

Patricia Bransford

Love and Tech

By E.J. RUSKIN

Patricia Bransford has so many talents, and such generosity of spirit, that I worried it might seem as if I had conjured her. I have not; she is all too inspirationally REAL.

Her story is one of fearlessness, grace, commitment to one's core beliefs, and, well ... a love of math.

Patricia Bransford's career changes may appear dramatic — from teaching to IBM to the not-for-profit world. But her underlying motivation — her deeply ingrained belief system — has remained constant. Ms. Bransford has retained an unshaken commitment to the things that most define her: family, education, teaching, community service, and spirituality. Combine that with major math brains, a warm, engaging manner, a great laugh — and it's not hard to see how Ms. Bransford could be so phenomenally successful in so many realms.

In 1995, at age 55, Patricia Bransford founded the National Urban Technology Center (Urban Tech). Its primary focus has been "to promote learning, academic perfor-

mance, and workforce preparation among disadvantaged young people ..." Urban Tech has been hugely successful.

What's so different about Urban Tech?

The organization has developed ways to use technology to engage youngsters in activities that will change their lives: group discussions, problem-solving, creative thinking, peer-to-peer learning. It provides teachers with a tool — a creative, multimedia curriculum, complete with teacher-training — that helps them reach children in ways that lectures no longer can.

It's not surprising that Ms. Bransford saw technology as a tool to engage, instruct, and inspire children as well as adults. After all, this is a woman who joined IBM in 1963, and spent her first career using technology to solve problems for corporate America.

Getting a little glassy-eyed? "Technology as a tool" sounding ... dull?

At least admit that these tech solutions are pretty cool. The first two for instances herewith are not

Bransford's, but they're great examples; the third is one of Bransford's amazing solutions.

- EASYPASS — Decreased toll-bridge congestion.

- ATMs (automatic teller machines) — Gave us 24/7 access to our money.

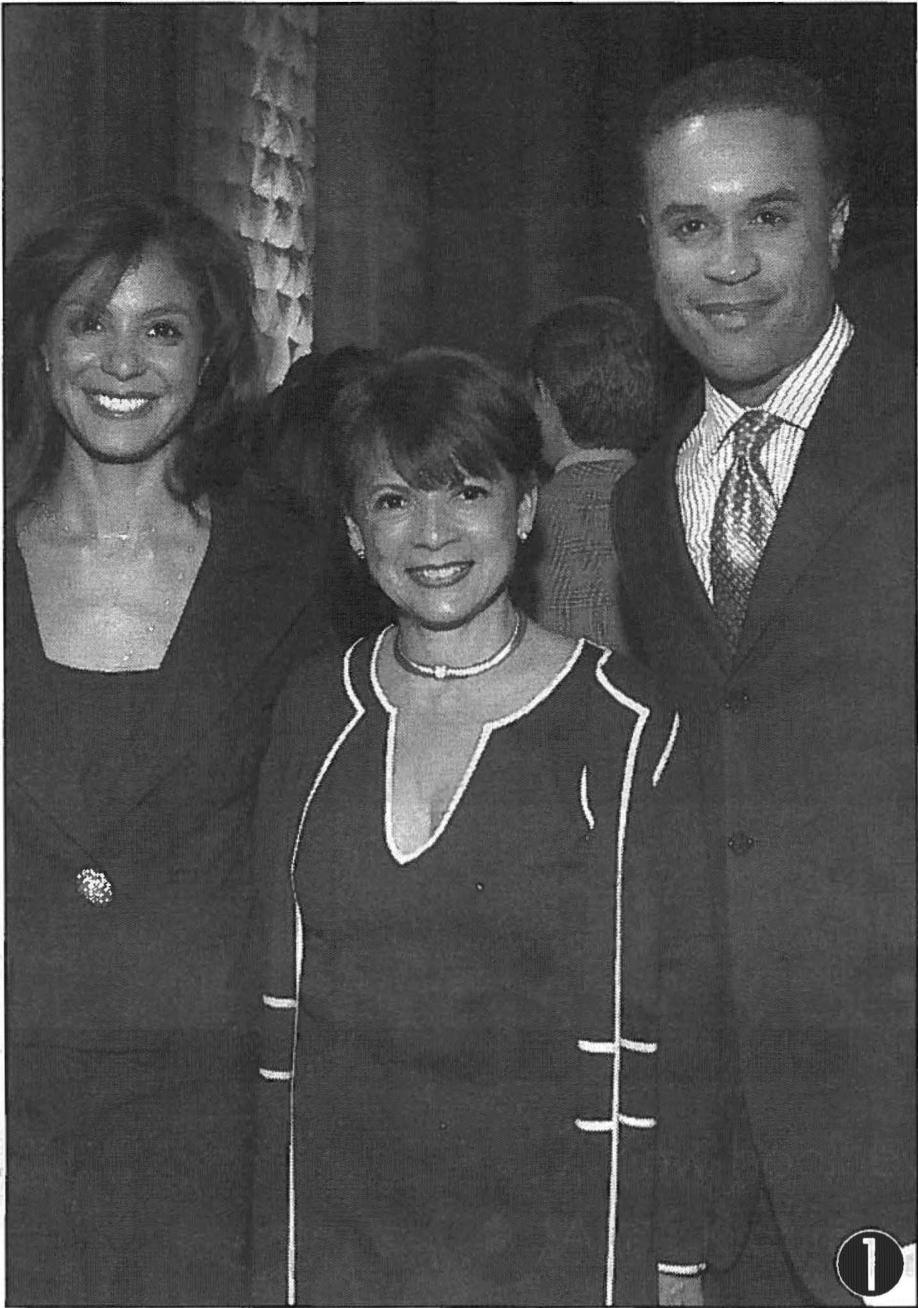
- Replacing cash registers with computers — Marked the birth of efficient inventory management. (*Bransford devised this solution to improve Waldenbooks' bottom line; it was one of her earliest successes at IBM.*)

Ms. Bransford, what brought you to where you are today?

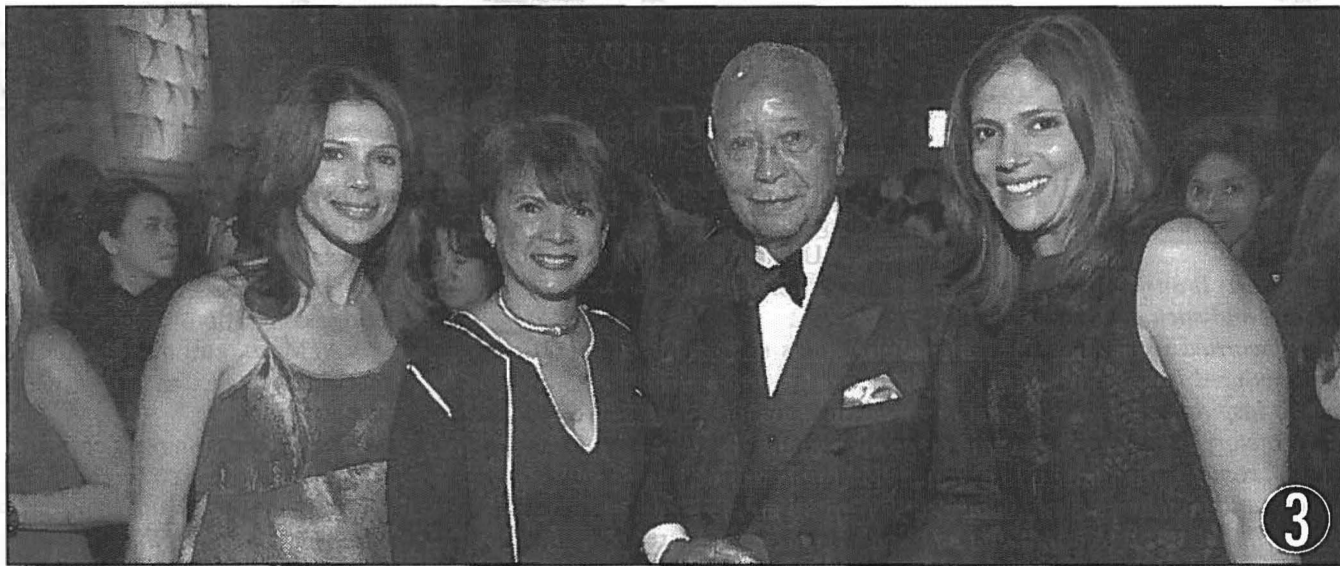
All the things I've been passionate about for most of my life: math, technology, education, concern for the community. We really need to understand the uniqueness of every individual. And to acknowledge our responsibility to invest in ways to reach those kids who are lost in our educational system. Shame on us for the drop-out rate.

"I am very much a product of my home environment," says Bransford;

BRANSFORD, continued on page 21



JASON GREEN PHOTOGRAPHY



1: Andrea DuBois, Patricia Bransford, Maurice DuBois, anchor CBS 2 News This Morning;

2: Bransford and Patrick Gaston, president of the Verizon Foundation;

3: Jenny Bransford, Pat Bransford, former New York City Mayor David N. Dinkins, Kathy Bransford Zukerman;

4: Bransford, Latasha Greer, principal of Frederick Douglass Academy II, and scholarship recipients.

BRANSFORD, continued from page 19

altruism and persistence were constant themes. She was born in Lumberton, North Carolina, where her parents moved after professional school. They wanted her to have a Catholic education and didn't want her to go to an all-black school; so her father *built* a school, and brought in an order of nuns to run it.

He encouraged patients from his multiracial dental practice to send their children there, with the end result of creating an integrated, Catholic school for his children and his community.

Determined and altruistic behavior was common in Bransford's home. She credits her commitment to helping those in need, and her sense of responsibility to young people, to her parents.

When Bransford was 8 the family moved to Washington, D.C. Her father was again determined that his daughters receive an excellent education at a Catholic school. This time, it turned into a "huge crusade"; finally the Archdiocese allowed young Patricia to be the first African-American child to integrate the all-white St. Aloysius Catholic School.

How, one wonders, does an 8-year old survive that experience?

"Lots of home schooling," she says, completely unfazed. "We did math problems at the dinner table." Fortunately, her mother was a gifted teacher and a devoted parent. Ms. Bransford appears to have learned early that her family was 100 percent behind her, and that she could thrive in any situation.

Years later, during an interview at IBM, Patricia Bransford was asked (in hushed tones) how she would feel being the only African-American in the office. She laughed and told the interviewer: "I integrated the Catholic private-school system in Washington, D.C. in 1948." He evidently got the message, and that was the start of her 25-year career at IBM.

"My mother was my hero."

Ms. Bransford's mother was a high-school math teacher. "She is the reason I followed math and became a math major. Every day at the dinner table we would do a math problem. It was very clear to me that math was my future ... I loved it." Bransford feels her pursuit of math demonstrates that parents have a lot of influence on the careers their children follow. She believes that if her parents were in the entertainment industry, she would have pursued a different childhood love – the piano – and become a musician.

What motivated you to leave IBM?

During her tenure directing all large-scale information systems in New York City for IBM her clients included David Dinkins and Ed Koch.

She remembers the day that Mayor Dinkins called and asked that she head the Finance Committee of his reelection campaign. She describes it as a watershed event.

She had had no plans to leave IBM; on the contrary, she'd been considering a move from the domestic side of the company to the international. She had already applied to – and been accepted into – NYU's Executive MBA program; it would have prepared her for broader and more senior responsibilities at IBM.

Nevertheless, she accepted Dinkins's offer and retired from IBM. She also decided to attend that Executive MBA program, and managed both her campaign responsibilities and her classes all that year. It was a busy period.

Where did you get the initial funding for Urban Tech?

"I sat next to a woman in business school who was an executive assistant at ATT. When I told her my ideas for Urban Tech, she encouraged me to speak with her boss, David Jefferson, who was the VP for Northeast Marketing at ATT." The classmate was certain that Jefferson would be intrigued by Bransford's plans.

He was. And in 1995 their initial conversation culminated in a \$250,000 check to Bransford's newly incorporated company. That early funding allowed her to invest in product development, a time-consuming and expensive effort. Further grants followed, and Urban Tech was up and running.

You never know where a conversation will lead; even casual encounters can have an extraordinary impact on your life. Perhaps the keys are optimism and an open mind.

Their first project: a rousing success.

Urban Tech's pilot program was for eight children in a New York City foster-care center. The six-week program was successful: On average, the children's reading scores improved by two grade levels — *in six weeks!* The next summer, Urban Tech worked with 55 students. Bransford and her team realized that technology was a fabulous motivator for the kids; it really got them out of their shells.

Even more exciting, she realized her company could provide lots of synergies in the classroom, and possibly make education look exciting to even the most withdrawn students. That led to the development of the Youth Leadership Academy (YLA), a program for 10- to 18-year-olds that "...develops social and communication skills while building 21st-century technology skills". Program graduates "... place new value on learning, leadership, and community service." YLA provides a series of discrete modules, each of which focuses on a different set of important life skills.

BRANSFORD, continued on page 22

BRANSFORD, continued from page 21

Bransford and her team understood that individuals learn in different ways. So the modules they developed accommodate diverse learning styles. Their Computer Animation series uses virtual peers to introduce students to important life skills. Role-playing, games, and debates are some of the interactive techniques that keep the kids engaged. They learn to think of the computer as a tool that can help them express themselves. Digital photography, Web design, data analysis on spreadsheets, all become integral parts of their learning experience.

What if these schools don't have any computers?

"If that's the case, we can help them find some," says Ms. Bransford. "But schools usually *do* have computers. What has been missing is the content that integrates technology with education. That's what YLA provides."

"SeedTech"

In 1995, Urban Tech connected with its first client, the Enterprise Foundation. The foundation provided the funding to establish the first "SeedTech" center in Baltimore, Maryland. SeedTech is a "turn-key" process, developed by Ms. Bransford, for building state-of-the-art computer training centers. In a tremendous coup for Urban Tech, the U.S. Department of Justice, Weed and Seed, adopted SeedTech to "... transfer technology skills to inner-city communities". More than 500 such centers already have been built.

What keeps you so interested in Urban Tech and YLA?

"Seeing kids build futures for themselves. Impacting the life of one of these kids - being there when he sees his options for the first time."

Vincent Bell was one of the first kids to participate in an Urban Tech program in the mid-'90s. He joined YLA at the age of 10, and thrived. Recently Urban Tech gave Vincent a scholarship for Virginia State University, where he runs tech systems. "Watching Vincent Bell develop into such a high-achieving individual has been thrilling."

Urban Tech's biggest challenge now is distribution: they do not have a dedicated sales force. (Their trainers, who work with teachers, also do product development and sales. The plus side is tremendous cross-training for their employees - which invariably improves both their products and their service.) A new marketing initiative (originating with a household name in the entertainment industry) is under review. Imagine how many kids could be reached if

Urban Tech's tools reached an ever-widening universe.

Patricia Bransford's organization has served more than 460,000 individuals over 12 years. Urban Tech has built more than 500 Computer Training Centers across the country, and 200 Youth Development Programs.

Ms. Bransford has gained considerable recognition for her work, including:

- An Innovation Award, given by Harvard University and the Ford Foundation for Urban Tech's SeedTech program with the Department of Justice;
- Recognition by the International Journal of the WK Kellogg Foundation as a model for bringing technology and training to people in inner cities and remote rural areas;
- A Beacon Award for distinguished accomplishments and work in disadvantaged communities; and
- A Granville T. Woods Award to the outstanding CEO of a corporation with the greatest impact in the community.

Her track record and awards certainly are impressive. But even more extraordinary was her enthusiasm and pride (and glee, I thought) when she grabbed a huge three-ring binder to show me her current work-in-progress: the next YLA module on banking and finance.

Completing a module is a 26-week process. It involves feedback from a wide (and impressive) range of educators, psychologists, and other advisors. But Bransford seems particularly interested in the changes recommended by a focus group of kids, who were concerned that an animated banker looked intimidating. Their comments were very specific; Patricia Bransford couldn't wait to show the remarks to me. She flipped to the relevant section of the binder: "Eyebrows too bushy!" "Suit too stiff, too fancy-looking."

Everyone's comments matter to Ms. Bransford. No detail is too trivial when the goal is to create a scenario that kids can relate to - which will engage them and facilitate the learning process. In Bransford's wake, there will be a generation of students who understand financial concepts, and the upside of integrating a banker into their community.

I can't wait to see what the animated pals will be up to next. I almost believe the little fellas are real. Something in Patricia Bransford's eyes - the eyes of a fearless 8-year-old math whiz - makes me think they just might be. *

If you are interested in participating in Urban Tech's programs, or in making a donation, Please buzz Patricia Bransford at Pbransford@UrbanTech.org.

