



FROM STREET KIDS TO WALL STREET Told by Matthew Malone

Show Steve Mariotti a young person bright enough to rob someone and get away with it, and he'll show you a potential business leader needing direction. Inside a rundown classroom on the uncertain streets of the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn is probably the last place most people would look for America's entrepreneurial future, but Steve is trying to change all that.

It was a dark night when he first saw the light. Jogging down a busy New York street, dodging the city's normal hustle and bustle, Steve was stopped abruptly by a gang of youths who wanted his money. They roughed him up and he handed over his wallet, and, though still somewhat dazed, as he watched them run away he was jarred by an improbable thought: What if the talents and energy these kids spent on illegal and destructive activities could be channeled productively?

A successful businessman himself, Steve recognized their creativity and drive, however misguided, as the same qualities needed in the business world. They were aggressive, focused—and they were working together to achieve a common goal. Unfortunately, tonight their goal was his wallet. But Steve had a hunch that with the proper training, these kids could reach higher. He decided to leave his successful import-export business behind and follow a dream.

Steve had always wanted to be a teacher. He taught one of his first classes at the Central Ward Boys & Girls Club in Newark, New Jersey, where one of his first students was fifteen-year-old Felix Rouse. Felix was instantly impressed by his teacher, a short white man carefully explaining such business concepts as supply and demand, buying wholesale, and profit. To this bunch of kids, the

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business world looked like another planet. As Steve talked, he laid the groundwork for his “mini-MBA,” enticing the students with his enthusiastic delivery and promising ideas.

He taught them the basics of running a business. They opened checking accounts, designed business cards, and discussed the delicate art of customer relations. They visited Wall Street, met with wholesalers, and developed plans to start their own businesses.

Steve used somewhat unusual techniques to get his students to think beyond today to what they could become. One day when they came to class, he greeted them with a challenge: “If you want something badly enough, you’ll reach high enough to get it!” They followed his gaze upward and saw a five-dollar bill dangling from the ceiling. As his classmates and teacher looked on, Felix made several unsuccessful attempts to grab the bill. He stopped for a moment to think, then he climbed up on a chair as his friends chanted, “Fe-lix, Fe-lix, Fe-lix!” He leaped through the air, snatched the money, and landed safely back on the classroom floor. Money in hand, Felix sashayed back to his chair, and Steve said again, smiling, “If you want something badly enough, you’ll reach high enough to get it!”

A few months later, Felix reached for his dream, too. He and a friend had a passion for comic books, and they decided to open their own comic-book store. First they developed a detailed business plan, outlining their costs, prices, and strategy. Steve gave them one hundred dollars to open their own store. For two years they ran their business out of office space provided by the Boys & Girls Club. The boys did all the buying and selling, bookkeeping, and inventory. “Though we didn’t make a ton of money, I never had to borrow any,” Felix says. “I learned very quickly to take care of myself and developed the skills to be successful.”

In 1986, Steve created the NFTE (National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship) to expand his successful program to reach other inner-city youth. NFTE now has 45,000 graduates, 400 active and 2,000 trained teachers, 14,000 sponsors, and 12,000 students each year in the United States as well as in India, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Argentina, breaking through the dead ends

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of drugs, crime, and teenage pregnancy in vigorous pursuit of success in business. In partnerships with Goldman Sachs, Microsoft, and Koch Industries, as well as major universities—Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Columbia Teacher’s College, and Babson College—NFTE is making inroads beyond Steve’s wildest dreams.

While inner-city kids learn about business, hone their personal ambitions, and even begin to count their profits, the personal attention and respect they’re getting from someone who really cares is invaluable. “Steve was always in the mix,” Felix says. “He knew about my struggles and was always there to listen. He cares about all of us on a very personal level.”

Like many other NFTE students, Felix has experienced some bumps along the road. During his senior year in high school, his father passed away. A year later his older brother was shot and confined to a wheelchair. But Felix stayed on course and followed his dream to college. In 1996 he graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a degree in political science. He became the first NFTE student to be trained as an entrepreneurship teacher, teaching at the Boys & Girls Club where he first encountered Steve. He’s working on his MBA at Cornell University.

The outlook for thousands of kids like Felix who find their way through the NFTE program is not “underprivileged.” Their new knowledge, skills, experience, and hope skyrocket their chances of success. As one graduate put it, “My dream is not to die in poverty, but to have poverty die in me.” Day by day, student by student, so it is and so it does.

A coach is someone who tells you what you don't want to hear, and has you see what you don't want to see, so you can be who you have always known you could be.

TOM LANDRY

Want to help a child learn how to start a small business, get NFTE’s entrepreneurial curriculum into the hands of at-risk youth, or sponsor a teacher to be NFTE trained? Visit the NFTE Web site, www.nfte.com.

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