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The Next Economy

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AMERICA'S RENEWAL:

BOUNCING BACK, BUILDING ANEW

THE MOST INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS

FROM VERMONT TO LAS VEGAS AND POINTS IN BETWEEN

INTRODUCTION BY RONALD BROWNSTEIN

INTRODUCTION

At the Grassroots, a Self-Renewal

Big government and big business haven't acted to fix the nation's problems. So ordinary Americans are stepping in. BY RONALD BROWNSTEIN

The magazine you are holding is an antidote to the fear that the United States no longer can solve its toughest problems.

Watching the systemic stalemate between the parties in Washington, or the cresting vitriol on the presidential campaign trail, it's easy to reach that despairing conclusion. Despite a few bipartisan breakthroughs late last year (particularly on education and highway funding), and other instances during the past two decades when one party has temporarily accumulated enough political power to impose its agenda on the other (George W. Bush's tax cuts in 2001, Barack Obama's health-care law in 2010), Washington since the mid-1990s has been defined mostly by its *inability* to act. Restoring solvency to the federal budget? Overhauling immigration laws? Devising a sustainable strategy for balancing energy and environmental needs? On issue after issue, our political leaders have proven unable, or unwilling, to mediate our differences. Too often, as a society, we have viewed deadlock and drift as an easier alternative than compromise and action.

The private sector hasn't inspired much more confidence among average Americans. While many iconic U.S. companies continue to formulate innovations that inspire the world, collectively they are no longer producing the expanding employment opportunities or rising living standards for American workers that were common in the first decades after World War II.

These failings at the pinnacle of business and government have convinced many, both at home and abroad, that America has lost its capacity for self-renewal. That's an understandable verdict. But it's wrong. Pull back the lens from the treetops of American society to the grassroots, and the picture looks very different.

The national stalemate has dominated attention, but (as I've written before) the United States today is experiencing a golden age of local initiative. Frustrated by the inaction nationally, inspired by an ethos of direct action, and using the new network-friendly means of communication, Americans at the grass roots—in the biggest cities and the smallest towns—are devising innovative answers to society's challenges.

Across America, nonprofit organizations, small businesses, local governments, tech-enabled start-ups, and partnerships and permutations of all of the above are engaging the toughest problems—from expanding opportunity for low-income children to stabilizing neighborhoods. For more than a year, *The Atlantic* and *National Journal*, with the support of Allstate, have sought out the most dynamic and effective of these local innovators. This week, we are proud to present the very best of these civic entrepreneurs with the first annual Renewal Awards. You will meet these outstanding programs in the pages that follow.

To identify our Renewal Award winners, *The Atlantic* and *National Journal* searched hard and long, with the help of a distinguished panel of judges and extensive public input. Approximately 160 potential nominees were identified through profiles by *Atlantic* and *National Journal* journalists. (You can find most of these profiles at **http://www.nationaljournal.com/next-economy/solutions-bank?mref=landing-title.**) We met others during lunches with local leaders in cities around the country. Another 70 were nominated by the public.

A team of *National Journal* and *Atlantic* editors sorted through the nominees and picked 25 finalists. The five Renewal Award winners were selected from among the finalists by a combination of public online voting and ratings from judges who were asked to consider four criteria—the program's impact, its potential to grow, the ease of replicating it elsewhere, and the national importance of the need it addresses. The judges were: Wellington E. Webb, the former Denver mayor; Manuel Pastor, director of the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity at the University of Southern California; Ellen Alberding, president of the Joyce Foundation in Chicago; Amy Liu, director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at the Brookings Institution; Juliet Stipeche, the outgoing assistant secretary of the Houston Independent School Board; Eric Liu, founder of Citizen University, a Seattle-based group that promotes civic participation, and director of the Aspen Institute's Citizenship and American Identity Program; Raul Vazquez, chief executive officer of Oportun, an organization that expands Hispanics' access to credit; Bruce Reed, former chief domestic policy adviser to President Clinton; Jan Epstein, executive director of the Allstate Foundation; and myself.

Allstate then chose a sixth winner from among the remaining finalists, to receive a Youth Empowerment award. Each of the six winners will receive a $10,000 grant from the Allstate Foundation and will also appear at a "national summit on local innovation" that *The Atlantic* and *National Journal* are convening in Iowa this week.

As the profiles in these pages show, the programs that emerged as the winners from this search differ in their focus, structure, and strategy. But they share a powerful commitment to direct, locally guided, and creative action on problems that an earlier generation of Americans might have waited for a bigger institution—the federal government, say, or a global company—to address.

I have described the resurgence of grassroots initiative across America as an impulse that does not yet know it is a movement. With these awards, we hope to recognize—and nurture—this movement. We will show how far it has already spread—how many innovators are already working to renew whichever place they call home. ■

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COVER PHOTO: CHET SUSSLIN/NATIONAL JOURNAL

building of a failing school in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, which has a history of high crime and racial tension.

P-Tech revolutionizes the structure of high school by encouraging students to attend the school for grades 9 through … 14. This essentially extends high school into the early years of college. Over those six years, the goal is for students to complete both a high school diploma and an associate's degree. Graduates can either enter the workforce equipped with a postsecondary degree—no tuition, so no student debt—or continue on to a traditional college with a bevy of class credits in hand.

Stan Litow is IBM's vice president of corporate citizenship and corporate affairs—and a former deputy chancellor of New York City public schools—who was intimately involved with the founding of P-Tech. "The idea of getting into the workforce with just a high school diploma is an idea from the past," he says now. "We needed to come up with a new model."

The one in Brooklyn involves an intensive partnership with a big business. IBM helped design the school and continues to provide P-Tech students with mentors, internships, a dedicated staff person, and countless hours of pro bono work—an investment that Litow figures is worth $1 million to $2 million a year. All P-Tech graduates are first in line for available jobs at IBM that fit their skill level.

The most intriguing part of the P-Tech experiment is its focus on disadvantaged teenagers who don't usually get college-level training in science and math. No entrance exam is required, as it is for the Bronx High School of Science and New York's other elite public schools. Fully 95 percent of the students are African American or Hispanics, and 80 percent are poor enough to qualify for subsidized school lunches; nearly three-quarters are male. The majority of them would be the first in their families to attend college.

"If you look at who is getting the 21st-century jobs, they are not children of color from low-income neighborhoods," Litow says. In 1970, only 6 percent of the poor held a college degree, a figure that has barely budged in the decades since. (It's now at 9 percent.) "If you don't get at the core issue of education and skills," he warns, "then you will not solve this problem."

The acclaim P-Tech has drawn as a model of innovation for high schools in poor neighborhoods, as well as a way to make college easier to afford, earned a visit from President Obama in 2013. The P-Tech model has expanded to 40 other schools in New York, Connecticut, and Illinois, with numerous business partners, including Cisco Systems, Motorola, and Verizon.

P-Tech's strategy is to overhaul the traditional public high school experience, in everything from the calendar to the role of mentors in students' lives. The flow of the school day—and year—looks different. Groggy teenagers start the day (when, research shows, their brains are still waking up) with physical education classes, and they wait until 9:20 or so for academics. The school day lasts until 4:06 p.m. Summer vacation is limited to two weeks in August. During students' first year, in ninth grade, they take no courses in science or history, giving them more time to work on reading and math—to "bring them to a higher level," says Rashid Davis, P-Tech's principal.

The mentors, culled from all corners of IBM, are important. They commit to checking in with their student for 30 minutes every week, either online or in person, and they offer advice on everything from coursework to how to behave as an intern. Saddler had an internship at IBM Global Insurance, researching the insurance industry.

By far, the biggest benefit to attending P-Tech is the associate's degree that every graduate earns, either in computer science or in engineering. This emphasis on attending college-level classes, sometimes on a community-college campus, begins in ninth grade. "The decision to enter P-Tech is the decision to choose college," says an IBM guide to developing technology-centric schools such as P-Tech.

Earning an associate's degree along with a high school diploma makes college more affordable. P-Tech students pay nothing, not even for books, for "the opportunity to complete a postsecondary credential," Davis says. "I see students trying as hard as they can in spite of all of their circumstances."

Many of the students from the school's inaugural class are expected to graduate by June 2017, six years after the program started. Six of them, including Saddler, have finished two years early. Three of those have taken jobs at IBM; the others attend college.

Saddler chose a job as an associate analyst in market research at IBM because "I want to own my own company," he explains. His father is a manager at a construction company, and his mother is working toward a nursing degree; the family moved from Jamaica when Radcliffe, the eldest of three sons, was 6 years old. "Having this business experience is amazing," he adds. "What other 18-year-old could say, 'I worked at a *Fortune* 500 company right out of high school'?"

But Saddler hasn't given up on further education. With an associate's degree in hand, he plans to attend college on a part-time basis starting this spring.

ALLSTATE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AWARD

GIRLS ♥ SCIENCE

BY SHARON JAYSON

AUSTIN—Its rooms explode with pink and purple, with teal and green, marking this spot as clearly a girl space. But in this technocentric city, the nonprofit Girlstart is focused on a formula to shift gender stereotypes and to create new mind-sets that can ripple through the U.S. economy.

Girlstart is all about inspiring girls in elementary and middle school to flaunt their smarts and to encourage them to consider science, technology, engineering, and math (known as STEM) for their futures. "Just because we view science as informal and personal, it is real science," says Tamara Hudgins, Girlstart's executive director. "Pink is not incompatible with doing real science."

"Every activity we do is leading to a career," she adds, hopeful that the next generation of aerospace engineers, video-game designers, astronomers, or geologists may well take root at Girlstart.

At a time when STEM education and the need for workers in those burgeoning fields has become a national priority, data show that women are seriously underrepresented. Although women fill almost half of all American jobs, they account for less than a quarter of the STEM workforce, according to a 2011 Commerce Department report. They earn "a disproportionately low share" of undergraduate degrees, particularly in engineering, the report found. Even when they hold a tech-relevant degree, women are more likely than men to veer away from STEM careers and to go into education or health care instead.

Girlstart was founded in 1997 by Rachel Muir, an Austin native. "I started it when I was 26 years old, in the living room of my apartment, with $500 and a credit card," she says. She had been "really discouraged" in math and science growing up and felt that her "poor performance" in those subjects had far-reaching effects. She gave up her childhood dream of becoming a veterinarian because it required science and math, and she got kicked out of the University of Texas (Austin) business school because of a D in business calculus. "I was forced to change my major," she says, "and I changed to liberal arts." She feared that other girls were equally unprepared to pursue lucrative science-related careers. In the late 1990s, Muir says, Austin's booming high-tech industry recruited employees right out of high school, and "girls were definitely left out of the equation."

Girlstart offers a year-round menu of after-school programs, summer camps, conferences, and community events. The program is already entrenched in central Texas and across the state—in the Rio

Tech-minded preteens: Girlstart participants (from left) Sheyenne Williams, Aribella Peters, and Faith Collier, with the program's director, Tamara Hudgins, at the Tobias Elementary School in Kyle, Texas

PHOTO: JOEL SALCIDO

Grande Valley, the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, and around Houston and San Antonio. Its participants are diverse: 58 percent are Latina, 70 percent qualify for subsidized school lunches, and 42 percent would be the first in their families to attend college. Girlstart's summer camps have been offered in six other states, including California. Altogether, the program has reached almost 50,000 girls from coast to coast.

Girlstart's after-school clubs are for fourth- through sixth-graders, who meet once a week for the sort of hands-on collaboration they might encounter in the real world of work. Through activities aligned with the state's science curriculum, girls spend about an hour conducting experiments to explore a concept—friction, say, or density—and hearing about related careers. They've used Oreos to learn about phases of the moon and cleaned a feather covered in oil to understand how oil spills harm wildlife.

The program teaches more than the substance of science; it can also be a confidence-builder. Fifth-grader Sheyenne Williams, 11, is in her second year of Girlstart's after-school program at Tobias Elementary School in Kyle, a half-hour's drive south of Austin. "Before I came into Girlstart, I was a lot more shy—out in general, with my parents, or in class," she says. "This has helped me a lot."

The local weeklong summer camps take place at Girlstart's headquarters in North Austin. The 7,900-square-foot one-time nursing home has beanbag seats and a bedazzled decor. Campers have dissected sheep hearts, produced animated commercials, created video games and apps, and engineered robots and bumper cars. Community activities include astronomy shows at the on-site mini-planetarium and free events on topics such as the weather or "spooky" science.

Carly May, now 19, attended Girlstart's camp for three summers and later worked there and at the after-school programs. "Girlstart gets you right at the perfect age when it is still cool to like math and science," she says. "Then you start hearing those words: 'You're a nerd. You're a geek.' ... We stay away from using those words at Girlstart." A sophomore at UT-Austin, she is majoring in aerospace engineering.

Rob Dyer is the principal of an elementary school in Georgetown, north of Austin, that offers Girlstart After School. He is also the father of three daughters, ages 6 to 13. "As a dad, I want my daughters to have every opportunity that they can," he says. "My wife is a CPA—an accountant—a math person. We've worked really hard to encourage our girls to study math and get involved in science. We're pretty big on girl power in our family."

Girlstart's activities require technology at the girls' fingertips, often courtesy of the companies that may someday reap the rewards of these efforts to inspire. Girlstart's financial supporters include locally based Dell, Samsung, Austin Semiconductor, and Silicon Laboratories, as well as Google, Intel, and Oracle, offering an array of grants, contributions, in-kind donations, and volunteer time. Nearly $900,000 in corporate and foundation funds and more than $40,000 worth of donated technology contributed to Girlstart's 2015 budget of almost $1.3 million. During the 2014-2015 school year, Girlstart's expenditures amounted to $10.34 per girl per hour, according to Hudgins—"cheap, given the cost of a generalist babysitter," she says. "And that doesn't have anything to do with the content quality."

The number of Girlstart's after-school programs has leapt from four in 2009, when Hudgins became its leader, to 54 in 2015, serving about 1,400 girls. "We are ready to be everywhere in America right now," Hudgins says. "The biggest obstacle is finding people who have resources who can help us flip that switch." She looks forward in 2017 to replicating Girlstart's three-pronged approach—after-school programs, summer camps, and community outreach—in Silicon Valley and other locales boasting "a stable base of philanthropy" along with corporations and communities that value tech-focused education.

"Girlstart has shown excellent outcomes in what they're trying to achieve and accomplish," says Anita Krishnamurthi, vice president for STEM at the Afterschool Alliance, an advocacy group in Washington. Girlstart's own study found that 23 percent more of its Austin district participants passed the statewide science test in fifth grade than girls who didn't participate—or boys—and 15 percent more passed the math test. No independent analyses have been done, however.

"There's plenty of room for Girlstart to go national," Krishnamurthi says, although it isn't the only program that could be scaled up. The Afterschool Alliance has also cited the Science Club for Girls in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Techbridge, in the San Francisco Bay area, for their programs geared to girls. Girl Scouts and Girls Inc., too, have programs that focus on science-related education. "They all have different models," Krishnamurthi says, but "what they all have in common is a desire to reach girls with engaging programming."

Hudgins's efforts in Austin haven't gone unrecognized. Last March, she was inducted into the SXSW Interactive Hall of Fame, which recognizes trendsetters in the digital industries. In September, the White House named Girlstart as one of the nation's "Bright Spots," as part of an initiative to support Latino educational attainment.

For the 45-year-old Hudgins, this passion for girls and science is a way to reconcile her past. Engineers run in her family, but only among the men. Hudgins says she couldn't visualize herself as an engineer, so she majored in art history and went on to earn a PhD. "I should have been a mechanical engineer," she says. "I kick myself every other day for not getting into mechanical engineering, because I would have been good at it." ■