

LETTER FROM OUR CEO



Dear Friends,

One of the most significant challenges for Summer Search students is preparing for their first summer trip. There are many logistical and physical hurdles each student must overcome—exercise, applications, travel arrangements, shots, etc. But the largest and far more daunting hurdle is psychological. Each student is preparing for a transformational experience, which by definition is an experience you can't possibly understand until you have gone through it. There is no way to simulate it. Telling the kids what to expect doesn't really do much either.

What you can do is help each student be strong for the journey: develop strategies or “tools” for dealing with the unknown. One tool is self-reflection—the capacity to look at yourself honestly and change your behaviors when you need to. Another important tool is reaching out—being willing to ask others for help and admit vulnerability. However, perhaps the most important “tool” is hope.

Each student takes on the challenge of that first summer because they have hope that it will be transformative—that they will be changed and grow in important and positive ways. Almost all of our students participate in intensive wilderness expeditions during their first summer in the program, and anyone who has done one of these trips knows that by about day three, when almost a month remains, your feet and back hurt and you are completely exhausted, it is the ability to remain hopeful that makes the difference between persisting and giving up.

2008—the first year of our stretch growth plan—was a year we never could have fully anticipated. The scale of our ambitious goals, combined with the growing challenges the economic situation has created—for the communities we serve as well as the communities that support our mission—have thrust our whole organization into a new reality. Simply put, we suddenly found ourselves in our “first summer” and we've been called upon to practice what we preach.

Throughout the year, we have engaged in intensive organizational self-reflection, looking closely at how we do everything to make sure that we are fulfilling our mission as effectively and efficiently as possible. Where we have had to change behaviors, we have done so. We have also had to reach out for help—although less than I would have thought, because our extraordinary community—all of you—has stepped up so quickly to offer additional support when we most needed it. The result is that in 2008, we saw significant growth in volunteers, event attendees, and even donations. In spite of the terrible challenges around us, we were able to serve many more students than in 2007. Your support also enabled us to build a stronger and more sustainable organization and we are on track to continue to expand the number of students we serve in 2009. This in a time when our services are most needed and many nonprofits are having to scale back their operations.

The challenges facing this country also hold the potential for its ultimate transformation: We can do better. But, as always, there is no guarantee that we will change for the better—that depends in large part on our leadership: how they face these challenges and the example they set. Today there are more than 3,000 Summer Search students and alumni all throughout the country. As individuals, they have faced the very same challenges and opportunities that we now face as a country. They are exactly the kind of leaders we need in this moment.

I am so grateful for your incredible support this past year and for all you have done to build this group of young leaders. Thanks to you, we all have more reason to be even more hopeful at the end of this extraordinary year, than we were when it started.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jay Jacobs". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Jay Jacobs, C.E.O.