

FOUNDER AND CEO, YEAR UP

Gerald Chertavian takes the adage “what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger” to heart. “Within adversity are the seeds of resilience,” says the son of a dentist who grew up in working-class Lowell, Massachusetts. Chertavian’s philosophy is at the core of Year Up, the extraordinary nonprofit he founded that helps economically disadvantaged young adults gain skills for professional careers. →

GERALD CHERTAVIAN MBA 1992

TIMELINE

- 1965 Born, Lowell, Massachusetts
- 1987 Earns BA, Economics, Bowdoin College
- 1987 Joins Chemical Bank
- 1992 Earns MBA
- 1993 Cofounds Conduit Communications
- 1999 i-Cube buys Conduit
- 2000 Launches Year Up
- 2012 Publishes *A Year Up*, which becomes a best seller
- 2013 Named Chairman, Roxbury Community College Board of Trustees
- 2014 Year Up will serve 2,100 young adults

“My goal is to reduce the number of young people who are disconnected from mainstream opportunity in this country.”

Chertavian’s inspiration for Year Up stems from his experience as a volunteer in the Big Brother Big Sister program. After earning a degree in economics from Bowdoin College, Chertavian worked at Chemical Bank in New York City, where he volunteered as a mentor to 10-year-old David Heredia. Seeing the divide between Heredia’s potential and his prospects, Chertavian was determined to help expand options for Heredia and kids like him.

“I saw that David had enormous talent and drive, but he needed help to reach his full potential,” says Chertavian, adding an explanation that clarifies the name of his organization. “He needed a *handup*, not a *handout*.” With mentoring and support from Chertavian, Heredia was able to graduate from high school, attend college, and pursue his passion for art. Twenty-six years after they first met, the two remain close friends and have much in common: Heredia has a successful career (as an animator), is happily married, is a proud father of three, and recently signed up to be a Big Brother.

Interested in expanding his own skills so that he could put his ideas—and ideals—into action, Chertavian followed in the footsteps of his older brother and applied to HBS. In his application essay, he outlined his vision for building an organization that would offer disadvantaged youth a year of training and then place them in meaningful jobs with partnering corporations.

As a student at HBS, Chertavian continued to pursue his interest in closing what he calls “the opportunity divide.” “I was fanatical,” he recalls. “All I thought about was enabling young people to go from poverty to a professional career in one year.” Upon graduation, he moved to London, the hometown of his new wife, Kate, where he ran marketing for a financial services firm before cofounding Conduit Communications, a consulting firm focused on

the nascent field of Internet marketing. He spent several years building Conduit into one of Europe’s fastest-growing technology companies, eventually counting 130 employees around the globe and \$20 million in annual revenue.

In 1999, Chertavian and his partners sold Conduit to i-Cube, and he was able to put all his energy into realizing his dream. Ready to return to the Boston area, where Kate had gone to college, the Chertavians moved to Cambridge with their first two (of three) children, and Gerald began to use his network to put the building blocks of Year Up in place.

Since founding Year Up in 2000, Gerald Chertavian has steadily grown the endeavor from its initial class of 22 students. The nonprofit now operates in 12 cities across the United States, employs 400, and has an annual budget of \$70 million. While those numbers—as well as rave reviews from the media and corporate partners—tell of the organization’s success, Chertavian’s most prized metric shows the outcomes for the 18- through 24-year-olds that Year Up has served: Some 10,000 young people have participated in the one-year training program, and 85 percent of graduates are working or in school full time within four months of graduation.

Chertavian, who didn’t take a salary for six years, says that Year Up works not because of charity, but because the program’s participants are providing meaningful skills. The leaders of some 250 partner organizations, including State Street, Facebook, and Bank of America, “have literally opened the door of opportunity to thousands of young people,” says Chertavian. If those individuals did not deliver on their promise, he observes, Year Up would not be expanding. “Our success is because these young adults are economic assets, not social liabilities.”



Clockwise, from top left:
Chertavian visits with Harvard students; in his Cambridge kitchen; with mentee Akeem Raphael, a Year Up graduate who works at HBS.

