

WHAT DOES IT TAKE?



Richard Buery is the first black President and CEO of The Children's Aid Society. Rich previously co-founded Groundwork, Inc., iMentor, and the Mission Hill Summer Program in Boston. A graduate of Harvard College and the Yale Law School, Rich has a background in law, education, and politics.

Tell us a little bit about your childhood and family. What it was like for you growing up?

I grew up in East New York, Brooklyn in a family with two working parents . . . My parents emigrated from Panama to New York because they wanted to build for their children a strong future that was based on education. I went to Stuyvesant High School. Going to Stuyvesant while living in East New York was really a transformative experience. I think it was that experience that put me on the path that I'm on now.

What challenges did you face growing up?

The first challenge was growing up in a high crime, high poverty community. You have poor schools, poor air quality, poor role models, and exposure to violence. Having to figure out what routes to walk home to avoid trouble was a challenge. I had this remarkable advantage in having parents who not only wanted the best for me – because I've never met a parent who didn't want the best for their children – but also who had the resources and the skills to know how to get it . . . When I got to Stuyvesant, it became strange, because I was living in two different worlds – one that was vulnerable and completely underserved and another that was privileged and full of opportunity. The cultural challenge was trying to navigate two separate sets of norms and experiences. The personal challenge was trying to reconcile the idea that there were actually two New Yorks..

How did those experiences help prepare you for the work you have done since you were in school?

Growing up the way I did, it's impossible not to understand the difference between being a black kid in New York and being a white kid in New York. It doesn't take statistics to see that New York doesn't offer the same opportunities to all children. The rest of my life was about trying to figure out how to do that, how to offer the same opportunities.

In freshman year of college I started volunteering with kids in a housing project, and over time I was spending more time there than on campus. In the summer, some friends and I started a summer camp for those kids who didn't have anything to do in the summer. It gave me a sense of mission and opportunity . . . even as 18-year-olds, we could be agents of change in the community.

Who did you admire growing up? Did you have any mentors?

I didn't have people that I would have thought of as mentors, but there were people like Mrs. Virginia, my homeroom teacher. She made me feel special and smart and like I could accomplish things. My parents—they came here with nothing. My parents grew up poor in Panama and made a life for themselves.

Can you tell us how you deal with challenges in your life and career today?

The first step in dealing with any challenge is making a decision to try. Execution - personally and professionally - is never easy. But trying is. . . . For me in my work at Children's Aid, the possible rewards are so wonderful and joyous that you stick with it because you know what it feels like when children and families benefit from the work you're doing. I think that sustains you while you muddle through.

What advice would you give to young men?

Two things really matter: matte: Going all out on your education. Squeeze everything you can out of the educational opportunities that exist in your life. Whether it's in your school or your afterschool program or in your church

The other: is Take chances. You are bound to feel overwhelmed or intimidated by the world around you sometimes. That fear can prevent you from learning and growing For me, it was in the opportunities that I took to engage, to share, and to try that made a difference even if I wasn't sure I was ready. In my lifetime, whether it was starting the summer camp, or teaching and traveling in Africa after college, I was willing to take the chances it has been really rewarding.