





# GAME Changers

Their names may not often make headlines, but their power as catalysts for transformational work is indisputable. Meet six individuals who are crafting innovative solutions to our community's most pressing social, educational, cultural, and civic needs.

BY JULIE DUGDALE & DALIAH SINGER / PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT NAGER

## WONDER Kid

**Daniel Epstein**

CO-FOUNDER, *The Unreasonable Institute*

→ When most people consider starting a business, they mull over things like long-term strategy, building a business plan, and how to beat the competition. When Daniel Epstein, co-founder of the Unreasonable Institute, decided to start one, he thought about how it could positively affect the community.

And so the Unreasonable Institute was born. Epstein calls the group a “mentorship-driven acceleration program for entrepreneurs tackling social and environmental problems” that brings 25 entrepreneurs together to live under one roof—like a fraternity house for intellectuals. The third Institute will be held in 2012.

Having started two companies and one nonprofit as a University of Colorado Boulder freshman, Epstein, now 25, was looking to put into practice his idea that a business focused on influ-

ence above profit could succeed. “Those initial companies were designed to attack a social issue directly, to turn it into an opportunity and leverage business to have an impact,” Epstein says. “I was looking for a community of fellow misfits.”

Some of those “misfits” come to the Institute today because they need help forming a specific business model. Others apply because they need assistance finding capital, or tips on how to grow the company, or a new business strategy to reach an international scale. “Our mission is that they launch companies that affect at least a million people,” Epstein says. “Today’s issues are no longer just regional or national. They transcend borders, and they demand a global audience. That’s the future of business, and the future of progress as well.”

In true entrepreneurial fashion, the fellows are re-

quired to raise the \$10,000 it costs to attend the Institute. After whittling down the applicants (last year there were 304) to 50 finalists, each must raise the money through donations, proving their “entrepreneurial mettle.” The first 25 to do so get a spot at the Institute.

Soon, there will be more opportunity: Epstein’s goal is to set up 100 Institutes by 2020. The first Institute on how to run an Institute (how’s that for meta?) will take place in 2013, from which a select number of entrepreneurs will be picked to run their own versions in their home countries. “Unreasonable is a little bit ahead of its time,” Epstein says, “but I think we can catalyze a global movement.”







## CULTURE Club

### Laura Merage

PHOTOGRAPHER, SCULPTOR, PHILANTHROPIST  
FOUNDER, RedLine

→ Laura Merage's art studio looks like a cross between a carnival fun house and a storage garage. Bronze casts, fabric dolls, self-portraits, and a contemporary lipstick exhibition are strewn about the room in various stages of completion. It's one of the larger studios in RedLine, a cavernous 20,000-square-foot nonprofit gallery space that was formerly a warehouse for vacuum cleaner parts in the Curtis Park neighborhood.

In 2008, Merage, now 53, and her husband, David—co-founder of the company that invented Hot Pockets—invested \$3.5 million to buy and renovate the building with a specific goal in mind: “Art, community, and education coming together under one roof,” Merage says. “All three components have to be present for a healthy existence. I thought about ways to have an organization that bridged schools, galleries, communities, and museums—so we can all be healthier.”

Today, RedLine is funded by outside agencies, grants,

and individuals, as well as the philanthropic David and Laura Merage Foundation. The space has become a creative hub that demystifies the process of making art: From painters and paper sculptors to leather workers and performers, RedLine's “resident artists” secure studio space for up to two years through a competitive application process—with the understanding that their studios are open to public viewing, even while they work. The artists receive mentorship from both in-house and visiting professional artists from around the globe who are exhibiting their work at RedLine.

Each artist is required to devote several hours a week to community outreach, such as creative workshops. It's all part of Merage's goal to make art accessible to everyone, especially students—a desire that comes from her own background: At just 15, having grown up in Iran with limited education, she immigrated to the United States in search of better schooling and eventually earned her master's degree in art at New York University. RedLine's programs reflect her dedication to early education. Through an initiative called EPIC (Educational Partnership Initiative for the Creative) Arts, for example, the artists work with Denver Public Schools to give students an artistic outlet,

sometimes even exhibiting their projects in the RedLine gallery. “When kids see their art on those white walls,” Merage says, “their backs are straighter, their eyes are shining. They speak so eloquently about their work.”

Merage chose the Curtis Park area—a tired-looking grid on the periphery of downtown Denver—for its potential as an up-and-coming community. She believes RedLine will help both the resident artists and the neighborhood itself develop their respective identities, and hopes others will come from afar to see this corner of the city she wants to transform. Several galleries have already opened nearby. “I see RedLine being the epicenter of the transformation of this neighborhood into an arts destination,” she says. “I envision people saying, ‘I heard about this neighborhood in Denver; we should take our vacation there’—and RedLine being the catalyst for that. It'll happen in the next 10 years.”







## WATER works

→ **Jörg Drewes**

CIVIL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ENGINEERING PROFESSOR,  
Colorado School of Mines  
DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH,  
National Science Foundation's  
Engineering Research Center for Re-inventing the Nation's  
Urban Water Infrastructure

→ What if your tap water came from the sewer? It would be treated, filtered, and purified, of course—and it would have the imprimatur of scientists—but still...*It came from the sewer.*

One day, you may not have a choice: Americans are facing ongoing climate change and population growth—especially in the arid West where water is already scarce—which means we may have to accept counterintuitive concepts like this. It's not a new idea, but it's being considered more than ever as a viable and potentially necessary water reuse method, and it's just one of the water-planning strategies under discussion by Jörg Drewes and the four-month-old ReNUWIt (Re-inventing the Nation's Urban Water Infrastructure) center, an engineering consortium of the Colorado School of Mines, Stanford University, University of California—Berkeley, and New Mexico State University. Drewes, a CSM professor, is spearheading the research—the first of its kind to receive water-

specific funding (more than \$40 million over 10 years) from the National Science Foundation. “Obviously the NSF realized it's a pressing issue for our nation,” Drewes, 48, says. “Our urban water infrastructure is 50 to 100 years old. The technology used to build it is 20th-century technology. It didn't pay attention to energy requirements.”

Using Colorado's Front Range and the San Francisco Bay area as test zones, Drewes and his team—ReNUWIt is partnering with 27 organizations, from consulting firms and NGOs to utility companies such as Aurora Water—are developing large-scale infrastructure solutions to reuse wastewater, starting with cities in the West. Options range from harvesting storm water and storing it underground in the city, to decentralizing our purification system into smaller neighborhood treatment plants that can be tailored for specific water use. A low-level plant, for instance, might treat water only for irrigation purposes, which requires fewer resources than a plant that purifies water for drinking. One local test plant at the School of Mines, which recycles wastewater from a residential housing complex, has already been executed successfully.

It's a daunting and time-sensitive task: While replacing America's outdated water infrastructure could cost up to \$1

trillion, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act earmarked only \$7.8 billion to replace and improve the drinking and clean water systems. By 2030, 80 percent of the U.S. population will live in major cities that will be forced to pay more to meet the demand for water. “The idea is to be less reliant on imported water, especially in the West,” Drewes says. “If you look around our country now, the water solutions are very similar, and, generally, are very energy-intensive. We want to be more flexible in developing solutions rather than one size fits all.”













## Crissy Fanganello

CO-FOUNDER, *Denver Living Streets*  
DIRECTOR OF POLICY AND PLANNING, *Denver Department of Public Works*



→ We've all been there: creeping along in a line of cars behind a cyclist because there's not enough room to go around; cursing the buses that disrupt traffic flow; wondering what genius planned this particular roadway. Crissy Fanganello knows those frustrations as well as anyone: The 41-year-old has spent the last 12 years working in transportation planning, from FasTracks consulting to her current gig as Denver's chief public works strategist. Time and again, she wrestles with how to improve city corridors so they're functional for *all* users—bus/rail riders, cyclists, pedestrians, and, yes, drivers. The need becomes more critical by the day. The demand we place on our roads every time we head to the store, visit a friend, or commute to work will exceed our roads' capabilities by 2015, according to Denver's official Strategic Transportation Plan.

Thanks to Fanganello's vision and a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, hopefully we'll never reach that point. In 2007, Fanganello used the grant—roughly \$80,000 worth of technical assistance, including consultants and urban planners—to pull together eight city agencies and launch Denver Living Streets, an initiative that re-envisioned the existing layout of Denver's roadways to move people around the city more efficiently. The idea: Create bike lanes, rethink traffic direction, widen sidewalks, and improve street-side property to revitalize our roads and commercial neighborhoods. If commuters

considered walking, biking, or mass transit instead of driving, the likelihood of visiting businesses along the way (read: economic growth) increases.

Already, corridors like West Florida Avenue have been renovated with what Fanganello refers to as "road diets," which can include things like repaving and restriping the lanes to change the way vehicles move on the street. In this case, West Florida went from four lanes (two in each direction), to one lane in each direction, bike lanes, and a center turn lane. Both Federal Boulevard (the second-most-traveled RTD route in the city) and 14th Street downtown are being transformed to improve user friendliness using techniques such as sidewalk improvements, strategically placed crosswalks, and tree-planted medians. And Colfax Avenue is undergoing ongoing streetcar feasibility studies to determine if and how a streetcar might contribute to a more seamless public-transit schedule for an RTD route that sees 22,500 people a day.

Fanganello is bracing for the future. Drivers, she says, are attached to their vehicles and their routines; too many people cling to the idea that public transportation isn't accessible, or that biking is too much of a hassle. "Everything from here on out will come with a trade-off," she says, "like stripping away street parking. Those are challenging conversations to have. Our mentality is part of it. Socially, we still have a lot to overcome."



# LEARNING Curve

**Chris Gibbons**

FOUNDER AND CEO, West Denver Prep

→ West Denver Prep schools look like any other middle school: Kids carry backpacks exploding with textbooks; classrooms are filled with the sounds of binders snapping closed and pencils scribbling. But West Denver Prep has an ambitious goal: ensuring that every single student not only attends, but also graduates from a four-year college.

The man leading the charge is 33-year-old Chris Gibbons, the charter schools' founder and CEO. Gibbons will be the first to tell you he has a lot of work ahead, because the numbers are nothing short of abysmal: Forty-eight percent of children in Denver Public Schools don't graduate on time from high school. In 2010, only half of DPS students (grades three through 10) were at or above proficiency level in reading; that statistic drops to 39

percent in math. But Gibbons has lofty ambitions to help fix the state's education crisis: Within 10 years, he plans to have opened 12 charter schools in four "clusters" (each with two middle schools and one high school) in neighborhoods of need around Denver. He's already opened four in the past six years.

Students entering West Denver Prep schools—cur-

rently located in Southwest and North Denver neighborhoods—are an average of two years below grade level in reading and math. Despite the fact that 90 percent of West Denver Prep's students receive free or reduced-price lunch and 95 percent are Hispanic or black (both socioeconomic status and race have been correlated to academic performance), all four campuses ranked in the top seven for academic growth within Denver Public Schools, based on the 2011 Colorado Growth Model. The schools were also classified as four of the five highest performing secondary schools in DPS (the other was Denver School of Science and Technology at Green Valley Ranch). "There are lots and lots and lots of students in this country, many low-income, who have been tragically underserved by our education system, and we have an opportunity to believe that can be different," says Gibbons. "I couldn't imagine something more important to be doing."

A high school science teacher by trade, Gibbons spent two years completing the Building Excellent Schools Fellowship, part of a national, independently funded program for charter school creation, before opening his first West Denver Prep campus in 2006 at age 28. Today, it's still too early to tell if Gibbons' vision is a success: None of West Denver Prep's students have gone to a four-year college yet, simply because the first senior class won't graduate until 2013. But Gibbons has no doubt they'll get there. "By comparison to what schools in Denver are doing for low-income students, we've been very successful," he says, "but that's not a bar I'm happy with. By the bar I want to be held to, I think we're on the right track."



→ When Cynthia Gallegos was eight years old, she and her Spanish-speaking grandmother walked into an Albuquerque office to pay a bill. “Why doesn’t she learn English?” the teller asked when Gallegos translated for her grandmother. Gallegos smiled, knowing her grandmother would be angry if she raised her voice. “She doesn’t need to speak English,” little Cynthia responded. “I’m speaking English for her.” But Gallegos was shaken, and as they walked outside, her grandmother said, “You don’t have to defend me. I should learn English.”

“You don’t have to, Grandma,” Gallegos said. “I will speak it for you.”

That was more than 30 years ago, and the encounter indelibly shaped Gallegos’ life. “That’s the experience I don’t want kids to have to feel,” says Gallegos, 40, today. Her own immigrant background and encounters with prejudice and ignorance were influential in driving her to her current position as the executive director of Focus Points Family Resource Center. The organization is a safe haven for a community (the Swansia-Elyria and Five Points neighborhoods) primarily composed of a low-income, historically Spanish-speaking immigrant population, many of whom don’t have access—or don’t know how to access—resources such as education, nutritious food, and daycare. At the almost 10,000-square-foot center, individuals and families can learn English, take basic education classes, work toward a GED, drop the kids off for early-education programs, and get assistance maneuvering bureaucracies—such as health care or welfare—effectively.

There’s a large populace in need of Focus Points’ offerings. According to the 2010 census, 28.7 percent of Denver County residents speak a language other than English at home, and



currently more than 1,300 individuals and families participate in the Center’s programs, while more than 150 people are on a waiting list. “Education is that great equalizer,” Gallegos says. “We hear people say, ‘Because I don’t know how to do this, I’m not going to get it done.’ No. Let’s teach you how to do it so you can get it done on your own whenever you need to.”

In 2004, Gallegos started at Focus Points as an administrative assistant; today, she oversees a \$1 million budget

and a staff of almost 45. “Every opportunity is there for us to increase those abilities for families to make it, not just get by,” Gallegos says. “‘Get by’ is just too hard. Maybe I won’t be able to educate all of the kids, but darn it, we’re going to educate as many kids and help as many families as we can.” ▲▲

## TRADING Places

**Cynthia Gallegos**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, Focus Points Family Resource Center

