

Winnick Family Foundation Funds Teach For America Member Chris Akel

More than 2,000 Teach For America teachers, called corps members, have taught in L.A.-area public schools, reaching some 160,000 students. By 2010, program administrators expect that there will be nearly 1,500 alumni pursuing educational careers in the Los Angeles area, 60 will be running schools, and 10 or more will hold elective office.

Los Angeles, CA – August 4, 2009 – When teacher Chris Akel applied to join Teach For America, he was ready for the challenge of teaching in an underserved urban or rural community – something very unlike the suburban neighborhoods he grew up in on the Cumberland Plateau of Tennessee.

Akel went through a rigorous five-week training program in L.A.’s Watts neighborhood in the Summer of 2009. But imagine his surprise at spending most of his corps commitment at a school ten miles to the north of Watts in the Southern California suburb of South Pasadena – within easy walking distance of the famous Rose Parade and Rose Bowl held every New Year’s Day a few blocks to the north.

[Karen Winnick](#), Chairman of the Winnick Family Foundation said, “We are delighted to welcome Chris Akel to Southern California and to play a small role in supporting his work this year through a grant to Teach For America. We have a continuing relationship with Teach For America, which is a corps of recent college graduates from top colleges and universities who commit, like Chris, to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools.”

She added: “These are young and idealistic new educators who invariably energize the schools where they teach. It is also nice to see that many of the program’s still-enthusiastic alumni are moving on up to lead the cause of genuine school reform in every major school district in the United States.”

Despite the posh reputation of Pasadena and Pasadena-adjacent school districts, Chris was assigned to Blair International Baccalaureate in South Pasadena, a much sought after magnet school. Although Pasadena and Pasadena-adjacent neighborhoods have a posh reputation – home to the California Institute of Technology, NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and any number of world-class museums – Blair draws its students from across Southern California, a diverse group of children and young adults who commute daily to the tranquil campus from some of L.A.’s toughest neighborhoods.

Says Akel, who taught the 9th grade last year at Blair: “My students were approximately 60 percent Latino and nearly 40 percent African American. One or two were Asian, and another one or two Caucasian. Virtually none of them come from wealthy families. Over the course of the year, they learned positive motivational habits, along with the curriculum. By the end, I believe many of the students were permanently invested in an academic community which they cared about.”

Adds Akel: “Many of my students live in violent environments, so building a classroom culture to overcome any opposition encountered in their neighborhoods is very important to us. It gives these kids pride in themselves and their futures. It also helped that there has been such a boom in contemporary fiction for this Young Adult age group. Needless to say, the novel *Twilight* by Stephanie Myers was as big a hit in my class as it was among most high school populations in America.”

[Gary Winnick](#), Chairman of [Pacific Capital Group](#) and Founder of the Winnick Family Foundation, said: “We have been pleased to support Teach For America for the past six years. L.A. was one of the organization’s original charter regions and since then, more than 2,000 Teach For America teachers, called corps members, have taught in L.A.-area public schools, reaching some 160,000 students. Teach For America is a much-respected national program, but it has our Foundation’s interest because it has been making a particular and major impact on elementary and secondary education in Los Angeles since the program’s inception in 1990.”

For example, in his last year’s class at Blair, reports Akel, there were three students who had lost some member of their immediate family to violent crime or incarceration. Akel sees the impact daily of Blair on each of his students – advancing despite the many logistic and learning hurdles they encounter on a daily basis.

Says Akel: “Education is a solution to many of the problems that arise out of poverty. Our experience together in the classroom at Blair allows my students to both understand that they can achieve great things and inspires them to want to achieve those things. You can imagine how that energy motivates me to support them in that quest.”

Akel plans to continue on with a career in education after he has finished his two year tenure with TFA next summer. Both of his parents have been teachers and his mother just retired as an elementary school teacher in the Tennessee elementary school system. Says Akel: “I find that I like teaching, just like my parents did before me, but I might also explore educational administration before I settle down.”

Adds Karen Winnick: “By next year, program administrators project that there will be nearly 1,500 Teach For America alumni pursuing permanent educational careers in the Los Angeles area. Sixty will be running schools. Ten or more TFA alums will hold elective office. The influence of this remarkable program on school reform, a share focus of our own foundation, is significant and long-term.”

About the Winnick Family Foundation

The Winnick Family Foundation encourages project-specific programs but also selectively supports capital campaigns and unrestricted gifts to grantee organizations. There is a preference for projects in Los Angeles and New York – or those having an international component.

Foundation naming grants include:

- Winnick Family Clinical Research Institute at Cedars Sinai Hospital

- Winnick House and Arnold S. Winnick Student Center at the C.W. Post campus of Long Island University
- Winnick International Conference Center at the Simon Wiesenthal Center / Jerusalem
- Winnick Children's Zoo in Los Angeles
- Winnick Faculty Scholar at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University
- Winnick Hall at the Skirball Cultural Center
- Arnold & Blanche Winnick Popular Library and Karen Winnick Children's Gallery at the Los Angeles Central Library
- Winnick Hillel House at Syracuse University
- Winnick Board Room at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City
- Winnick Winners Mentoring Program for the Los Angeles Unified School District
- Winnick Fellows at UCLA School of Medicine

[Gary Winnick](#) and Karen Winnick and the Foundation have endowed university and high school literacy and scholarship programs at Brown University, at Mrs. Winnick's alma mater Syracuse University, and at [Gary Winnick's](#) alma mater Long Island University.

They have also funded the transformation of the on-campus Post mansion administrative center – renamed Winnick House – as well as the main cafeteria which is now named in honor of Mr. Winnick's late father.

In California, the Foundation has supported educational programs at the California Science Center, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, KOREH L.A., the Los Angeles Zoo, L.A.'s Best Afterschool Program, the Wonder of Reading, the Fulfillment Fund and Noah's Ark at the Skirball Center.

Among the many other Foundation grantees are the Special Olympics, The Center for Jewish History, Children's Scholarship Fund, Partnership for Better Schools, Teach for America, The Gettysburg Foundation, The National Parks Foundation, Best Friends Animal Society, The Los Angeles Police Foundation, Shoah Foundation, and the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University.

The Foundation also supports charities operating outside the United States, including the International Medical Corps, Flora and Fauna, World Wildlife Fund, the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, the Israel Museum, the Israel Philharmonic, the Jerusalem Zoo, Heifer International and the Bloomfield Science Museum at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. For more information on the Foundation and its work, visit <http://www.winnickfamilyfoundation.com> on the Web.