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Hotelier Rosen restores hope to kids in Tangelo Park

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"There is something that I can't prove statistically, but which I know in my heart of hearts: You take the most affluent neighborhood, the biggest gates . . . and you take a disadvantaged neighborhood like Tangelo Park. My feeling is that both neighborhoods are equal when it comes to the number of youngsters who have the intelligence, the intellect, the mental alacrity to go on to college. Equal. Only these kids will be given the chance, and these kids will not be given the chance."

Hotelier Harris Rosen pulled up to the drive-through pharmacy at Walgreens to pick up a prescription.

"Are you Mr. Rosen?" the young man in the window asked, looking at the name on the bag and the silver-haired man behind the wheel. "Tangelo Park Mr. Rosen?"

Yes, Rosen said. You've got the right guy.

"I just really want to thank you for everything."

The young man was Terrence Carson. As a teenager, he had lived in Tangelo Park, a once downtrodden Orange County neighborhood known at the time as a haven for crack dealers.

Now a Walgreens manager, Carson had gone to college on a scholarship paid for by the man whose prescription he was ringing up in Orlando during that chance encounter a few years ago.

"Just one incident like that makes everything worthwhile," said Rosen, 69.

Nearly 15 years ago, Rosen, one of Orlando's most influential businessmen, launched an ambitious program to pay for preschool and college for all children who lived "in the park." It is a community of modest block homes off Sand Lake Road, not far from the tourist strip where Rosen built his fortune in the hotel business.

Carson was a senior at Dr. Phillips High School then. His father worked in a warehouse and worried about paying for college. With his Rosen scholarship, Carson's education at Florida A&M University was free.

"This guy didn't know our community from a can of paint," said Carson, who still works for Walgreens and lives outside Atlanta. But he changed a place "that didn't have that ray of hope."

Rosen's charitable foundation has invested more than \$7.3 million in the Tangelo Park Program since it started in 1994, paying for college, supporting pre-kindergarten at the local elementary school, running eight small preschools and injecting something critically important.

"Hope is what's missing in these disadvantaged neighborhoods," he said.

Rosen's program has paid the college costs of more than 300 Tangelo Park youngsters. And nearly 370 students have attended the program's at-home preschools for free so far.

About 700 Tangelo students -- from preschool through high school -- are in the pipeline now.

Thanks to the program, Tangelo's high-school-graduation rate is close to 100 percent and college-graduation rates have increased significantly, said Chuck Dziuban, director of the Research Initiative for Teaching Effectiveness at the University of Central Florida.

The earning potential of Tangelo students is up and the neighborhood's crime rate is down, added Dziuban, who has been studying the program and is a member of the Tangelo Park Advisory Board that governs the project.

Andy Plaza, a Tangelo homeowner and father of three, sees the change in more homes with well-kept yards, a well-regarded elementary school and his sense of safety.

"It's really an amazing story when you really sit down and think about the program," Plaza said.

Pointed toward cause

Known for his philanthropy, Rosen also is a maverick who has battled the region's political establishment over issues such as how to use tourist taxes.

He created the Tangelo Park program because he wanted to focus more on what he calls "responsible capitalism" after years of success as president of Rosen Hotels & Resorts. And he believed strongly that education levels the playing field.

Community leaders steered him to Tangelo Park, less than two miles from his hotel office on International Drive but seemingly a world away from its lights and glitz. Local educators and residents were asked to help create the program and then serve on its board. Rosen does, too, and has rarely missed a monthly meeting.

"There is something that I can't prove statistically," Rosen said, "but which I know in my heart of hearts: You take the most affluent neighborhood, the biggest gates . . . and you take a disadvantaged neighborhood like Tangelo Park.

"My feeling is that both neighborhoods are equal when it comes to the number of youngsters who have the intelligence, the intellect, the mental alacrity to go on to college. Equal. Only these kids will be given the chance, and these kids will not be given the chance . . .

"Every ounce of hope will be drained from these kids until they believe there is just no future for them whatsoever."

He regrets only that he hasn't convinced other wealthy Central Floridians to follow his lead. He had hoped Tangelo would be replicated in other areas.

"I don't think there's enough of a concern on the part of many in the United States for our disadvantaged neighborhoods," he said. "I think the vast majority of people believe if you kind of turn your back and don't look, it will evaporate. It doesn't."

Tangelo Park, now a community of about 2,400 people, was founded in 1957 as a home for workers at what was the Martin Marietta defense plant. The collection of about 800 one-story houses suffered its first setback when the plant laid off thousands of workers in the late 1960s; banks foreclosed on many homes. In the late 1980s, crack dealers made the neighborhood a drug market. By the time Rosen stepped in, it was a place where some residents refused to let their children go outside.

A great day

One day in the spring of 1994, JuaNita Reed, a guidance counselor at Dr. Phillips High -- where all the Tangelo Park teenagers go -- called the neighborhood students to her office. Reed, who lives in Tangelo, told them college would be free.

They were ecstatic.

"You've got to be kidding, Ms. Reed. You've got to be kidding." Then their parents started calling her. "They wanted to know why or who?" she said.

Daniel Harris, now an attorney in Orlando, was an 11th-grader then. The program financed his undergraduate education at Florida State University. Not all his classmates could benefit from Rosen's offer, however. Some were too far behind or too uninterested by then.

The focus on early-childhood education, Harris said, was key.

"The kids there need a building block," he added.

When the program started, Tangelo students had low test scores, school-attendance figures and graduation rates. Tangelo Park Elementary got a D on the state's first school report card in 1999.

As the preschool program took hold, things changed.

"It's made a huge difference," said Patti Jo Houle, the teacher who oversees the preschools. "When you talk to the kindergarten teachers, they will tell you these kids are prepared. They're more socially prepared and more academically prepared."

In 2004, Tangelo Park Elementary -- where about 80 percent of the students qualify for the federal school-lunch program -- earned its first of three A's. This year, 81 percent of its students scored at or above grade level on Florida's reading test, beating the state average. It's an A again.

"We're very, very proud of what this program has done for the entire community," said Bob Allen, retired principal of Tangelo Park Elementary and the program board's chairman.

"Nobody thought Tangelo Park would ever be an A school."

Ivy League praise

Cornell University's president called the program proof that public service can have "brehtaking and inspirational" results, in his speech at May graduation ceremonies in upstate New York. Rosen, a 1961 Cornell graduate, pursued his professional goals but also found ways "to lighten the burdens of the world," said David Skorton, Cornell's president.

The program gave students opportunity and the neighborhood some pride, said Rachel Jones-Manuel, who attended college on a Tangelo scholarship and is now director of operations at a payroll company.

"I used to be embarrassed to say I live in Tangelo Park. I don't think that exists as much as it used to," she said.

At Dr. Phillips, 16-year-old Donae Fourth sometimes still hears cracks about Tangelo. But she takes advanced courses, sings in the choir, plays violin in the orchestra and knows plenty of her Tangelo classmates are also good students. She's convinced that each time the program sends one of them off to college, the neighborhood's reputation improves.

"I think it's been great for Tangelo Park," she said.

The program's real success might be that it helps youngsters see possibilities beyond the park, said Shana Horne, who grew up in Tangelo and received a Rosen scholarship. She is a guidance counselor at Olympia High.

"I think it's just hopeful," Horne said. "It makes the picture bigger."

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