

# THE Grit Factor

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It was my Junior year of high school, the Brown Invitational cross-country meet. I was never the fastest runner--usually number 7 or 8--so I straddled the JV and Varsity team. This time, the coach put me in the JV race, counting on me to place. The pressure was on. In the first quarter mile loop of these races, hundreds of runners are jam-packed together. At the start, one of them stepped on the back of my sneaker—and off it went. I was out in front, where I wanted to be, had to be. If I stopped for my shoe, I would fall back in the pack. So, I just kept running without it.

The path, rutted with rocks and roots, was brutal. My thin sock offered little padding or protection. When my coach spotted me, he didn't look hopeful, but hollered encouragement anyway. I kept running. Soon, everyone I passed was pointing at me, shouting something about the shoeless runner. It could have been humiliating. I found it *motivating*. *Exhilarating*. I ran the entire 3.1-mile course with a lopsided gait—and placed! My coach said I had true grit.

True grit. It's part of our everyday language. There's probably a thousand words to describe it. Passion. Resolve. Tenacity. Determination. Perseverance. Resilience. But it's much more than a bunch of adjectives. It's a mindset. People with grit set goals and stick to them. They embrace challenges, overcome setbacks, and rise from failures. When the going gets tough, grit keeps them going. People with grit know they can take care of themselves, make something of themselves-- even when others seem to have given up on them. People with grit finish the race.

Are you born with grit? If not, can you develop it? While the scientific jury is still out, I think we can-- and must--develop grit in children. Countless studies show this trait is as important to their success as academic and life skills, two key components of our Youth Development strategy. By adding grit to the equation, we give "triple threat" an entirely new meaning.

Since spear-heading the Cape-wide Youth Action Plan in 2010, the Foundation has put Youth Development at the heart of its civic leadership work. Over the years, we've supported many successful programs across the Cape that bring positive and caring mentors into children's lives, help young people prepare for college or the work force, create civic engagement opportunities, provide alternatives to at-risk behavior, and help prevent and treat drug and substance use.

Young people need all those things—now more than ever. We're not shifting our support. But we are shifting our tactics. We're sharpening our focus to make a bigger impact.

Through our Vision 2020 initiative, we're actively raising discretionary funds to strategically impact nonprofit organizational capacity-building and Youth Development. To date, we've raised \$400,000 from a unique philanthropic collaborative. Our goal is to reach \$1 million in three years.

At the end of 2018, we awarded a \$150,000 multi-year grant to the Y-Achievers program of YMCA Cape Cod. This is our first multi-year award and our most significant discretionary grant to date. It is the powerful new way we are going to increase impact across the Cape.

The YMCA's "triple threat" program concentrates on higher education and career exploration and helps young people ages 12-18 develop academic skills, life skills, and a positive identity—the grit factor. (Look for more about this program from Dara Gannon, our Director of Programs and Donors Services, in her upcoming column.)

We've supported this program before and we've followed its success closely since it started in 2015. We've seen what the leadership can accomplish with 50 kids from Barnstable High School every year. We want to help them expand their impact to 500 kids across the region every year. The team has already replicated the program in D-Y Regional High School. Plans for further expansion are underway. By making a larger, longer-term financial commitment to the YMCA, we're giving them a fuller tank of fuel and a longer runway for success. We're also changing the way we engage with our grantees by letting go of overprescribed processes with firm mandates. We believe funders can help by being more flexible and responsive partners to nonprofits. At the end of the day, we all have the same goal. In this case, it's about helping young people reimagine their futures.

Y-Achievers is working. There are other Youth Development programs that are also working wonders in the community. If replicated, these programs can also have a more pronounced impact on the region. Right now, we're identifying those that will benefit from additional funding, guidance, and support from the Foundation. It's a long, deliberate process. It's a powerful new direction.

**P.S.** I wasn't born with the "grit-factor." Seriously, I almost dropped out of kindergarten because I put my paper in the wrong cubby. Making a mistake meant a major melt-down. But, along the way, through various life experiences, I learned to be passionate, tenacious, resilient, and goal-driven. I want that for my kids. I want it for your kids. I want it for all the kids in our community.