

America's Best Leaders 2009

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Change Leaders

By *Avital Medoff*

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It was 1990, and black babies were dying at three times the rate of white babies in inner-city Boston, home to some of the world's top hospitals. Cheryl Dorsey, a Harvard medical student, had been hearing about racial disparity in infant mortality and thought it "an egregious affair." So when Nancy Oriol, a Harvard faculty member, suggested working together on a solution, Dorsey threw herself into the project full force, postponing her internship and residency in pediatrics.



Cheryl Dorsey, President,
Echoing Green

"Nancy and I, two women of color, thought, 'How can our most vulnerable citizens not be getting a chance at life?' " Dorsey, now 46, recalls. After many late nights at Oriol's kitchen table, the two launched Family Van in 1992. The mobile health program served 1,292 Boston residents of all ages that first year and now serves about 7,000 annually, doing its part in helping to close the infant mortality gap.

Against the grain. It was Dorsey's first experience in what would become her life's passion—social change. And in many ways, she's come full circle: Family Van was funded in part with a grant Dorsey received as a fellow at Echoing Green, a nonprofit investor in young social entrepreneurs, which Dorsey now leads. Other Echoing Green-sponsored organizations launched in the early 1990s include Teach for America, Jumpstart, and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. "It was an unparalleled community of young people going against the grain, trying to take on really tough problems with a real commitment to actually trying to solve them," she says. Dorsey completed her internship and residency, then left her doctor's coat behind for good.

She joined Echoing Green's board in 1998 and served on several fellowship selection panels

before stepping down in 2001 to consult for the group, which was seeking new leadership. Dorsey thought she'd stay a few months but was named president in May 2002. "The organization transformed my life," she says. "It made sense for someone who really understood the program to take over the reins."

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