

UNLOCK STUDENTS'  
**POTENTIAL**



# UNLOCK STUDENTS' POTENTIAL

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A BLUEPRINT FOR TRANSFORMING  
AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

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DANIEL ARMSTRONG



**Daniel Armstrong®**

BEHIND EVERY SUCCESS STORY IS A DREAMER

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ALSO WRITTEN BY DANIEL ARMSTRONG

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**HOW TO LIVE YOUR DREAMS**

*Find a Tree and Get Started*

**LIVE YOUR DREAMS NOW**

*Read About It! Write About It! And Do Something!*

**FIND A TREE IN A NUTSHELL**

*From Dreamers to Doers*

**FREE SOUTH AFRICA**

*The Columbia University Divestment Movement:  
A Personal Perspective*



“

**By helping individuals to achieve their dreams,  
we unleash the full force of the world's most powerful  
resource: human potential.**

”

**—Laurene Powell Jobs**

Businesswoman, philanthropist, and widow of Steve Jobs



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# THE FIND A TREE PROGRAM

# PRAISE FOR FIND A TREE

Students from elementary school through high school, from private and public institutions, have utilized the Find A Tree program.

## Improved Academic Performance

**After 16 weeks in the Find A Tree program, students at Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles showed a 44 percent increase in their overall grade point average and a 35 percent decrease in failing grades.**

Data compiled by Gus Reynoso  
Teacher  
Roosevelt High School,  
Los Angeles, California

**“[The Find A Tree program] has been instrumental in assisting us with our goal to increase student achievement.”**

Dr. Yolanda T. Rangel  
Assistant Principal of Instruction  
Roosevelt High School  
Los Angeles, California

**“From the perspective of one who has taught in the Los Angeles Unified School District for more than 25 years...Find A Tree is the most effective day-to-day program I’ve seen in terms of encouraging students to develop meaningful goals and then relating the importance of education**

**to achievement of those goals.”**

Randy Fong  
Teacher  
Roosevelt High School  
Los Angeles, California

**“The Find A Tree Program encourages the student to examine his or her aspirations. By learning the guiding principles presented in the program, the student begins to dream of possibilities, create real life projects, develop responsibility, and take ownership of his or her future endeavors.”**

Beverly Silverstein  
Teacher Training Magnet  
Coordinator  
Crenshaw High School  
Los Angeles, California

## **Better Attitudes and Behavior**

**“The Find A Tree program is turning failures into people who now have purpose.”**

Tyanna  
Student  
View Park Continuation Community High School  
Los Angeles, California

**“La Cresha [was]... a borderline student with unacceptable classroom behavior... La Cresha has become a more motivated and on-task student. Her behavior has improved as has her grade in my class. She has begun to put in the effort and time required to be a good student, knowing that she needs to do well in school to do well in life... The difference is visible and, hopefully, long lasting.”**

Gloria Pepin  
Science Teacher  
Dorsey High School  
Los Angeles, California

**“My students have embraced this program and have literally transformed... Find A Tree is a structured method that supports students, linking education to their dreams. This program has a very grounding and motivating force to help students master their academic subjects.”**

Wanda Szeremeta  
Life Skills Teacher  
Manual Arts High School  
Los Angeles, California

**“The Find A Tree program has rekindled in my students the ability to once again dream and believe in themselves.”**

Miriam Broadnex  
Life Skills Teacher  
Johnson Community Day School  
Los Angeles, California

## Personalization of the School Experience

**“The goal of the advisory period was to extend our school-wide vision of personalization and building relationships with our students into our homeroom classes. [The Find A Tree program] went far beyond that expectation.”**

Ronald R. Steele  
Principal  
Pio Pico Span School  
Los Angeles, California

**“Find A Tree helps students find themselves, their dream, and connect with school. Find A Tree is the starting line to the greatest goal in life: the achievement of living your dream.”**

Angel Jimenez  
Student and Find A Tree program graduate  
Roosevelt High School  
Los Angeles, California

## Revitalized Teacher and Staff Morale

**“By creating the opportunity for our staff to open up and share our own individual dreams in the field of education, it has led to a closer staff and given each of us the opportunity to examine and develop what motivates and fuels us in our work.”**

Amber Young  
Resource Teacher  
Bunche Elementary School  
Compton, California

**“Find A Tree training [is] a powerful and potentially life-changing experience for the young people of our beleaguered inner cities and as a source of career reinvigoration for teachers and coaches of the young whose commitments to their callings may have softened over time or whose hearts may have hardened by years of frustration with the status quo.”**

Ronald L. Davis  
Math Teacher  
Roosevelt High School  
Los Angeles, California

**“Daniel Armstrong gave the teachers a plan to get started on creative ways to communicate, educate, and inspire our students...When we show [students] they have value and treat them with dignity they will begin to change on their own. We might even be surprised at how much they have to offer. Then we can begin to help them become who and what they want to be. This is the Find A Tree Principle of how to connect students’ learning to their dreams.”**

Rita Barrett  
Teacher  
Roy Romer Middle School  
Los Angeles, California

## Effective Gang Intervention

**“If it wasn’t for Find A Tree, I would be dead by now.”**

Jonathan Ortega  
Inmate and Find A Tree program graduate  
Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility  
Whittier, California

**“I have never seen or been involved with a program as powerful and productive as [Find A Tree]. [The] program has successfully developed the talents and gifts of each participant by helping [them] to live their dreams.”**

Patrick Czarny  
Counselor  
California Youth Authority  
Whittier, California

**“The ‘Find A Tree’ program is set up similar to a road map that helps us visualize the steps needed to take in order to accomplish our goals in life. This program shows us how we can utilize our gifts and talents for the purpose of our lives and how we can contribute back to our community.”**

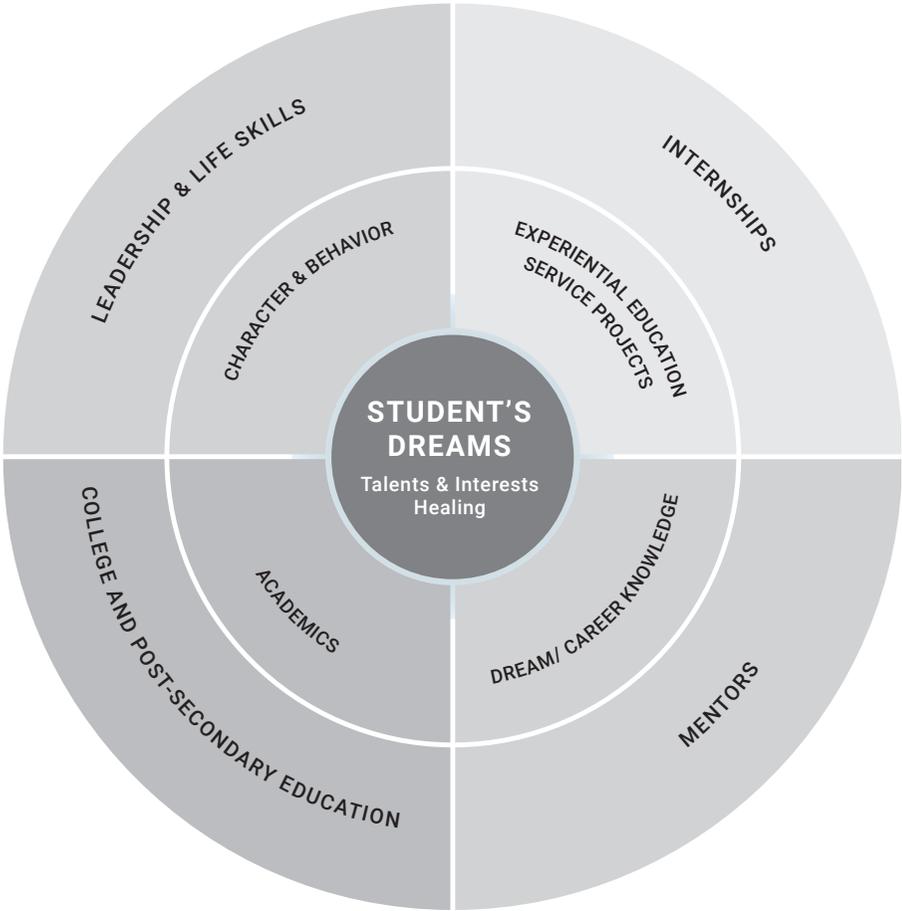
Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility  
Juvenile Inmates and Find A Tree program graduates  
in a letter to the director of the California Youth Authority  
Whittier, California



## BACKGROUND

Daniel Armstrong worked in Ghana, West Africa, for two years, pursuing business and development projects. While there, he also worked with Ghanaian youth, coaching basketball and teaching them how to launch their own businesses. Two of those youths, twin brothers Jonas and Jonathan Atingbui, dreamed of having a school of their own. However, they had no building or other resources. Armstrong advised them to “find a tree and start their school there.” Soon, Jonas and Jonathan had nearly 100 students coming to their school under a tree. Seeing their success, a businessman in the community gave Jonas and Jonathan a new building he had constructed to use as their school. That is how the Find A Tree program got its name and its inspiration.

# THE FIND A TREE EDUCATION MODEL



# INTRODUCTION

**Find A Tree** is a **student-centered, student-driven** learning program that brings a new approach to education and youth development. The program helps students identify and actualize their dreams by connecting their dreams to academics and initiative.

Founded in 1999, Daniel Armstrong created Find A Tree to be a **transformative**, systemic program to raise student achievement and help students of all ages and backgrounds achieve their dreams. The program's approach is grounded on six fundamental pillars to promote individual achievement: **ambition, understanding, belief, action, resilience, and urgency.**

The purpose of the Find A Tree curriculum is to provide students with the **life skills** and **psychological tools** to make their careers and life dreams a reality. The Find A Tree program helps students become self-empowered, motivated, and proactive, showing them how to take ownership of their education and careers. Find A Tree provides students the foundation to be **career and college ready.** Despite the obstacles and challenges they may face as students, they learn how to produce **excellence** and results, not excuses.

The Find A Tree method for motivating students complements teachers' efforts within the classroom by strengthening the values and work ethic of their students. It's the foundation for **improved grades, higher graduation rates,** a commitment to **community service,** and the pursuit of **higher education.** Find A Tree shows students how to take age-appropriate action today. This focus on **"action now"** engages, motivates, and produces immediate academic **results** by connecting their personal goals to their **academic achievement.**



# THE FIND A TREE PRINCIPLES

1. Identify What You Are Passionate About—Your Interests, Talents, and Gifts
2. Determine Your Dream: Find a Tree and Get Started
3. Explore Life
4. Nurture Your Dream with Knowledge
5. Empower Yourself
6. Be Willing to March into Hell
7. Build the Trust of Others
8. Embrace Struggle
9. Sometimes You Just Have to Have Faith
10. Create Opportunities through Service
11. Value People
12. Plan, Prioritize, and Manage Your Time
13. Distinguish Yourself with Excellence
14. Understand the Process: From a Seed to a Tree
15. Tap Into Your Creative Genius
16. You Will Achieve What You Expect and Try For
17. Lead Yourself
18. Start a Business
19. Work in Harmony with Universal Law (There Is No Santa Claus)



# PATHWAYS TO YOUR DREAM FOR YOUTH

1. Look Within: Identify What You Enjoy Doing
2. What's Your Dream?: Imagine Your Future...It All Begins with a Dream
3. Explore Life: Try New Activities and Explore New Interests
4. Learn About Your Dream: Read About It
5. Depend Upon Yourself: Accept Responsibility for Making Your Dream Come True
6. Mistakes Happen: Learn from Them
7. Earn the Trust of Others: Keep Your Word
8. Face the Challenge: Don't Quit
9. Think Positively: Focus on the Goal, Not the Obstacle
10. Help Others: Make the World a Better Place
11. Value People: Treat All People with Respect
12. Make A Plan: Write Down What You Are Going to Do Today, Tomorrow, and Next Week
13. Produce Excellence: Do Your Best...And Then a Little More
14. Big Dreams Start Small: Take Action—Today!
15. Be Creative: Find Solutions
16. Believe in Yourself: Think, "Yes I Can"
17. Be a Leader: Be An Example
18. Start a Business: Make Something, Do Something, Sell Something
19. It's Not a Birthday Party: Knowledge + Action = Your Dream



# THE VISION

**I**magine a school where every student finds his or her tree; every student would have identifiable dreams that he or she were actively exploring. They would all have a purpose for attending school: to turn their dreams into reality. Imagine a school where each teacher, staff member, and administrator would understand his or her purpose: to provide students with the academic foundation, life skills, and psychological tools necessary to pursue and realize their dreams. Students would be motivated to learn, for they would know that their dreams were not simply something to be talked about, but something to be addressed and grappled with now. Students would learn the theoretical in the classroom, but also be encouraged to perform practical applications of their dream through service projects.

Imagine a school where students work in small groups with other students who share a common passion, and these students work collectively to help each other achieve. Imagine a school where students excel because they want to learn and live their dream, a school where even the students who once rebelled find their niche and are inspired to achieve. Imagine a school that schedules time for students to heal their emotional wounds by talking about traumatic life experiences they never before shared. Imagine a school where teachers would be respected because they demonstrate the same respect for students.

This vision requires a new approach to education, an approach that begins where education should: helping students to look inside to find their gifts and talents. This approach would provide students with the academic foundation, life skills, and psychological tools to manifest those talents, gifts, and dreams. This approach would make students whole again and school a place that give birth to students' dreams.

## EDUCATION: INSIDE OUT

**T**he word *education* comes from the Latin word *educere*, which means to bring out or draw out. If we use this as our guiding principle in educating students, we will be on a new, more effective path to raising student achievement and addressing the nation's dropout crisis. Education should help students draw out what lies within—their talents, interests, passions, and dreams. In bringing out their dreams, education must provide them with the academic and experiential knowledge necessary to realize their goals and dreams.

I once met with a young man who had graduated from Harvard University three months earlier. He hoped I could provide him with guidance and direction. I asked, "What are your talents and interests? What are you passionate about?" He was dumbfounded. He had never thought about that before. Seeing that he was struggling to respond, I said, "You spent four years at Harvard studying Socrates, Plato, and others but never took the time to study yourself?" This process of self-examination should have begun in elementary school, not after his college graduation.

Another time, I was invited to speak to student leaders at the University of Southern California. I asked them what I thought was a simple question: "What are your dreams?" These high-achieving students were befuddled. Their faces suggested that they did not quite understand the question. "Dreams? What does he mean?" Clearly, they thought that just being in college was sufficient. They apparently had no dreams. Finally, after several moments of awkward silence, three students raised their hands. One wanted a new car. Another hoped to graduate in four years. The third wanted a high score on his Law School Admission Test. Now I was the one who was befuddled.

“These are not dreams. These are expectations. You are USC students. You should finish in four years. A high LSAT score? Study hard, take a prep course, and you will get a high score. A new car? Show a car dealer proof of employment and you can finance a new car.” The students were doing what was expected of them—going to college—but they had no personal purpose or passion for being there.

In order for students to learn and achieve, they must explore what lies within. They must ask themselves, “What are my talents, interests, and dreams?” The education process must begin with what lies within students and then provide them with the academic, psychological, and life skills necessary to manifest their goals and dreams. When students connect their education to their dreams, attitudes, behavior, and academic achievement will all improve, and they will be on the path to reaching their potential.

# THE PROBLEM

**“WHEN YOU LOSE YOUR DREAM YOU DIE.  
THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE WALKING AROUND DEAD  
AND DON’T EVEN KNOW IT.”**

—Unknown

**A**t the heart of the challenge facing schools in America is a fundamental problem: students have given up. They have the tangible resources they need: textbooks, qualified teachers, and computers. What they lack are the intangibles: hope, motivation, and dreams. Any administrator can create a wish list of additional resources. However, a larger investment in material items will only bring a marginal increase in student achievement. Intangibles like desire and self-direction have a larger impact on student success than any textbook or lesson plan ever created. Students who want to learn will learn. They can overcome any budget gap or outdated facility, but students with no interest in learning have a barrier too high to surmount.

I once attended a teachers' meeting at a public high school in Los Angeles at which the facilitator announced that 85 percent of the students at the school were failing both math and English. Alarmed, I figured I must have misunderstood, so I asked the person next to me to confirm the numbers that had just been announced. I had heard correctly. I eagerly waited for the teachers and administrators to discuss their plan for addressing this crisis. There was no plan. They quickly moved on to the school's tardy policy.

As the meeting concluded, I asked a teacher how the failure rate would be addressed. She said that that was just the way it was.

These teachers seemed to have given up. They apparently had lost interest in transforming and inspiring students. That was the real source of the problem. Teachers must lead by example. They must have a passion for their career. If not, they must somehow rediscover the passion that attracted them to education in the first place. Students, conversely, must come to understand that they are in school to make their dreams a reality. In a day and age when parents are often not available to monitor students' study habits, motivation becomes an even more critical component of achievement.

Once, while working with a group of high school students in Los Angeles, I asked them to list their talents, interests, and dreams. Then I asked them to share their list with their classmates. The students were terrified. Only after I suggested that we turn out the lights and that the students put their heads down were they willing to share their lists with one another.

A few weeks later, I did the same exercise with a class of fifth graders at First Street Elementary School, which was in the same neighborhood. The elementary students were excited about standing in front of the class and sharing their dreams. I was amazed. I told them that many students at the nearby high school were embarrassed to share their dreams with their classmates. The fifth graders were confused. Then one student raised his hand and asked, "Mister, have they given up on their dreams?" I said, "Maybe they have."

Even students who have dreams and understand their importance often fail to take appropriate action to bring them about. Many do not connect being in school with realizing their dreams. This lack of focus leaves many students open to negative influences such as gangs and drugs.

Gang members constantly recruit. They provide new members with a road map for rising in the ranks of the gang. By contrast, parents, teachers, and other responsible adults often expect students to navigate their own path, but many young people get lost along the way. We, too, must provide students a road map to help them achieve their dreams.

Lack of purpose not only affects students in the inner city but in suburban private schools as well. I once met with an administrator at one such school to discuss the value of the Find A Tree program. He told me his school already had anti-bulimia, anti-anorexia, anti-drug, and anti-suicide classes. I asked, "Is there something wrong with your students since so many 'anti' classes are needed?" Later, I took students from the school to meet with young people incarcerated in a juvenile correctional facility. The juvenile offenders had completed the Find A Tree program. Despite being incarcerated, the juvenile offenders had begun to work on projects based on their dreams. During the meeting with the students from the private school, the facilitator asked both groups of students, "What are you doing in your own community to build a better world?" The inmates said they had started a school in their unit, with outside instructors speaking to them about automotive mechanics, construction, and other topics. They said they had put aside their gang rivalries and were working together.

The students from the private school were silent. Then one of them said, "We have everything, but we are doing nothing with it." These students left the jail stunned. They went there to encourage the juvenile inmates to turn their lives around. Instead, the inmates had shown them that they, too, needed to find their tree—their purpose. After hearing what had occurred at the juvenile jail, the administrators at the school came to recognize that their students needed to find their trees as well.

Today, students are programmed to go to college, but college is not the panacea for living your dream. Students should examine who they are, what their talents, interests, and dreams are, and select an educational plan that will enable them to realize their goals and dreams. This was stated very well by a dedicated and inspired math teacher from Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, Mario Aguirre, who said the following:

“I ask my students if they know why they are going to college and they always give vague answers. This means they are going to college, which is good, but they are going without their trees. I told them that the college experience would be much more powerful when a student has a dream that triggers vigorous focus and efficient energy.”

Students must look within themselves, define their dreams, and then link their dreams with their education. But they also need practical experience. This can be gained through service projects related to a student's dream. It should also provide benefits for others. By gaining hands-on experience, students are more likely to be able to translate their plans into a productive, practical reality.

# THE STARTING POINT

## THE STUDENT/TEACHER RELATIONSHIP

**“A TEACHER MUST FIRST GAIN THEIR  
STUDENTS’ LOVE AND TRUST.”**

—John Wooden  
Legendary Former UCLA Basketball Coach

**M**anaging a classroom through intimidation may succeed in keeping students quiet and busy. However, that approach will not instill motivation in students. It will not instill in them a true desire to learn. Students will submit out of fear of negative consequences, but the moment the teacher is no longer looking, chaos will reign. The challenge is for teachers to inspire their students to take ownership of their education.

Creating a classroom culture based on mutual respect between students and teachers is required to get students to take responsibility for their education. This approach takes time. Initially, students will take advantage of this approach. At Dorsey High School in Los Angeles, an administrator used the intimidation approach with students in the Find A Tree class. When one student offered an excuse for not having done his homework, this administrator, who was African-American, told the student, who was also African-American, that he was going to “slap the black off” of the student for offering such an excuse. Unfortunately, the Bruce Willis Foundation, which was funding me to work with at-risk students at that school and teach the Find A Tree program, preferred the intimidation approach. I was fired for not adopting the approach they preferred. Telling students, in essence, to sit down and shut up does not motivate them to achieve. It only brings temporary order and diminishes their self-esteem. An approach based on mutual respect builds self-esteem.

Establishing an environment of mutual trust must begin the moment a teacher meets the student. The teacher must set the example. If students' dreams are placed at the center of the educational process and the students are made to understand how school can help them pursue their dreams, they are more likely to cooperate.

When teaching the Find A Tree class, I recognize that students will take advantage when an approach of mutual respect is used. After ensuring that students understand the purpose of the class—to help them achieve their dreams—I inform them that I have an “open-door policy.” The door is open and they are free to leave and do something else—play basketball, talk with friends, anything—so long as they do it somewhere else. Despite this invitation to leave, no student has ever left the class. When the students remain, they all have publicly acknowledged that they want to be there.

At that point, I list the rules the students will have to abide by in order to remain in the Find A Tree class. Most do not respond initially to an approach of mutual respect. Confronting their disruptive behavior with an invitation to leave is a critical first step in having students take ownership of their education. The teacher's responsibility is to help students pursue their dreams in exchange for their cooperation.

As John Wooden said, “A teacher must first gain their students' love and trust.” This is done by connecting with students and showing them that you care. Connecting with them will often mean approaching them as human beings and not as inferior beings over whom the teacher rules.

I once taught juvenile inmates at the Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility in Whittier, California. I never asked them about their criminal offenses. I focused on helping them uncover their talents, interests, passions, and dreams. Most had never thought about their dreams. Many struggled to identify their talents and interests. By challenging them to dream and look within themselves to find their passions, I demonstrated that I saw them as more than criminals. This seemed to convey to them that I cared—the next step in motivating students.

Once these juvenile offenders identified their dreams, they were challenged to gain knowledge about the area of their interest. I promised to bring them books about those interests. These young men were not accustomed to people keeping their word. Once each of them had received a book, trust was established. I had kept my word.

Motivating these students required a relationship based on mutual respect. My approach was to treat them as equals, although I was clearly in charge. I did not remind them that I had never joined a gang or committed a violent crime. I never reminded them that I was the authority figure, that I was older or that I had several degrees. I told them that I expected to learn from their life experiences, and I hoped that they would learn from mine. Although some of these young men had been incarcerated for murder and rape, I did not present myself as being better than them. I gave them respect.

A critical event that strengthened my relationship with the juvenile offenders occurred on Thanksgiving, when I ate dinner with them. I walked to the dining hall with my hands in my pockets, as the prisoners were required to do for security purposes. I conformed to all the security procedures that they were required to follow in the dining hall. The prison staff stared at me strangely. The young inmates were shocked and amused.

I did this again for Christmas dinner. It went over so well that I decided to eat dinner with them the three nights a week that I was at the facility. The facility's superintendent was alerted to my unusual approach, and I was called into her office. I was told sternly that the staff was upset by my eating dinner with the inmates and, although it broke no rules, she was going to have to charge me for the food. I said, "Fine. How much will that be?" She said matter-of-factly, "That will be \$1.66 for dinner." I smiled. I couldn't help but wonder if she really understood why I was eating dinner with the inmates and whether she thought I was just looking for a free meal.

Soon the approach paid off. Word began spreading among the inmates that "Armstrong ate our food." By humbling myself, even if it meant challenging the norms, I was accepted by the inmates as someone who cared.

Having established a good relationship with the juvenile inmates, I was better able to motivate them when they failed to do their work in the Find A Tree class I taught at the facility. I could not institute my open-door policy, which they would have loved to utilize. Instead, I told them I could not teach them, since they were not doing their work, and I left.

Staff members told me later that members of the class spent the next three days working to complete their assignments, sometimes writing in the shower area when other space was not available. A few stayed up until 3 a.m. to finish their work.

You can view the video "Live Your Dream: Now or Never" about the Find A Tree program at the juvenile facility at [www.DanielArmstrong.com](http://www.DanielArmstrong.com) under Youth - At-Risk Youth tab.

Watch the video "Live Your Dream: Now or Never" made by the juvenile inmates: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzStOJEO72o>

# FIND A TREE VIDEO DOCUMENTARY

## “HOPE FOR AMERICAN EDUCATION”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBnpgghom3Ns&t=448s>

Watch Daniel unlock students' potential.



**Daniel Armstrong®**

BEHIND EVERY SUCCESS STORY IS A DREAMER

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Armstrong is a dream coach, author, and motivational speaker. He's widely recognized for his work within the American education system—providing empowerment programs to educators, administrators, and students through his Find A Tree program.

Daniel's mission is to inspire and mentor both youth and adults to pursue and actualize their dreams. Daniel Armstrong earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Columbia University in New York City. At Columbia, Armstrong was the founding chairman of the Coalition for a Free South Africa, an organization whose four-year campaign resulted in Columbia divesting from corporations operating in apartheid South Africa. Armstrong earned his Master's degree in Business Administration and Juris Doctorate both from UCLA. He is also a Ford Foundation Fellow, having studied youth development in Zimbabwe, where he organized a national tour by the Harlem Magicians, an American basketball team. The tour's opening night game was the largest multiracial gathering at that point in Zimbabwe's then brief history, following twenty years of civil war.

For more information on Daniel Armstrong and his Find A Tree program, visit [www.DanielArmstrong.com](http://www.DanielArmstrong.com).



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**Find A Tree brings a new approach to youth development by helping students to identify and actualize their dreams, and by connecting their dreams to academics and initiative.**

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“From the perspective of one who has taught in the district for more than 25 years...[the Find A Tree] program, in my view, is the most effective day-to-day program I’ve seen in terms of encouraging students to develop meaningful goals and then relating the importance of education to achievement of those goals.”

**RANDY FONG**

Teacher  
Los Angeles Unified School District

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“Never In my 32 years of teaching and counseling have I experienced self-esteem raising results in adolescents in such a short period of time.”

**PAT BAYLIS**

Counselor  
Los Angeles Unified School District

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“Find A Tree opens the doors to a whole new world that children can not only dream about, but make it a reality. This step-by-step approach gives every child the opportunity to succeed and follow their dream!”

**STELLA CONTRERAS**

Parent Facilitator  
Los Angeles Unified School District

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