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Urban
Prep
Academies'

**Tim
King:**
He
Believes



Tim King: Inside The Pride

Tim King, founder and CEO of Urban Prep Academies, is flying high, and for good reason. Proof of King's good works—and a strong argument for the unisex charter school model—has manifested: All 107 Urban Prep Academy students were accepted into four-year colleges and universities.

Naysayers, bow down.

Urban Prep Academies, founded in 2002, is a 501(c)3 tax-deductible charity organization that operates a network of public charter schools, the Englewood campus (grades 9-12); the East Garfield Park campus (9th graders, to add a new grade level each year) and, opening this fall, the South Shore campus, that will also start with 9th graders.

Urban Prep's total 2009 revenue was more than \$5.3 million, up from nearly \$3.8 million in 2008. Its largest source of funding is the Illinois State Board of Education, which funds all charter schools in the state on a per-pupil basis, but Urban Prep also relies heavily on private donors, such as the Oprah Winfrey Foundation which donated \$250,000 to support Urban Prep's programs last year.

The school day is from 8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.; the students, clad in their crisp suit jackets and ties, take four years of math, social studies, and science; three years of foreign languages, and a daily double period of English. Summer opportunities, and even post-graduate support is available for students.

The Urban Prep motto is "We Believe." As the website states: *"Our motto is a constant reminder that Urban Prep students will not fall into the trap of stereotypes and low expectations."*

All Urban Prep students are selected via an open lottery; scores, grades, special needs and family histories are unknown, at the time of acceptance.

Tim King: Father Figure

By divine or design, Tim King was groomed to be an educator—and in the thick of it, he determined to become a father figure.

"It's tough to be what you don't see, and one of the biggest challenges that many urban youth—African American boys who live in tough neighborhoods—face is the lack of positive role models. They don't have people they can see, communicate with, and relate to, that have done things that are positive."

He adds, "If you look at Urban Prep, more than 85 percent of our students come from single parent households, and almost all, I mean 99 percent of them, are female-headed. They're very typical, like the typical boys in the hood. And they have other role models, that are people who have succeeded at sports, or performing, but it is a very narrow view of success and that needs to be broadened."

Therein lies the secret to the success of the Urban Prep students, having tangible, positive, male role models, King says. (On that note, every Urban Prep student is a part of a small, teacher-led group, or Pride, that meets daily to provide peer mentoring and support).

"We're cognizant of that [lack of role models] at Urban Prep and the number of African American men working at the school, teaching at the school, and coming in mentoring the guys does make a difference."

King is also cognizant that many of the students were taught in the fabled *School of Hard Knocks* long before arriving at Urban Prep. Old habits die hard, and safety is a major concern. The Urban Prep Academies employees have school issued cell phones and the students and parents have those cell phone numbers—and they use them.

"It's a positive school culture that we've created, and one component of that school culture is this notion of relationships and providing these really positive and supportive relationships between our students and the adults in the building, and that's what the cell phone does. It's just another way to mint that bond."

Parents use the phones as well, as in the mother who called because her teen son didn't take out the garbage as she had instructed. "We do become surrogate parents in many ways," King laughs.

"My sense is that the people in these neighborhoods are really proud of our guys. It's not uncommon for me to get a call or an e-mail that says, 'I saw one of your students on the bus with his jacket and tie on and he just made me so proud.' So I think that we do have a great deal of community support and enthusiasm for what we are accomplishing at that school. However, there's a flip side to that, and sometimes that means our students are targets. And there are some negative forces in the neighborhoods and the communities.

Security is posted inside and around the buildings to make certain students get to and from school safely. Students are taught to be responsible. "We understand that the person most responsible for your safety and security is you, so we tell our students that you need to do the smart thing, and when we tell you to walk this way from the school to the bus, walk this way, don't go behind the school or take a short cut."

King grew up in a two-parent home in the posh community of Pill Hill. "I went to private schools my whole life...my mother is an educator and my father is in the construction business." And he knew early on that an Ivy League education was in his future. "My aunt and uncle went to Yale, I remember going to my uncle's graduation when I was in third grade, so I was going to go to Yale. As I got older, I said Yale, or maybe Georgetown, because my brother went to Georgetown. I always knew I was going to go to law school and that I was going to practice law and go into politics."

King's original life plan also included entrepreneurship, but never education. "Never, ever, did it pop into my head that I would be an educator or that this entrepreneurial spirit or desire that I have was going to lead me in the direction of *not* starting the next Google, but lead me in the direction of a nonprofit organization that was going to operate schools." He pauses, "I *did* always think that somehow, in my life, I would try to serve others and make the world a better place."

Tim King graduated from Georgetown University and attended Georgetown Law. While in law school, a former professor asked him to teach history in D.C.'s Archbishop Carroll High School and King agreed.

"Carroll was about 90 percent African American, and they were solidly middle class, they weren't poor kids," King recalls. "I was teaching juniors and seniors and I was just getting out of college myself. I related to them the way a big brother would relate to someone. At the end of every day I felt really fulfilled, like I had made a difference and that's a great feeling."

King completed his law studies and remained at Carroll with his teaching role now expanded to fundraiser and college counselor. "Since I came from a background where college was a given and the road to college was already laid out, being at Carroll was my first

exposure, the first time that I really realized that everyone did *not* have that path set out for them."

He adds, "It was great to be a college counselor and to be able to help these students get into great schools that they may not have gone to, had it not been for my participation in their lives."

After serving four years at Carroll, Chicago was calling him back. King had every intention to practice law, until a phone call from Hales Franciscan High School led to a lunch with members of the board.

With King's teaching credits, law degree and fundraising skills, that lunch meeting led to a new position: the president of Hales Franciscan.

King was only 28-years-old. He jokes, "little did I realize that the reason they offered me the job was that no one else was crazy enough to take it."

King says his five-year tenure at Hales really opened his eyes. "If Carroll was my first exposure to students who needed some help and guidance on trying to navigate the path to college, Hales gave me my first experience and exposure to students who had greater economic challenges and therefore needed more assistance socially and emotionally," he states.

"They weren't all coming from really stable families and backgrounds like I had been fortunate enough to come from. I really had to figure out how we at the school could fill those gaps, and while I was at Hales I ended up becoming the guardian of one of the students there."

FATHERHOOD

It was a hard knock life for Keith Robbins, the Hales student had lost his mother and the surviving family members didn't want the added responsibility of rearing him. At his mother's funeral, King recalls, the teen was sitting alone.

"Keith said to me, 'where am I going to live?' and I said, 'well, we're going to have to work something out.' And Keith said, 'why can't I live with you?' And I didn't have an answer. And I said, 'there's no reason you can't, you're absolutely right.' And so I took him in and raised him, he was 15. I consider him to be my son, and he considers me to be his father."

Tim King's tenure was successful, but he wanted to do more. "We were having success at Hales, but I knew we weren't serving the toughest of the tough and the most under-educated or the highest need students, and yet those are the students, when you look at all the data points, who were suffering the greatest. They have the highest dropout rate in Chicago, over 60 percent of black boys will drop out of high school.

In 2002, I left Hales and decided to pursue this notion of a public, all-boys school. A lot of it had to do with my experience at Hales; my belief was that families who want this kind of education, who want to put their sons in an all-boys school and want to have a college prep program, in a nurturing safe environment, should have that option and it shouldn't cost them any money to do it."

He Believes.

Today, Tim King, Founder and CEO of Urban Prep Academies, is applauded on the national stage for his efforts with Urban Prep Academies, and his halo is blazing bright—right in the face of all that

is wrong—or appears to be—with the Chicago Public Schools system. To some CPS defenders, charter schools are undercutting the union membership and siphoning funds from the state's education budget. And the charter school model is hurting the very fabric of public education.



But King's mind isn't on that—it's the everyday miracles developing right before his eyes that command his attention now.

And it shows in his glow.

Even at 42, Tim can't shake the fresh-faced golden boy exterior. To many, he's a Godsend, delivered to educate and enrich fine young men who would otherwise be lost to the system.

What system? Choose one: The system of the underground economy, where bullets and blood drops pave the road to quick riches and, more likely, a quick and final exit; or the penal system, where some young black men cross paths with father figures who snuff out innocence and aspiration, all in the name of creating the ultimate hardened criminal in their own likeness.

Or, perhaps, the system that completely failed King's own son, Keith. "He was in a single-parent household, and his mother died, and the system really failed him," King recalls. "Believe it or not, I never got a single call from DCFS, or any government agency or entity regarding this student. So if I had not entered into Keith's life, he would just be on the street, falling through the cracks."

But he's not.

Today, Keith Robbins has finished Georgetown. "And he now works at Urban Prep," King says. "So it makes me proud that he wanted to come back and give back and be a positive influence on others."

There's just a moment of silence as King appreciates the fruits of his labor.

"My life has been full of surprises. I'm 42, and I'm at an age where I get to see the people who I taught, as adults. Many of them work at Urban Prep, many have families of their own and that's great to see. Most people don't get to see that their work has resulted in someone else's life being better, or someone else reaching their dreams."

And by their fruits, you shall know them.

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