

## THE CAPITOL CONNECTION

# Charting a New Course on Charter Schools

*Thanks to changes, we're beginning to see results statewide*

By Alan S. Chartock

As a kid, I went for a while to a terrible high school on Manhattan's West Side. It's long been closed. This is not to disparage the great teachers I had or the lifelong friends I made there. Nevertheless, the place was awful.

My mother was an influential West Side figure who devoted her life to education and to helping underserved kids get into college. My son, Jonas, is running a charter schools policy institute in Texas. They're doing wonderful work trying to figure out what works in publicly funded charter schools and what doesn't. My wife is a full professor of education who has spent her career trying to improve the way in which we teach our kids. She is not alone. There are many people who genuinely want to help kids learn and who are committed to improving the way our schools work. We all have that in common.

There is great frustration in New York State over the charter schools movement. There are those who are committed to stopping this movement in its tracks. When the Legislature passed the bill that allowed these schools, they created a model in which the money follows the student. Critics of the idea say this has left the already challenged school infrastructures around the state short of funds. What's more, they say, the charter schools are allowed to be more creative than the public schools and are left with fewer of the troublesome mandates that have created crushing burdens on our public schools.

Many school boards in upstate New York have real and genuine concerns about the drain on their already limited resources. As a result, there is heightening tension about lifting the cap on the number of charter schools there can be.

We are beginning to see some results. There can be no doubt that a number of charter schools have been so effective that some of their approaches are already

They've taken out ads targeting him, annoying some of his Democratic (majority) colleagues who are actually in favor of charter schools. This is a bad approach. Reason and success are what will win out, not tough boy, bullying tactics. What's more, some people are for the charter school movement just because they don't want to spend money on public schools. Shame on them.

I'll tell you where I sit. I have grudgingly become a fan of those charter schools which are doing phenomenal work, but I think that if state legislators want these schools they should provide a separate pot of money for them and not turn educator against educator and parent against parent by taking money away from public schools for the charter schools. If the charters are successful, the public schools will continue to copy their good ideas.

After all, the whole point of the exercise is to help the kids. Furthermore, public schools should be unburdened from some of the onerous and numerous mandates that have been plaguing them for years. It is imperative that those charter schools which are not doing good work should be carefully monitored by the state and closed lest they go the way of the failed community school boards in New York which were so often plagued by political intrigue and corrupt practices.

There is no reason why the charter schools can't continue to do their own good work without causing harm to our public education system; quite the reverse. Let's have both. That way, the kids really do win.

**There can be no doubt that a number of charter schools have been so effective that some of their approaches are already being replicated in other state-supported schools.**

being replicated in other state-supported schools. This is precisely the reason why these schools were established — to challenge public institutions to do better. When you see kids going to school for longer school days and even, in some cases, for longer school weeks and school years, particularly in neighborhood schools in inner cities, you have reason to support this movement. On the other hand, many of these schools have not produced results. In some cases, the usual bad reasons — jobs and political influence — have ruined any chance for success.

Those who want the legislative cap lifted on how many charters there can be in New York have become frustrated and have turned their ire on a great champion of public education, Assemblyman Ron Canestrari.

## A MANHATTAN MEMOIR

# Out of the Dunk Tank, Into the Holding Tank

*My effort to upstage Blaine and draw attention to the Sudan*

By Taylor Krauss

Earlier this month, I tried to steal David Blaine's show. In my own tank, just across the street from Blaine's breath-holding stunt, I submerged myself to bring attention to the fact that Darfuris are losing their lives every day, while we stand by literally holding our breath.

I hadn't trained with the Navy Seals, nor did I hold any previous world records, and ABC wasn't airing a special about me. I had spent my week in the office. But the opportunity to subvert Blaine's media circus was something I just could not miss.

We set up our "Dunk for Darfur" tank at 64th and Broadway, strung a hose across the street, and began to fill our 250-gallon drum. I was already stripped to my boxers and a small crowd had formed when we discovered a kink in the hose. With it straightened out and the water flowing again, I still worried we wouldn't be ready in time for a head-to-head competition with Blaine.

My partner in crime, Ted Alcorn, eagerly pressed his half-naked body through the crowd at Lincoln Center trying to divert their attention. "A genocide is occurring while the world holds its breath. How many Darfuris must die while Blaine holds his?" he shouted. Over 200,000 people have been killed in the last three years and over 2 million have been displaced.

An elderly woman who lived in the building overlooking the spectacle came down to investigate. "My son would be so happy that you're doing this for Darfur, even if you don't beat him," she said. I needed to warm up if I was going to have a chance—I went under.

A tapping on the plastic window broke my concentration. I resurfaced just in time to be pulled from my tank by two New York police officers. There I was, across the intersection from Blaine, feeling a lot more like him than I had bargained for. Now, I really had an audience.

When they brought me to the precinct, I was still dripping wet. I heard people jeering. "Hey look, it's David Blaine," they were saying. From my cell I could hear the

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ABC special blaring, and the officers joked about my stunt while they filed the paperwork.

One cop approached my cell.

"What's Darfur?" she asked. And then, "What's genocide?"

Before I could finish answering her, I overheard another officer ask, "What does he care about Darfur if he lives in New York?"

The news came in that Blaine gave up after 7 minutes and 8 seconds. I tried doing the rough math. Between one and two Darfuris had been killed while he was underwater, and at least 9 had been driven from their homes. Nearly 1,500 lives had been taken during the week Blaine was submerged, and 12,000 were displaced.

When I was out of prison and back in my clothes hours later, I found myself wondering: sure, I was free,

but had our stunt been a total failure?

"Dunk for Darfur" had been picked up the BBC, bounced around blogs in Australia, and later resurfaced in the Nigerian Tribune. People were talking about the stunt. But the actual news from Darfur was dismal. The night before, while the world watched Blaine, violence had erupted in the Kalma refugee camp and an interpreter had been killed. The refugees wanted African Union (AU) forces to be replaced by UN peacekeeping troops, who could truly enforce the cease-fire, which was supposed to have gone into effect that day.

Despite the cease-fire, the violence has continued, and real international pressure is needed more than ever. Until the U.S. takes every step possible to stop the genocide in Darfur, citizens of our country must continue to push our government to do so.

Opportunities present themselves every day to insert this crisis in the public consciousness. Two weeks ago, five members of the U.S. Congress were arrested demonstrating outside the Sudanese embassy. George Clooney lent his star-power at a rally for Darfur in Washington, DC. Even "ER" took up the challenge with an episode featuring Sudan.

I am due in court on June 29 because I failed to obtain the proper permits for our dunk tank. But I have no regrets for standing up for what I believe, and I hope that my time before the judge will present yet another opportunity to bring people together in show of support for Darfur.

*Taylor Krauss is an independent filmmaker living on the East Side.*