

# Shoot for the Stars

Henry Crown Fellow  
John Danner's  
Rocketship schools aim high.

When John Danner was nominated to the Henry Crown Fellowship, part of the Aspen Global Leadership Network, he had the “success” part of the fellowship’s mission to move from “success to significance” down pat. “The ‘doing well’ box was checked,” jokes Danner. In the late ’90s, Danner had been the CEO of NetGravity, one of the first Internet advertising companies. NetGravity quickly acquired clients like Yahoo!, Netscape, and TimeWarner. And so, when Danner sold the company to DoubleClick in 1999, he decided to retire. He was 31 years old.

“It was strategic for me,” says Danner of joining the Fellowship. “I thought of it as a way of figuring out what to do next.” But, as Danner embarked on the two-year program of mentorship, text-based seminars, and a required leadership project, he was soon contemplating horizons much broader than just his own next move. He remembers thinking, “What’s going to have the most significant impact on the world in the next ten to twenty years?”

As he considered his leadership project, says Danner, “I knew I was interested in education. The Henry Crown Program’s requirement of a project caused me to look at what I could do.” Around this time, Danner also met Father Mateo Sheedy, pastor of Sacred Heart Parish, in San Jose, California. Father Mateo was the founder of a new middle school that served low-income students, and he convinced Danner that the community needed a top-flight elementary school, too. “That began a long chain of events,” says Danner—including a trip back to school for a degree in education, getting three years of teaching experience, and founding a charter school in Tennessee—“all with the idea to one day start Rocketship schools.”

And so, in 2006, Danner co-founded Rocketship Education in San Jose. “I approached the poverty problem with education as the major tool for change,” says Danner of Rocketship, which provides low-income children with longer school days, higher academic expectations, and a special focus on mathematics and literacy. “We found a niche a lot of people weren’t filling in the charter-school world,” says Danner of Rocketship’s exclusive focus on elementary education. He is proud to say that Rocketship schools are now filling northern California middle and high schools with children who are ready to learn:



Rocketship was the seventh-highest-scoring elementary school in California serving a low-income population.

And Rocketship Education is expanding. With a combined \$5 million grant from the Charter School Growth Fund and from fellow Henry Crown Fellow Reed Hastings, CEO of Netflix, Rocketship is currently building six new schools.

“In schools, the thing that makes it worth it is the kids—and not just the average kid, but the one struggling the most, or in the toughest position,” says Danner. He recalls one student who, “in one year, went from far below basic to advanced. Worst to best.” But it was when the student’s mother, Valentina, stood up at a public forum for charter schools that Danner really saw Rocketship’s impact. “You can talk about charters being good or bad,” Danner recalls Valentina saying, “but, if you’ve got a child like this on a bad track, we know what the statistics say: in trouble with the law or death. A good school can change that.”

Of course, Rocketship Education hasn’t only changed the lives of children; Danner’s life is now entirely devoted to the schools. “As simple as it sounds,” says Danner, “This leadership project gets you outside of anything you would normally do with your life—sit on boards, whatever. The project makes you take initiative and do something yourself.”

