

## Genius at Change

Social entrepreneur Bill Strickland offers advice from the frontlines of change -- San Francisco's non-profit Bayview-Hunters Point Center for Arts and Technology.

by **Anni Layne**

Bill Strickland sparks revolution from the inside out. He is a change agent with more than 30 years of experience, but he resembles no other change agent in any industry, any company, or any government agency. That's because Strickland's "inside" is not IBM, Ford, or the U.S. Mint. His transformations and surrections effect whole families, communities, and cities. He is a change agent for society.

In September 1998, Fast Company documented Strickland's social initiatives in a story titled [Genius at Work](#). That article introduced Strickland's brand of social change and his work with the Bidwell Training Center and Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, two Pittsburgh-based programs he founded that teach marketable skills and trades to 400 underprivileged youths and nearly 500 adults each year. For the past seven years, 75% to 80% of the high-risk high-school kids in his after-school arts program have gone on to college. 78% of the adults who graduate from his vocational program find jobs. And he's only just begun.

Since Fast Company last spoke with him, Strickland -- a MacArthur Foundation "genius" -- has expanded his operation. In the spring of 1999, Strickland officially became a change agent for the city of San Francisco. On May 20, he -- along with Mayor Willie Brown and jazz legend Herbie Hancock -- disclosed plans for the non-profit Bayview-Hunters Point Center for Arts and Technology ( BAYCAT ) in a south-west neighborhood of San Francisco.

The proposed center will be modeled after Strickland's headquarters in Pittsburgh -- a 62,000-square-foot, honey-colored brick building designed by a pupil of Frank Lloyd Wright that houses a staff of more than 110 trainers, teachers, and mentors. BAYCAT's 80,000-square-foot campus will stand on 5 acres of previously contaminated shipyard land leased by the city and it will cost up roughly \$30 million to build. In short, it is a huge project with one driving goal: To drastically change the economic and social landscape of one of the Bay Area's most under-served neighborhoods.

"Environment is the cornerstone of community," Strickland says. "If an environment is violent, destructive, destabilized, and discouraging, the citizens will feel and act exactly the same way. If the environment is hopeful, nourishing, and positive -- if it generates the capacity for income and wealth accumulation -- then the population will reflect that. In my view, there can't be any change unless

the fundamentals of the environment are in place to encourage that growth and creativity."

So far, Strickland and the city of San Francisco have recruited an all-star board of directors containing Cisco Systems, Hewlett-Packard, and Arthur Anderson, among others. With BAYCAT's groundbreaking tentatively scheduled for next fall, Strickland says they will begin a formal capital campaign in early 2001. In the meantime, he will continue to make powerful connections within the Bay Area, initiate strong local partnerships, and push forward a change initiative that Mayor Brown's office calls "groundbreaking -- a key catalyst project."

Fast Company spoke with Strickland at the magazine's recent [Community@Work](#) event in Denver, and asked him to describe the challenges and rewards of effecting change throughout a community and, eventually, throughout the world. Following is his change mantra and his advice for revolutionaries with heart.

### **Nourish Versatility and Sensibility**

"The attitude that accompanies my work in Pittsburgh is the most valuable commodity that I can bring to San Francisco. It's far more important than the programs themselves. As I begin working with new city officials and new organizations in San Francisco, I must remain aware of my responsibility to listen to the local environment, to analyze the local environment, and to talk with the people who live in the community. More than ever, I must remain flexible and responsive to change. Like any change agent, I must drop the idea that there is a predetermined right and a predetermined wrong. I must change my ideas in the face of reality.

"That's a good lesson for anybody, but it's a crucial model for my organization as it works to roll out models in San Francisco, and elsewhere across the country. The methodology by which we expand will determine the outcome."

### **Build a People's Republic of Change**

"I've learned that if you're not including people at the front end, you're not going to include them at the back end. If that happens, you will not be successful. To me, success is tied to the willingness and ability of people in any given community to take ownership of a project or an institution. I'm brokering the process in San Francisco rather than initiating the process. I'm handing it over to the people."

### **Forge a Language for Change**

"Humility, imagination, excitement, intuition, subjectivity, and respect -- those are all words I use to characterize the work of Bidwell Training Center and of Manchester Craftsmen's Guild. They also characterize how we feel about ourselves. I make sure those words are kept in active circulation in our conversations as my co-workers as I begin to plan the various programs, structures, and methodologies for our San Francisco expansion. We must make

sure that we are not pretentious, that we are listening, that we are open and responsive to people, and that we treat each other with respect so that BAYCAT may become a culture rather than a program. Our set of values and our attitude about living must be reflected through our programs."

Contact Bill Strickland ( [wstrickland@earthlink.net](mailto:wstrickland@earthlink.net) ) for more information about the Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, the Bidwell Training Center, and BAYCAT.

*This article appeared in **Fast Company Magazine***