing. It opened the door for us to get these additional programs in place."

For Richard, Challenge Day's strength lies in the fact that it provides social and emotional tools to leaders, high achievers, and parents alike. "It's not just for so-called problem kids," he says. "Participants learn that it's ok to acknowledge and talk about their feelings, and they see that they are not alone with their issues. They see that there's nothing wrong with them because they're sad or anxious or feeling stress. I remember one student telling me, 'Wow, I didn't realize that popular people have problems too!' Challenge Day allows you to get below the image of yourself that you present to the outside world. It awakens you to your emotional life."



*"Challenge Day awakens you to your emotional life."*



# LEARNING



## Catherine BRECHTELSBAUER

JACKSON COUNTY INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL DISTRICT

*"If you can touch one person that deeply, you're doing a good thing."*

**Catherine Brechtelsbauer** is the Director of Human Resources & Legal Services for the Jackson County Intermediate School District in Jackson, Michigan. For the past fifteen years, she has been instrumental in bringing Challenge Day to the schools and communities she serves.

Having participated in the program the first year it was held, she says that "the muscle memory is deep on Challenge Day. It stays with you. That first year, I remember a child talking about losing a parent and the accompanying loss of love he experienced. He said that the amount of love and affirmation he felt as a result of Challenge Day made school a place he now goes to for love. A place he can thrive. Another student told me that the weekend before Challenge Day, she had sat in her bedroom contemplating suicide. Her peers described her as Goth; they would laugh at her and run away whenever she showed up. After Challenge Day," Catherine says, "the same student told me she learned that 'Everyone should have twelve hugs a day. And now I'm so happy, because I have friends at school who do that—who give me twelve hugs every day.' If you can touch one person that deeply, you're doing a good thing."

Currently, Catherine and her colleagues combine up to 125 kids from two or three different schools on the same Challenge Day. This exposes them to people "outside their zone, and it allows them to see how different everyone's life is. The result is that the empathy that the Challenge Day experience creates is dramatically expanded." She has brought Challenge Day to Catholic schools, Baptist schools, and charter schools in her district. As many as seventeen schools participate each year.

The reports she gets from administrators and teachers throughout the Jackson County school district is that Challenge Day has a "mind-blowing impact in classrooms. The post-program surveys we conduct four weeks after a Challenge Day show our kids feeling much better and more empathetic toward both teachers and peers as a result."

During her tenure, Catherine has seen the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) initiatives in her county expanding from one staff person who covered all issues to a full division of the department. "Challenge Day helped to highlight the need for SEL in our schools. My experience tells me that you have to work with the whole child. That is what Challenge Day encourages us to do. And that's why I've been recommending it for fifteen years."

# INCLUSION

# Mimi SORG

WESTBROOK HIGH SCHOOL



**Mimi Sorg** has been working in education for twenty-three years, as an administrator, a special education teacher, and now as a social worker at a high school in Westbrook, Maine.

Her first Challenge Day experience occurred about fifteen years ago. A movie director from New York had shot footage in her school, and he gifted Challenge Day to it as a thank you. "I was hooked from the very first moment," Mimi recalls. "I watched miracles happening that day. And I have watched them happen every year since." She remembers a junior in high school who had been bullied throughout his school experience. "The bully himself was in the room, and he got up and said, 'I'm sorry. I've been acting like a jerk and I see that. From now on, I will be your friend, not your bully.' The next day, the victim's mother called her and said, 'Thank you. My kid has never been this happy.' It's easy to imagine," Mimi continues, "that a single day doesn't last. But I've seen it. Challenge Day programs have long-lasting effects."

According to Mimi, this is because Challenge Day creates a common language and behavioral expectations throughout the schools it visits that kids can rely upon. "Language and behavior change significantly as Challenge Day becomes entrenched in a school's culture. People talk to each other differently after they experience Challenge Day. I've heard students end conflicts at times with the simple question, 'Hey—is that Challenge day behavior?'"

For Mimi, in the post-Covid environment, Challenge Day has renewed relevance and urgency. "We're seeing kids who have suffered developmentally because they haven't had a normal school experience since 6th grade, and now they're in 9th grade. They have been hidden behind social media and gotten lost behind a screen. There's been a backslide," Mimi says. "And the feedback I'm getting from other schools is the same."

So Mimi and her colleagues decided to bring Challenge Day to Westbrook three days this spring.

"I remember two students in particular who had been deeply impacted by the lapse in schooling. They were in the principal's office all the time, and we had to be in contact with their families on too regular a basis. Since their Challenge Day experience, there has been a remarkable change in how they present themselves and how they interact with others. You can see that empathy has taken root in them. And this is not a one-off experience," Mimi continues. "Across the years I have gotten letters from parents with small financial contributions and notes saying, 'Thank you. You have changed my child's behavior.'"

Mimi believes that Challenge Day's reach can go far beyond the school building in which it starts. "I always try to get a wide range of volunteers to take part," Mimi says. "Not just school staff. I bring in firemen and policemen as volunteers each year. People that kids will have to interact with outside of school. When you broaden Challenge Day like this, it creates change in the entire community, beyond the school building. You have to have that vision. The Challenge Day vision."

Mimi believes so deeply in this vision, she is expanding it. "Our next initiative," she says, "is to build a mandatory volunteer day or two into our curriculum as part of Challenge Day. I envision our entire school going out, into the community, to serve it and one another together."

*"It creates change in the entire community, beyond the school building."*



# RELEVANCE



## Trish BRUNO

CHALLENGE DAY ADVISOR

*"I am a  
different person  
now."*

As Co-director of Facilitation and Strategy, **Trish Bruno** created and facilitated Challenge Day Programs. She was a teacher in Colorado when Challenge Day came to her school in 2013 for two days in a row. "I was transformed by the experience, as were the kids," she remembers. "I heard the facilitators expressing my own, long-held beliefs and philosophies. Challenge Day changed the culture of our school. At the end of the second day we took a moment for reflection, and I remember saying, 'I am a different person now.'"

A big piece of that change, according to Trish, was professional. "I could always make connections with the kids. I was one of those 'cool' teachers. But I realized through Challenge Day that I was always expecting them to be authentic and vulnerable with me, but I kept my own vulnerabilities to myself. I wasn't being fully authentic with them. So I made a change, and that made a profound difference to the dynamic in our classroom."

It also made a difference in Trish's life. "Notice-Choose-Act had been a slogan for me up until that point. I was living the life I thought I should live, rather than the one I wanted to live. The Challenge Day experience led me to further connections, and ultimately to a place of deep forgiveness and understanding." Two years later, while still living in Colorado, Trish applied to become a Challenge Day leader. She was accepted, along with twenty others, to audition. Thirteen of those twenty-one people were invited to undergo a 6-month training process. At that point, Trish packed her bags and moved to California. In 2015, she became one of seven people hired from that initial cohort.

Trish sees Challenge Day's strength arising in large part from the people who work there. "One of the fundamental traits of all the facilitators is that we're resilient. All of us have gone through trauma, and all of us have survived it. So we are able to help others to do the same." The key to opening that door, says Trish, is a rigorous understanding of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). "Challenge Day was always using SEL, even before it was recognized as a discipline. SEL helps participants develop core competencies in five essential areas: Social Awareness, Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision Making, and Relationship Skills. Under each competency there are further skills that Challenge Day participants develop. These lead them deeper into empathy and compassion, which is what it's all about." Trish is very clear that Challenge Day is an experience first and foremost. "Empathy and compassion are taught through experience. You need to feel them, above all else. So my job is to create and facilitate specific and strategic activities in which participants can actually and fully experience empathy."

Trish is excited about Challenge Day's current trajectory of adapting programs and infusing them with contemporary research and best practices. "We're going to be doing what we do from a stronger base as a result. The shifting and re-strategizing that Covid forced on us will result in a stronger foundation for the organization." But for Trish, the payoff still comes down to the individual lives that Challenge Day impacts. "It's subtle, but it's real. Every kid who goes through a Challenge Day has a compelling story and a vivid memory. I do as well."

# AUTHENTICITY

# Sandy WEIL

CHALLENGE DAY SUPPORTER

**Sandy Weil** and her sisters have been giving to Challenge Day since 2021. Their parents were Holocaust survivors who made it out to San Francisco and eventually opened a successful bakery. Sandy remembers this family-run business being full of different nationalities. It was warm and welcoming to others, and her parents embedded in their daughters the conviction that all people are created equal. They also used to tell them, “always start with the children. When there’s a problem, start to solve it with the children first.” That’s why her family gives to Challenge Day.

“Challenge Day is about breaking down barriers between young people,” she says. “It opens their eyes to see what other people are dealing with.” She believes so completely in the work Challenge Day does that, starting in May of 2016, she decided to begin spreading the word directly. “Hate was being fanned at a very high rate at that time, so I started walking around with a sign that said, ‘Unite to End Hate and Racism. Foster Love! Talk? Hug?’ I had a flyer with me that had a link to Challenge Day printed on it that I would give to anyone who engaged.”

For Sandy, truth is found by searching within and accessing one’s own vulnerability—and Challenge Day provides a crucial safe space where people young and old can do exactly that. “They get to see what they’ve been taught and what, as a result, they project into the world. This means they begin seeing with a bigger, more open heart. Barriers are broken down and commonalities are perceived. The result is kindness.”

Sandy admits that she was lucky. She had a very happy family that established a successful business. “But that’s the luck of the draw,” she says. “Not everyone has such luck, and problems that start in childhood snowball into adulthood. You have to start addressing them when people are young.”

Having sponsored Challenge Day in three schools in San Francisco, Sandy and her sisters believe that every middle school and every high school should have it. “It moves from the micro to the macro, from the individual student to their family, into the larger community and finally across the world. I have seen directly what young people who experience Challenge Day do with it. They bring it forward with them, to work, to college, and into the families they create. Challenge Day ripples out, creating small and large changes, even waves of change in the people it touches.”

In the wake of Covid, Sandy sees Challenge Day as essential to young people, now more than ever. Her friends who are teachers have told her that the emotional and physical unbalance they witness in children is off the charts. The isolation of the past two years made it harder to connect with fellow students, which also made it easier for social media to take over their lives. “When you can be real and share your experience with other people, it takes away the stigma and the sting. It opens your eyes and your heart. It creates kindness. That’s what my parents would have wanted to see happen in the world. That’s why I support Challenge Day.”



*“Challenge Day ripples out, creating... waves of change in the people it touches.”*



# IMPACT



## Enrique COLLAZO

CHALLENGE DAY PROGRAM FACILITATOR

*"At Challenge Day, there are big hearts doing beautiful things."*

# MINDFULNESS

**Enrique Collazo** was drawn to join Challenge Day after being introduced to the MTV show *If You Really Knew Me* by one of his Mindfulness Meditation teachers in Los Angeles over a decade ago. Enrique describes the work that he does as "soul work," work that he is meant to do and that calls for his particular gifts. He uses Challenge Day's metaphor of "Philosophy of the Heart" to describe one of his intentions while facilitating a Challenge Day: to get everyone in the room to realize that we all show up to school with a story, life experiences, struggles, and joys. "We have no idea what the person sitting next to us in class is going through, so maybe instead of passing judgment, what might make more sense is extending a little kindness." Enrique is convinced that the root solution to the pain and suffering in this world is empathy and compassion.

"I prepare my heart and mind for a Challenge Day by putting on my CD shirt with the words 'Be The Change' in giant lettering, and it feels like I'm stepping into the role of superhero. I'm being called to be my best self for the next 8 hours. And it's humbling when I fall short, when I'm not being fully inclusive or nonjudgmental or open-minded. But this reminder of my own humanity allows me to have space and patience for the people I get to work with who are learning a new skill, a new language, a new way of living. The Day and the people in the Day are my greatest teachers," says Enrique.

"Humans have a capacity to go through something really difficult and get through it. What's important is to not let the pain and struggle pass without learning from it. You have to go through it, learn from it, and use it to move on and become stronger." This "soul-centric view" is present in Challenge Day's experiential programs, in which Enrique and other facilitators provide young people with the opportunity to move through painful experiences within a community. Enrique likens the end result to a poem by Jane Hirshfield, which he quotes from memory:

More and more I have come to admire resilience.  
Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam  
returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous  
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,  
it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.  
But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,  
mitochondria, figs – all this resinous, unretractable earth.

Enrique is very excited by Challenge Day's future and the opportunities he sees on its horizon. The dream of getting a Challenge Day at every school is for him a realistic, long-term trajectory for the organization. He recognizes that "hatred, greed, and delusion will always plague us. But at Challenge Day, there are big hearts doing beautiful things." For Enrique, Challenge Day is part of a great movement by many people moving against the status quo, back to empathy and compassion.



## Victoria GAZULIS

BOARD PRESIDENT

*"The through line is hope."*

# HOPE

School was a unique experience for **Victoria Gazulis**. Her father taught at her elementary school; he transferred along with her to middle school. Her mother was a math teacher at the high school she attended in Brentwood, California. This meant that she was accompanied throughout her educational experience by her parents, and she was obliged to present herself in a certain way. She was expected to be a model student, a good reflection of her family, a varsity athlete, and an overachiever. As a result, she found herself either heavily stereotyped as a "teacher's pet" or shunned by her peers because her parents were teachers.

She first experienced Challenge Day in high school as a sophomore. It allowed her, she says, "to be seen by my classmates for the first time for who I really was. My entire class broke down barriers and forged new connections." It was an experience that she carries with her to this day, and it explains her commitment to the Challenge Day organization as Board President.

Victoria has been with Challenge Day throughout the pandemic, so she has seen firsthand the difficulties it presented. In-person Challenge Day events are by nature crowded, and they unfold without Covid protocols. "There is a lot of hugging. Hands are held. Tears are shed," she says. The pandemic hit at the very infrastructure of the program. At the same time, it increased the weight that students, teachers, and parents already carry. "Covid was the ultimate disruptor. Education became a pressure cooker. There was an exodus of teachers. People's mental and physical health suffered. Irrational decision making prompted by isolation caused a spike in crime. A sense of desperation took hold."

But these markers demonstrated for Victoria only the deeper relevancy of Challenge Day, and she believes they actually provided the organization with an opportunity to revisit its core purpose. "People need connection, especially our young people, who have been pushed and pulled by the pandemic. You see this need in the extent to which more and more kids are socializing online. TikTok became the most heavily trafficked site in the world during the pandemic, primarily because of kids trying to make contact with each other." For Victoria, this makes Challenge Day's mission to provide a place of connection, with structure and human-to-human contact, even more relevant.

Victoria believes that schools will need Challenge Day more than ever as they emerge from the pandemic. She is confident that "there will be a correction. A large group of people have lost their way, and they need a shared space to rediscover themselves and their communities. Challenge Day operates in that space of compassion. It helps people to open their souls and shed their skins."

When Victoria attended her first Challenge Day, it was a Bay Area-based organization. Now Challenge Day provides programs across the US and Canada, and local organizations in India, Belgium, and the Netherlands provide programming modeled on the Challenge Day approach. "Challenge Day was developed around school communities," Victoria says. "But it is really a construct for making a new life—for students, for teachers, for parents, for corporations, for front line workers, for police forces. The sky's the limit. Even in my darkest times, Challenge Day has guided me. The through line is hope, and that is what Challenge Day provides—to all communities."



## Anne WILSON

CHALLENGE DAY INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

*"We are able to teach resilience to the participants in our programs because we live it."*

Since joining Challenge Day in November 2021, **Anne Wilson** has immersed herself in the organization's programs while working to assist the Board and staff in the transition to finding a permanent ED before the end of 2022.

As a new member of the team, Anne brought fresh eyes and an outside perspective to the organization and the work it does. From day one, however, she witnessed the extent to which Challenge Day's practices remain grounded in internal strength. She saw first-hand that what Challenge Day does, at the most basic level, is to help people access personal resilience and use it to grow and thrive as loving, connected, courageous humans. As Anne says, "when Covid arrived, accompanied by lockdowns, school closures, masks, remote learning, and isolation, our staff was tasked with quickly pivoting from its core program approach, which is based on in-person experiences with young people in schools. Without missing a beat, they responded. They relearned what they had been taught, retrained in what they had been practicing, and recreated our essential, in-person programs as services that we could deliver virtually to students, teachers, and parents. That, right there, is an embodiment of resilience."

For Anne, resilience does not mean waiting quietly for something to change. It involves responding to challenges with agility, grace, and creativity. It calls for adaptability, meeting people where they are, addressing the full spectrum of their humanity. It means working through difficulties as they present themselves in the present moment, so that they become opportunities for growth, compassion, and connection. Anne says that "at Challenge Day, we are able to teach resilience to the participants in our programs because we live it."

Challenge Day's mission to make the world better by helping people to know that they are safe, loved and celebrated is, as Anne sees it, alive in the very structure of the organization, braided into its DNA, expressed in its ethos and daily practice. It can be no surprise to hear from her that "living and working in such an environment brings profound joy."

# AGILITY

## CELEBRATING OUR FOUNDERS



To talk with founders Yvonne and Rich about the history of Challenge Day is to take a journey across thirty-five years, one that begins with a shared conviction. “We believe everyone does the best they can, and that’s the place we meet them,” says Yvonne. It’s where Challenge Day started, and it’s what the program still seeks to draw out from people: The best you have to offer.



Yvonne grew up in Brentwood, California, and she remembers her father as a gentle but mostly absent man. She

was parented primarily by her mother, who had experienced severe child abuse. “That abuse trickled down into my own life, the way abuse does, and I turned to food to dampen the stress and the pain. I ended up with an eating disorder, which led to being insulted, almost tortured, in school. And that led me, finally, to a suicide

attempt.” Yvonne pauses over that memory, and then she smiles. “Now I see all that as preparation for what Richie and I later created.”

As a result of her own experience, Yvonne’s early work addressed eating disorders and gender stereotyping with kids in schools. She used writing programs to help groups come together, get close, and stop the hurting. “I was working with teenagers, trying to keep them out of jail and away from addictions. Then I heard about an organization in Oakland called Thunder Road, whose goals overlapped with my own. I went to visit it with a friend. I met Richie and we spent the day together at the facility. When we left, I turned to my friend and said, ‘I’m supposed to be with that man.’ The next day, he called and offered me a job.”

Rich as well remembers being bullied every day of his life until he went to high school. “I was small. I grew up in an alcoholic home. And I knew I didn’t want our kids to go through what Yvonne and I had suffered as children. We were twenty-five and twenty-seven when we met. Like many young people, we saw a world in need of saving, and we wanted to help save it. We wanted to break down walls and build bridges.”

After their first meeting, Rich and Yvonne realized they wanted to bring their work and their passions together. They both believed in treatment and healing for teenagers, and that all teenagers in some way or another needed these things. They believed that everyone should be celebrated where they are and for who they are. As Yvonne remembers it, “We were young and confident and in love, so we started writing a 12-hour program that we called ‘Challenge Day.’ Word got out, and before we knew it a school administrator called us with an emergency. ‘We need you—right now!’ he said. ‘There’s a huge, racially-motivated fight going on in our school as we speak. Fifty kids are involved.’ So Richie and I took a deep breath, walked in there, and led our first Challenge Day. This was in 1987. And it was transformative—for all of us. We saw kids who were bruised holding each other. We saw kids who were hurting forgive each other. After that day, word began to spread. We didn’t do any marketing. It just took off. Documentaries were made. We were inundated with responses and requests.”

That doesn’t mean it’s been easy. “After we became a nonprofit, we had more work than we could handle, and we were doing it all. Creating and leading the programs, modifying them to 6-hour sessions, studying the research,” Yvonne says. “At the same time, our budget was upside down, and we were in danger of folding. And then—I found out that I had congenital heart disease. I had open heart surgery and spent a year in the hospital. We went bankrupt and lost our house. It wasn’t easy.”

But resilience is at the heart of what Challenge Day does, and that applies to everyone involved. “We have to live what we teach,” says Rich. “We used to think we could save the whole world. But what it’s really about is taking the assignment in front of you, and taking that assignment—whether it’s a person or an illness or a trauma—in service and with integrity and love. That’s what it’s about.”

The memories across thirty-five years of work are thick, and they go back to the very beginning. “I still remember the first Challenge Day we did,” says Yvonne, “and watching the magic unfolding, seeing the walls come down. During that part of the program when the students become the teachers is when the miracles always start happening. There was a girl in the circle who was crying because she was relentlessly teased for ‘being fat.’ Well, the captain of the football team came up, grabbed the microphone, and walked to the other side of the circle where she was standing. The entire football team followed him. He stood there and looked here in the eyes and said, ‘I am so sorry for the years of teasing and bullying we have put you through, and I swear to you that will never happen again.’ And then he hugged her. I looked at Richie at that moment, and we both knew this would be our lives’ work. Every day we do a Challenge Day, we do it for that moment.”

“Challenge Day wasn’t given to us just to keep,” continues Rich. “Our goal is to get this out into every country of the world. After all,” Rich says, “people are people, anywhere you go. It’s about love.”

“IT’S ABOUT LOVE.”

VISION



This year, in honor of our founders' vision and in support of their legacy, we ask you to join **Challenge Day's Close the Gap Campaign**.

In 1987, founders Rich and Yvonne perceived a gap in human relationships in which people seemed increasingly cut off from one another. They knew that the key to bridging the gap was cast in building compassion, empathy, and connections.

The past two years have opened new gaps experienced most acutely by the very people for whom Challenge Day was created: our youth. The data are in. Young people are struggling. In the ongoing chaos of Covid, they are dealing with isolation, loss, grief, disconnection, family disruption, and academic setbacks. The message from schools in 2022 is the same one that Yvonne and Rich received when they set out on their very first Challenge Day: **"We need you—right now!"**



The demand for Challenge Day programs is building. Our ambition is to bring Challenge Day to more schools across the country. We want to continue to close the gap by increasing our capacity, expanding our training, and extending our reach. We invite you to join the **Close the Gap Campaign** to help us meet the need.

Please support Challenge Day as you have so generously in the past—and please consider reaching out a bit further, along with us. Here's how you can:

## ENGAGEMENT

### 35<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary Giving Circles

Founders' Circle .....	10K and Greater
Advocate .....	5K to \$9999
Supporter.....	1K to \$4999
Friend .....	\$5 to \$ 999

### CLOSE the GAP - Impact of your extraordinary philanthropy to celebrate 35 years will include:

#### Enhancing curriculum development and research to meet current conditions

- Social isolation of students and faculty
- Trauma laid bare by quarantines and school closures
- Addressing current cultural and social climate

#### Supporting additional staff capacity

- Market demand from schools exceeds current staffing capacity

#### Investing in professional development

- Staff training and support for continuous learning

#### Investing in operational excellence

- Technology and equipment upgrades for efficiency and impact

# COMMUNITY

**RESILIENCE**  
**CONNECTION**  
**HOPES**  
**RELEVANCE**  
**LEARNING**



Visit our website for more information:  
[www.challengeday.org](http://www.challengeday.org)



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