My husband, Michael, and I are deeply committed to helping the community around us, from providing enriched educational opportunities to (promoting) health and wellness, and we constantly seek our ways to help those who are underserved to become more self-sufficient. We support Harlem Village Academies (HVA) because we believe in the leadership and vision set forth by its founder, Deborah Kenny, and the extraordinary team she has assembled. We are proponents of all schools that successfully help elevate the quality of education for young people, particularly those who would not otherwise receive the standard of education they deserve. Growing up in New York City, I was troubled by the large discrepancy in the quality of education that children received, as determined by their ZIP code or their parents’ financial means. HVA strives to help students become intellectually curious, wholesome in character, avid readers, independent thinkers and compassionate individuals who will contribute meaningfully to society. Their teachers work tirelessly to help the students meet this goal.

Having worked in the literacy program at charter school Boys and Girls Harbor, I was excited to learn of the opportunity to mentor students at HVA. I was matched with three fifth-grade girls and am still partnered with them six years later. I enjoy visiting them at school and getting together to read articles, play games and discuss what’s on their minds. The girls appreciate having someone outside of the faculty with whom they can talk and ask for informal counsel. I was frustrated when I realized that summers for these students primarily meant minimal stimulation or activities. I wanted to do more.

As a Cornell University graduate, I hosted an event in my home for Cornell alumni to listen to a lecture by a Cornell professor. Michael had attended Cornell Summer College when he was in high school, so I asked our dean if there was a program to help inner-city students attend the summer program. He replied that there was no funding for that, so six years ago we started a program to provide it. Each year we fine-tune it as we see what works and learn from what does not. The highest-performing rising juniors and seniors from HVA and Harlem Children’s Zone are among the charter school students that attend each summer. They take college-level courses with students from around the world, and we provide tutors to help them with the workload. This year, we added a second program for rising sophomores to help them learn study techniques while they attend the Cornell summer camp. Students gain lifelong skills, confidence and a new perspective as they begin to embark on the college process.

Running a business further allows us to be more creative and flexible in helping people. Our company, Juice Press, now employs 600 people—all the charter school students who attend Cornell Summer College are offered an opportunity to work for Juice Press, and a number of them have proven themselves as some of the most beloved team members. My mentor, who attended Cornell Summer School, started working at Juice Press when she turned 15 and was very proud to become self-sufficient. She became a great role model to her friends, juicepress.com.