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Miracle on 141st Street

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Buck Ennis

Yvette Campbell has run Harlem School of the Arts since 2011. Among her tough calls was cutting the budget by 24%.

The Harlem School of the Arts must be the envy of many a nonprofit these days: All its debt, including its mortgage, was paid off—and its endowment was restored and even expanded—thanks to a $5 million donation received last month from the Herb Alpert Foundation.

Now the community school, which provides programs in dance, music, theater and the visual arts, is starting with a clean slate after surviving a brush with extinction in 2010, when it was forced to close for three weeks."I can really think about the future," said Yvette Campbell, who has been president and chief executive of the 48-year-old institution since January 2011. "We wouldn't have survived carrying our debt."A donation from the same foundation in 2010 helped keep the doors open, but Ms. Campbell toiled mightily to prove the school was worthy of continued, and more generous, support. Ms. Campbell sliced $1.1 million, or 24%, from the budget

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through such efforts as cutting staff by 68% and renegotiating service contracts. She added a preschool program to increase revenue. And she just lured noted dancer Twyla Tharp and Grammy-winning Afro-Latin-jazz musician Arturo O'Farrill to become artists in residence, which should raise the school's profile. She's also negotiating with jazz great Wynton Marsalis, already an adviser, to play a greater role in the institution.Her biggest problem, however, was paying $400,000 a year in debt. Few donors make grants to repay loans; they prefer to support programming. But when Ms. Campbell explained her dilemma this summer to a meeting of donor-group executives, Rona Sebastian, president of the Herb Alpert Foundation, decided to break the mold."In this situation, it just made sense," said Ms. Sebastian. "It's like giving the school a fresh start, and they are well positioned to be a strong institution." Ms. Campbell's challenge now is to build on that momentum. She wants to increase enrollment, which has shriveled by 47%, to 800, since 2010; match the $5 million donation; expand the board; and fix up the building."We have to continue to change the perceptions," said Ms. Campbell, whose two daughters attend classes at the school. "Families have to understand this is a great place for kids to study."

Best ambassador

The institution provides after-school classes for those serious about a career in the arts—Ms. Campbell boasts that three of the actors who played Simba in *The Lion King* are graduates—as well as those who simply enjoy the experience. Tuition starts at $720 a year for group lessons and goes up to around $1,100 for private study. About 10% of the children receive financial aid. Part of the gift from the Herb Alpert Foundation will be used for a $2 million endowment to provide financial aid.

And the institution couldn't have a better ambassador, those who know Ms. Campbell say. The former dancer and administrator for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater holds a degree in applied mathematics from the University of California, Berkeley."She can speak passionately about the arts, and she understands the numbers and budgets," said Kate Levin, the city's commissioner for cultural affairs. Ms. Levin and other city officials helped choose a new board for the school in 2010 after a *New York Times* article reported that the organization was mired in debt. Mr. Alpert and Ms. Sebastian read the piece and were appalled that the school might close permanently, so they sent a $500,000 check."The school was an iconic institution," said Ms. Sebastian. "We decided it was worth saving."Meanwhile, the new board's search for a leader led them to Ms. Campbell, whose first tasks included cutting costs and reassuring parents the institution would remain open.

Trying to grow tuition revenue

"The parents were really nervous we would close," said Janice Savin-Williams, the board vice chair who first reached out to Ms. Campbell. "She had to go and listen and calm them."

She also had to tackle the budget. Ms. Campbell was shocked to find that the school had a full-time staff of 50. By outsourcing services like maintenance, it was able to cut that number to 16. She was equally stunned to find out that the school was deriving a mere 30% of its revenue from tuition, getting the rest from fundraising."The school wasn't collecting tuition," she said. "People were signing up and not paying the bill."Now the school gets about 40% of its revenue from tuition, an amount Ms. Campbell would like to bring up to 50%. She recently conducted a direct-mail campaign in the neighborhood, offering local families a 20% discount. She said that about 50% of the students come from the area immediately surrounding the school, on West 141st Street and St. Nicholas Avenue. However, children come from as far away as Connecticut to take classes at the school, which was founded by opera singer Dorothy Maynor.Ms. Campbell is hoping the school will become an even more attractive place to study by drawing such artists as Ms. Tharp and Mr. O'Farrill to take up residence. Each will rent space from the institution but will also play other roles, such as teaching or giving performances, although the specifics haven't been solidified yet. Ms. Tharp will start in November, and Mr. O'Farrill will begin in January."I'm really looking forward to doing some teaching," said Mr. O'Farrill, who added that his wife, Alison Deane, played piano for Betty Allen, the acclaimed mezzo-soprano who once led the school. "We want to help in any way we can." Ms. Campbell said that most of the people she has approached have been generous with time, money and advice. For example, the school received a $500,000 grant from Manhattan Borough President Scott Stringer's office to buy 13 pianos."You need to be clear about what you want," she said.

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