



*Photograph courtesy of Educating Young Minds*

## EDUCATING YOUNG MINDS

“Hello, *beautiful!*”

Angeles Echols, the dynamic and inspirational founder and director of Educating Young Minds, approached one of her charges with her standard joyful greeting. It was a typical weekday evening, and students were filtering in to the 7,600-square-foot space in central Los Angeles for after-school homework and study sessions.

The student, a teenage girl carrying a stack of textbooks, smiled shyly.

“Hello Ms. Echols,” she said.

“I want to see your best work,” Echols said, wrapping an arm around the girl’s shoulders and giving her an encouraging squeeze.

“Yes ma’am,” the girl responded, beaming.

As the girl disappeared into one of EYM’s many classrooms, Echols made a sweeping gesture, taking in the learning center’s bold, primary colors, soft carpeting, and soothing artwork. “School doesn’t have to be hard and mean,” she said. “This is a comfortable, nurturing place, where children feel safe, feel loved. This is a good place to learn.”

That’s the basic message underlying the work of the center, started by Echols more than 20 years ago with nothing but big dreams and two students eager enough to be tutored in her one-bedroom apartment. Today, the center serves nearly 400 students – predominantly low-income African Americans from kindergarten through 12th grade, who have struggled in traditional classrooms. EYM provides a range of programs that deliver excellent after-school and daytime study support services, prepare students for the SAT and other standardized tests, and help students focus on academic basics during the summertime break between school years.

At the heart of Educating Young Minds is Echols herself, a gregarious leader who shares her personal story with the youngsters to illustrate the power of education. She was raised in the projects in Tennessee by a single mother who pushed her to excel, which Echols did, winning a scholarship to Cornell University. Like many young people however, Echols took a detour, pursuing life as a performer and even singing

back-up vocals once for the great Isaac Hayes. Stardom of course, proved allusive, and Echols began to work as a teacher to pay the bills. The punchline of course, is that when the teaching bug bit, it bit hard.

Echols had found her passion. She quickly realized that “educating young minds” was what she did and loved best, and an organization was born. “When I was a child, every strong black woman I knew was a teacher,” she said, “so for me, to be a teacher is to be a leader in the community.”

Echols now leads a staff that includes 21 teachers, many of whom volunteer. Students are admitted to EYM regardless of their ability to pay – families are charged on a sliding scale, up to \$50 a month. But each family must submit to an intense screening process in order to gain admission. “It doesn’t matter if the child has low grades—those are among the children we want to help,” Echols said. “But the parents must be willing to take an active role in their child’s learning experience. The parents think I’m screening the child, but in truth, I’m screening the parents.”

Those who are admitted undergo a three-month probation, during which one in five students either choose or are asked to leave. This is rigorous stuff, but coveted nonetheless; empty spots are filled immediately from an endless waiting list. Once enrolled, most students stay through senior year; 100 percent of those who do will graduate from high school, in a city where less than 2/3 of their peers ever will.

Part of EYM’s success is attributed to incentive; high school seniors in the program are expected not only to complete their own work, but to also spend 20 hours a month tutoring younger children. In exchange, upon graduation each receives a laptop and a college scholarship of up to \$10,000, divided over four years.

Clearly however, EYM’s success is also due in greatest part to the passion, vision and competence of its exceptional leader. After more than 20 years of operation, and numerous success stories, Echols is working to expand the brand. She’s added both square footage and students, and is looking to branch out beyond Los Angeles. The challenge of course, is how to translate the dynamism of one individual into a program that can be replicated in under-served communities elsewhere. The first step, Echols said, was to thoroughly document the program itself.

Within the past year Echols has created an operations and procedures manual. She's published the first of what she hopes will become a quarterly newsletter. And she's recently completed a comprehensive database of all the contacts she's amassed in more than two decades of operation. "That was a major undertaking," she said. "But now the information is in one place, and it's a gold mine of people who care about what we do."

Many of the people who care are, of course, EYM's alumnae. Jordan T. is soon headed to Skidmore, in upstate New York, where the school motto is "creative thought matters." Jordan recalls his demeanor as a first-grader walking in to Educating Young Minds as "very scared, somewhat defiant." Now, as he looks toward a college career, he is grateful for the mentorship of Ms. Echols and the excellence of her program. "I am a much more enjoyable person because of my time spent here," he said. "Being here taught me how to interact with other people, how to treat both others and myself with respect."

Perhaps the replication of the EYM model will fall to one of the hundreds of brilliant young minds to which the program has given wings.