INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1980s, colleagues and I conducted research on six reportedly successful out-of-school time programs operating in high-poverty neighborhoods of three diverse US cities. Our 1994 book *Urban Sanctuaries* reports the results of that research. However, while *Urban Sanctuaries* could celebrate the promising outcomes associated with these initiatives, it could say nothing about whether the positive consequences we observed would last as the young people who participated in these programs went on to experience various life changes and shifting circumstances. *You Can’t Be What You Can’t See: The Power of Opportunity to Change Young Lives*, adopts a long-term perspective to consider participants’ life outcomes and the role of one such program, CYCLE.

CYCLE operated from the 1980s through the mid-1990s in Chicago’s notorious Cabrini-Green public housing project, one of the nation’s most violent, most impoverished neighborhoods. To support the development of poor African American youth living in or near Cabrini-Green, CYCLE offered free comprehensive afterschool and summer supports primarily through closely interrelated tutoring, Junior Staff, and scholarship programs. *You Can’t Be What You Can’t See* follows up with these CYCLE participants thirty years later and in doing so provides a rare opportunity to see outcomes of a youth program over an extended period of time and over a generation. The “kids” we met in the mid-1980s and early 1990s now are in their forties and fifties, and most have children of their own.
Between 2012 and 2017, Greg Darnieder, CYCLE’s founder, and I conducted extensive interviews with former participants to hear if, how, or why CYCLE shaped their core attitudes, careers, and life choices. We focused on those cohorts that were most involved in the program: the more than 600 youth who became part of the Junior Staff, a program that provided youth with paid positions as coaches, tutors, and program leaders; and those who participated from grades 7 to 12 in two scholarship programs that guaranteed financial support for college or other postsecondary programs. We also interviewed key staff, funders, and trustees to gather their reflections on the program and reviewed data kept by the program and its coordinators. We conducted in-depth interviews with more than 40 individuals and, with the assistance of program staff and social media, were able to account for the education outcomes of more than 700 former CYCLE participants, specifically whether they had graduated high school, attended college, or completed college. Because the life stories of the participants were so integral to documenting the success of this program, this book features the stories of about a dozen individuals to illuminate, in their own words, how and why CYCLE mattered to them and shaped their life trajectory.

CYCLE served hundreds of African American kids growing up in Cabrini-Green. Nearly all of them lived in a single-caregiver, welfare-eligible household headed by a mom, an aunt, an older sister, or a grandmother. Few had a dad living at home; most saw their fathers rarely, if at all, either because of disconnection with the mom, participation in “the [gang] life,” incarceration, addiction, or death. All grew up in concentrated poverty, thanks to the Chicago Housing Authority’s income guidelines, and most went to the public grammar schools serving the housing project, schools deemed by some observers of the Chicago Public School (CPS) system as the worst of the worst. The majority of Cabrini-Green youth dropped out of high school; many of the young men fell victim to violence or drugs, were killed, or went to jail, and early pregnancy was the norm for the young women.
However, CYCLE participants’ lives took a dramatically different course. The vast majority earned their high school diplomas, and of those graduates, more than one-third went on to gain acceptance at a college or university, from which approximately half graduated. In addition to earning associate and bachelor’s degrees, among the CYCLE participants from the 1980s and early 1990s, eleven earned doctorates, two MDs, and several MAs in programs such as architecture, accounting, social work, education, communication, and business. Impressive accomplishments in any context, these outcomes are remarkable when placed against figures for the city’s schools then and even now. During the time of our original research, CPS’s overall high school graduation rate was approximately 35 percent; CYCLE senior staff report that graduation rates for young men growing up in Cabrini-Green hovered at around 20 percent and for young women around 30 percent.6

CYCLE executive director Greg Darnieder and former Junior Staffers gathered in 2015 to celebrate the awarding of Carleta Alston’s doctoral degree, and to pose for this photo taken by Carleta. Top row (left to right): Greg Darnieder, Craig Nash, Don Smith, Johnny Calerway, Cyril Nichols, Brian Alston. Bottom row (left to right): Andre Stokes and Lloyd Rogers.
Today most CYCLE alums and their children enjoy middle-class lifestyles. They pursue such careers as educators, doctors, administrators, social workers, managers, youth leaders, tradesmen, law enforcement officers, among many other professions. They have stable family lives and see to it that their children get good educations, which for most involves college. They remain in close touch with one another, maintaining the relationships forged at CYCLE all those years ago. Arguably, these life outcomes represent a significant return on investment, especially when one considers that at its peak enrollment in 1992, the program, funded primarily by private donors, operated on an annual budget of $1.4 million (around $2.2 million in 2017 dollars).

GOALS

Three broad goals shape this book:

- to look inside the black box of program processes and principles. Although research considering the operation and outcomes of afterschool programs or out-of-school opportunities has begun to provide details on program activities and strategies, few accounts provide concrete details about what goes on inside effective programs—or what’s inside the black box, the space between program inputs and participant outputs. Much research on afterschool programs remains either variable based and purely correlational (time spent on mentoring activities, staff-youth ratios, race/ethnicity) or is focused on general features (program site, youth involvement opportunities, staffing practices) as they relate to various youth outcomes (retention rates, academics, health). Largely missing in this literature are close-grained descriptions of how activities are carried out and structured. For instance, what do mentors and mentees do together? How do youth and adults interact in supportive relationships? What are core principles guiding behavior for both
youth and adults? The narratives in this book take up these black box questions from the perspective of both former staff and former participants.

- **to understand factors affecting sustained positive outcomes.** CYCLE youth appeared to be headed for productive lives when they left the program in the late 1980s or early 1990s. Twenty-five and thirty years later, nearly all stayed on the positive paths they chose. Few long-term accounts exist to consider questions of sustainability, questions important to any youth program. But these issues are especially significant in the context of concentrated poverty and around worries that at-risk youth will fall back into predicted behaviors of dependence, crime, or substance abuse. CYCLE participants not only kept alive the values, perspectives, and ambitions they acquired in the program, but they passed them on to their children. What happened at CYCLE that supported this extraordinary departure from the expected Cabrini-Green youth trajectory? Former CYCLE participants provide persuasive, consistent explanations of what mattered most to their lives and why. These accounts provide compelling evidence in favor of youth-centered, relationship-based, out-of-school programs focused on providing opportunities for adolescents.

- **to move CYCLE’s experience from being exceptional to a new norm for youth program approaches.** Founder Greg Darnieder has often said that putting together a program like CYCLE “is not rocket science”; nor does a CYCLE-like opportunity need to break the bank. What would it take to create more programs reflecting CYCLE’s core design principles? What are the implications of CYCLE’s experience for funders, policy makers, and practitioners?

The individual reports that make up this book consider participants’ journeys from CYCLE and Cabrini-Green to their lives as adults. These alums’ life accounts provide powerful and important
stories of how a youth program operated with such effectiveness in a setting of extreme poverty, violence, and crime and fostered positive change that was sustained for a lifetime and across generations. A life course perspective departs from research or evaluation approaches that tally accounts of program effects at completion or one or three or five years later. It considers the significance of an experience such as CYCLE participation as seen in individuals’ choices and actions over time and in different contexts. This viewpoint invites questions of how and why an experience affected individuals’ choices and action and consideration of whether or not those consequences continued across time.\(^{10}\)

However, several somewhat different approaches gather under the life course umbrella.\(^{11}\) This book takes a life story approach, attending to how young people’s choices and actions reflected relations with the various environments through which they moved to create a life pathway.

**WHY THIS BOOK NOW?**

The growing inequalities in the education and economic outcomes of poor urban youth alarm educators, social planners, and civic leaders, but efforts to stem or reverse them generally have fallen short. With few exceptions, public and private investments in areas such as education, housing, or mentoring mostly have failed to disrupt the high rates of school failure, violence, and incarceration for low-income urban youth of color.

Not a single-focus youth program, CYCLE took a whole-child, comprehensive view of what Cabrini-Green youth needed in order to imagine, reach for, and attain lives different from those forecast for them. Program leaders believed that all children, regardless of the conditions in which they grow up, share the same foundational needs and that the concentrated poverty of the Cabrini-Green environment undermined families’ ability to meet those needs. In response, CYCLE developed a portfolio of youth develop-
InTrOduCTIO n

ment supports typically unavailable to families living in distressed neighborhoods.

Although the program operated in the Cabrini-Green neighborhood, CYCLE took a place-conscious rather than a place-based approach to identifying and providing these supports for the hundreds of young people who came through its doors. Staff pursued connections and opportunities across Chicago, the region, and even the nation. They worked to integrate and supplement the resources of multiple organizations and public and private institutions—schools, social services, recreational opportunities, nonprofit agencies, and employers—to create an array of opportunities for CYCLE youth. The program’s regional perspective aimed not just to provide a neighborhood-based refuge but to connect young people with resources outside the psychological and practical constraints of Cabrini-Green.

The practices CYCLE alums said enabled their positive life outcomes and the design principles staff deemed foundational to program operations provide important lessons for policy makers, educators, community activists, funders, youth agency directors, and others who want to learn what makes a youth organization effective in changing the lives of low-income, marginalized youth today.

This long-term account also raises questions for researchers and evaluators about when and how to consider program effects. The usual impact assessment conducted after program involvement ended would have missed many important CYCLE-shaped outcomes; it would have missed, for instance, how one participant who became a teen mom in the mid-1990s finished her EdD in 2015. The life stories told here challenge researchers to attend to more than quantitative tallies of program outcomes, such as graduation rates and college degrees, to consider evidence of program values enacted in life choices, such as family stability, careers, and community engagement.

A lot has happened in the out-of-school time (OST) arena since we set out to learn about effective programs for urban youth in the mid-1980s. The field has expanded exponentially, and much has been learned about the characteristics of effective OST initiatives. Other
sources offer narrative accounts and research reviews of youth programs that made a difference for poor youth and discuss elements associated with high-quality programs. This book, however, is distinctive in its follow-up account of participants’ lives more than three decades later and their reflections on how and why program elements enabled them to attain their positive futures and build important supports for their children.

Finally, You Can’t Be What You Can’t See makes a significant argument about how to frame policies intended to benefit youth living in high-poverty settings. It pushes explicitly against culture of poverty explanations for the distressing social, education, and economic outcomes reported for poor youth of color, most especially black males. According to a culture of poverty perspective, not only does poverty largely determine an individual’s life outcomes, but the negative outcomes associated with growing up in concentrated poverty predictably persist across generations. This book puts forth importantly different assumptions to guide youth policy and practice. These compelling life accounts show that these inequities result not from a culture of poverty but, rather, as the title of the book suggests, from a poverty of opportunities that could allow young people to see and take a different path.

ORGANIZATION

You Can’t Be What You Can’t See proceeds in three parts. Following a portrait of life in Cabrini-Green based on accounts of social historians and on the lived experiences of CYCLE kids and senior staff, Part I describes the CYCLE program—its activities, core design principles, and the opportunities offered participating youth. Part II takes up the three factors alums named as reasons why their involvement with CYCLE constituted a turning point in their lives and set them on a positive, productive pathway out of poverty: exposure, mentoring, and community. Part III considers what made CYCLE effective and discusses implications for practice, policy, and research.
Because CYCLE operated in an especially difficult, dangerous, and toxic environment for children and adolescents, it is important to understand how CYCLE functioned in this context, what made it so effective, and why its accomplishments are extraordinary.