

John Hancock presents Pivotal Conversations

Starter Course

She answered a newspaper ad offering a chance to make a difference in the life of a child. Twenty-five years later, Barbara Fox Mason has helped thousands as a founder of The Child & Family Network Centers (CFNC), which provides free, high-quality education and support services to at-risk children and families in Northern Virginia.

The seeds of the CFNC were sown when a group of mothers living in a public housing project in Alexandria learned that all 17 of their children had failed kindergarten and could not advance to the first grade. They realized that preschool was key to giving their kids the same solid foundation as their middle-class counterparts.

Enter Barbara, a former public school teacher determined to help these economically challenged families defy the odds and create a community preschool program. Its first year was successful, but in order for the program to continue, she'd need to overcome some economic challenges of her own.

Barbara Fox Mason: "After our first six kids performed well in kindergarten, we proved our value in the community. The next year we were full to capacity with 12 children, and I knew we'd need more money to make it work."

Barbara looked to the man who wrote the inspiring ad that called her to action in the first place: University of Maryland Professor Dagobert Soergel.

Dagobert Soergel: "Barbara needed to focus on working with the children. So I stepped in to advise her on raising funds—and get the program on track to becoming a real organization. I first suggested that she work to make sure that there was money available in the city budget for her classes; eventually, though, the city couldn't cover it all."

Dagobert recommended that Barbara turn to other places for support, including several local churches.

Barbara Fox Mason: "I would go and present our case to different church council meetings. I went to churches almost every night. It worked—and eventually led to finding money to hire a grant writer."

Dagobert Soergel: "In time, CFNC's budget increased from \$15,000 given by one church to \$2 million from various sources."

Barbara knew that Dagobert's advice was central in allowing her to help more children through CFNC—but his influence in the organization's growth reached even further than she realized.

Dagobert Soergel: "In CFNC's second year, there was a workshop through High/Scope, an educational research foundation renowned for its preschool approach. I knew that Barbara wanted to go, but CFNC didn't have the money. I found an organization to pay for half. And Barbara doesn't know this, but I contributed the other half."



Dagobert Soergel and Barbara Fox Mason
Inset: The children of CFNC

Barbara Fox Mason: (To Dagobert) "Thank you for that. The chance to go to that workshop was a turning point for our organization."

Dagobert Soergel: "That curriculum was made for the kind of children CFNC serves. I knew it could make a huge difference."

Barbara Fox Mason: "We still use it to this day. The curriculum helps children gain the skills they need to succeed in school and teaches them to be independent thinkers. Our kids grow up in not-so-wonderful situations, and it's easy for them to just go along. But through our program, they learn how to make their own decisions—and chart their own course."

CFNC serves nearly 200 children and their families at five program sites in Virginia—and hopes to help even more by finding additional sources of funding. For details, visit www.cfnc-online.org.

Find out what piece of advice had a big impact on Barbara Fox Mason's life, or share your own advice story at www.pivotalconversations.com.