


INTERVIEW

Building a Posse of Diverse Leaders: An Interview with Posse Foundation Founder Deborah Bial

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network for the United States.*

Building a Posse of Diverse Leaders:

*An Interview with Posse Foundation Founder
Deborah Bial*

Posse Foundation founder Deborah Bial believes that the key to a promising future for our nation is having strong leaders from diverse backgrounds to develop consensus solutions to complex social problems. To cultivate leaders who represent our country's demographic and socioeconomic mix, it is essential to broaden the pool of students who enroll at the best institutions of higher education. In 1989, Bial started Posse Foundation with the goal of providing deserving scholars not only access to elite colleges but also the necessary support to help them thrive, once enrolled.

The first "posse" of diverse scholars went to Vanderbilt University together in 1989, and, since then, nearly 8,500 Posse Scholars have earned \$1.2 billion in full-tuition scholarships to 57 partner colleges and universities. Posse Scholars graduate at a rate of 90%—five times higher than the 16% national average among students from low-income backgrounds. Their success is thanks in part to leadership training they receive before and after they arrive on campus, along with the support of campus mentors and the fellow scholars in their posses. In 2007, Bial received a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship for her work, and, in 2010, the Posse Foundation was one of 10 organizations President Barack Obama honored with a share of his Nobel Peace Prize winnings in recognition of its work providing outstanding young people the educational opportunities they deserve.

In this edited interview with DMGroup CEO John Kim and DMGroup Associate Dean Constant, Bial discusses how her team at the Posse Foundation identifies, supports, and cultivates a new generation of diverse leaders for our nation.



Can you begin by telling us about your inspiration for starting the Posse Foundation and how it has grown?

I think the best way to describe the Posse Foundation is to explain why it's called "posse." In the 1980s, the word "posse" was a cool word in youth culture that meant "my group of friends." I was working at CityKids Foundation at the time, and one of the CityKids who had dropped out of college said, "I never would have dropped out if I'd had my posse with me." I thought, "Well, that's a great idea. Why not send a team or a posse of kids together to college?" The idea was that students would go to college with a group of friends—a posse—to help support them through the college experience. It was this idea that a cohort system would support these young people in a way that didn't exist when they went alone. That way, if you grew up, for example, in the Bronx, and you ended up in, say, Middlebury, Vermont, you'd be a little less likely to say, "I'm going home. The culture shock is too extreme."

We started the program at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and thank goodness Vanderbilt took a chance on this idea, as we had no track record or history. Back then, Vanderbilt's student body was mostly white, Southern, and wealthy, and the university wanted help bringing kids from diverse backgrounds to the institution. They gave us a chance, and we sent our first posse of five students there in 1989.

You need to think of Posse Scholars in the same way you think of Rhodes Scholars. Posse Scholars are incredibly impressive, and they are going to change the world.

Since that first class, we have sent almost 8,500 kids to college. Posse Scholars have won an astounding \$1.2 billion in scholarships from our partner colleges and universities, and our scholars graduate at rates of over 90%! Most importantly, they represent the diversity of the American population and go on to become leaders in the workforce in a way we have not seen before.

The Posse Foundation has been recognized as one of the most comprehensive college success and leadership development initiatives in the country.



The Posse Foundation identifies and recruits public high school students of diverse backgrounds who have extraordinary leadership potential. Posse's partner colleges and universities then provide these students with full scholarships to attend college in a cohort or "posse" of about 10 students. Posse supports its Scholars with training, guidance, and mentorship prior to attending college, throughout the college experience, and beyond.

Posse Foundation Highlights:

- **8,480** Posse Scholars and Alumni
- **\$1.2 billion in scholarships** awarded since 1989
- **President Barack Obama honored Posse Foundation** with a portion of his 2010 Nobel Peace Prize award winnings
- **Partnerships with 57 elite colleges and universities**, including Bowdoin College, Bryn Mawr College, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Middlebury College, Pomona College, Tulane University, University of California–Berkeley, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, University of Notre Dame, Vassar College, and Wesleyan University
- Posse Scholars are recruited from **10 cities and metropolitan areas**: Atlanta, the Bay Area, Boston, Chicago, D.C., Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, and New York
- **Fewer than 5% of applicants are selected** as Posse Scholars following a rigorous, multi-round Dynamic Assessment Process
- **57%** are first-generation college students
- With **190 career partners**, Posse Foundation's career program offers internships, mentorships, and jobs to Posse Scholars and alumni. Career partners include 20th Century Fox, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, Biogen, Bloomberg, Brookings Institution, the CIA, The Fresh Air Fund, Google, Museum of Contemporary Art, NBC Universal, Norwegian Cruise Lines, Pandora, Steppenwolf Theater, and Sotheby's

You are not only providing support to get students through college; you have developed a tool called the Dynamic Assessment Process (DAP) that enables you to tap a whole different pool of candidates.

You're right. We started with the idea of providing support, but we quickly came to understand that there were really smart, talented, capable young people from diverse backgrounds who were getting missed by traditional admissions measures. They were fully capable of succeeding at an elite college or university, but they weren't getting the opportunity because their test scores were too low or they went to a high school that wasn't ranked highly enough.

Early on, we decided we wanted to develop a different way of assessing talent that would be just as predictive as the SAT or the ACT, so we developed a recruiting tool called the Dynamic Assessment Process.

We realized that Posse was actually creating a new kind of network—a new leadership network for the United States.

I imagine that in 1989 this idea must have sounded pretty radical. How did you convince colleges and universities with well-established approaches to evaluating applicants to accept an alternative way of assessing students for admission?

That's a good question. I believe two factors were at play in our success in getting schools to listen. One, by relying too heavily on test scores, colleges were creating a situation where they weren't getting diversity in their

student bodies. We were never going to achieve the level of diversity we wanted if we relied too heavily on the test scores. Students of color are still underrepresented in the high-scoring categories.

The second factor was that admissions staff understood that there were other ways to identify talent. They knew a holistic process that included elements beyond just test scores could accurately and fairly identify students who would be able to succeed. But they didn't have the luxury of going into hundreds of public schools to find these incredibly talented kids who were getting missed through the more traditional admissions measures.

So, Posse came along and said, "Look, we understand that the tests shouldn't be the only determining factor, and we can go into those schools for you." To give you a sense of how far we've come, this past year, 17,000 kids were nominated for 750 slots. We have thousands of young people for whom someone is saying, "This kid deserves a shot," and they are coming to us. We're finding the kids who typically would have been overlooked by more traditional admissions.

Tell us about the Dynamic Assessment Process. What traits do you look for and how do you test for these?

There are characteristics and traits that we believe can predict success—success in a community, in school, in a college environment, in the workforce. If you think about the traits someone is looking for when they're hiring for a corporate leadership-track position, that's what we're looking for when we interview 17-year-old kids.

The Dynamic Assessment Process is a lengthy interview process that starts with nominated students coming in for a large group interview. We gather 100 students in a room at a time, and for three hours we ask them to participate in very interactive, engaging small-group

Deborah Bial Timeline:



1987
Brandeis University
B.A.



1987–1989
CityKids Foundation
Counselor



1989
Founds the Posse Foundation
First Posse of five students
attend Vanderbilt University



2004
Harvard Graduate School of Education
Doctorate of Education (Ed.D.)



2007
MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship Award



2010
President Barack Obama honors Posse Foundation with a portion of his Nobel Peace Prize grant



John J-H Kim, Deborah Bial, and Dean Constant

activities where they're building robots out of Legos, or they're running a small group discussion about genetic testing, or they're creating a speech to give in front of their peers.

Our evaluators are looking for non-traditional skills and characteristics that don't show up on a piece of paper on a college application. These include collaborative skills, communication and public speaking skills, leadership skills, and the ability to solve problems quickly. We are looking at things that you can't necessarily see with a test score. You can't fake it. I always say, "If you think you can fake good communication skills, then guess what? You actually have them!"

You have been ahead of the curve by focusing on these important qualities and skills, now recognized as vital 21st-century skills. How might schools contribute to cultivating these leadership and collaboration skills?

There's a lot of innovation happening at the high school level already. Schools that encourage young people to understand collaborative leadership are doing the right thing.

We have a country that is polarized, but what makes me feel hopeful are those schools where kids are learning how to speak out and speak up. They're being taught that their voice matters, that they should vote, and that they should have the courage to believe they can make a difference in the world.

In our society we have unbelievable diversity, and yet we don't see it reflected at all in leadership positions. We need young people who can speak clearly about important

issues and understand that we need to care and work together, or we really won't have a meritocracy going forward.

Tell us about the programming Posse provides its Scholars while they're still in high school and once they get to college.

We have high school through college programming. Incoming Posse Scholars—seniors in high school—receive eight months of leadership development. Their posses (of 10) meet once a week after school. They participate in workshops about race, gender, class, religion, politics. They learn how these things intersect and they become very comfortable talking about them.

Our theory of leadership says people who understand how aspects of identity—race, class, gender, politics—affect decision-making are better leaders. It's that simple. I don't think a lot of people understand leadership that way, but people who understand how aspects of identity affect decision-making are better leaders.

Has Posse's definition of success evolved? You started by helping deserving students get into top colleges and making sure they graduated, but you've since grown into something much bigger, it seems.

Joe B. Wyatt, the former chancellor of Vanderbilt University, said early on, "Posse is not a program, it's a movement." That stuck with us, and we realized that Posse was actually creating a new kind of network—a new leadership network for the United States. We do feel like we're a movement, and we focus a lot on leadership in a way that I think is very important.

We need young people who can speak clearly about important issues and understand that we need to care and work together, or we really won't have a meritocracy going forward.

Posse alumni have gone on to become leaders in a variety of fields. Can you share some of their stories?

A great example is Shirley from our very first posse. Shirley was a Dominican kid who grew up in Brooklyn. Her dad drove a Yellow Cab in New York City, and she had pretty low SAT scores. Posse helped her go to Vanderbilt University, where she graduated with honors. Next, she earned her doctorate in clinical psychology from Duke University. Later, she became the dean of Middlebury College. Last year, Shirley Collado became the president of Ithaca College. She is the first Dominican-American to be president of a four-year college in the United States. While the field of education is dominated by women, 88% of the presidents of four-year colleges in this country are white, and the majority of them are men—and then there's Shirley. Shirley Collado represents what we're about.

And, there's Koby Altman. Koby was a Posse Scholar who went to Middlebury College and now is the general manager of the Cleveland Cavaliers. He's one of a small number of people of color who are general managers; he's also one of the youngest.

I believe that over the next few years, as we start to have more Posse alumni in their 40s and 50s, you're going to see increasing numbers of them in prominent leadership positions. They'll be inclusive and collaborative, and that's exciting to me.

Posse has also added a career program. How does Posse support Posse Scholars as alumni?

Posse has been developing its career and alumni programming so that we can more deliberately connect these outstanding young people to the right kinds of leadership-track positions in the workforce. We have a corps of volunteers who are career coaches for kids, which is a great volunteer opportunity for a lot of

people. We also have powerful companies that partner with us—Deloitte, Goldman Sachs, Bank of America, Disney, Viacom, and many others.

Recently, we launched the Jeff Ubben Posse Fellows Program, which provides a \$10,000 stipend to five high-achieving Posse Scholar sophomores and matches them with a dream internship opportunity. For example, we've matched fellowship winners with Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, Merck CEO Ken Frazier, and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren.

What we're trying to say to these young people is, "Here's a role model for you. We want you to think big. And you're the kind of kid that we believe in." We use this as a way to say to the world, "You need to think of Posse Scholars in the same way you think of Rhodes Scholars. Posse Scholars are incredibly impressive, and they are going to change the world."

You have almost 8,500 Posse Scholars and alumni out there. That's an incredible number of people in the network.

Yes, and that number is continuing to grow. If we reach our goal to recruit 1,000 new Posse Scholars every year, over the next century Posse and our partner schools will be supporting 100,000 leaders for the United States of America. One day, I think we'll be able to look back and say, "Wow, thank God we had these kids."

That's a remarkable goal, and Posse certainly seems poised to achieve that. Do you foresee, or are you worried about, any obstacles to reaching that goal?

I worry that our current system of higher education is not sustainable. It has become so expensive to put one young person through college that I don't see how it can continue. I also worry that we're forgetting how important a liberal arts education is. The focus on vocation and technology is important, but so is the philosophy that we should learn about as much as we can, learn how to think critically, how to understand the world, and how to be valuable citizens. I worry about our losing sight of that.

What in your background drives you to do this work?

My father, who is 91 years old, played for the New York Philharmonic for 38 years, and my mom did public relations. They raised my sister and me in this very open household where we always talked about the news at the dinner table; we all ate dinner together, and my sister and I were important contributors to the conversation—our



voices were always important. My family shaped a lot of the philosophy that I—and Posse—have now: this idea that the voices of young people are important at any age, and, if adults don't listen to them, we're missing out on amazing ideas.

I also married Bob Herbert, who was an op-ed columnist for the *New York Times* for almost 20 years. He influenced how I look at the world, which helped me to think more critically about Posse's role as a social justice organization. While Posse is not partisan, we do care about making a difference and making our world a better place.

What do superintendents need to know about Posse?

Without our district partners, we wouldn't have the necessary nominations. Really, there would be no program, so we are extremely grateful to them. I remember when Alberto Carvalho (Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools) asked Posse to open in Miami. He believed so strongly in the importance of giving all of his kids a shot at a great education that within the first year, 100% of the public schools in Miami-Dade nominated kids—100% of schools! That's because of Alberto. It's been an amazing partnership.

The superintendents we partner with are saying, "We believe in the Posse mission. We know we have amazing kids in our schools who could go unnoticed." They value that Posse provides opportunities for their students and brings millions of dollars of scholarships into their public school systems. So it's a win-win.

In closing, is there anything that you want to say to our superintendents?

I think superintendents have such a hard job to do with limited resources, but they also have power. When superintendents come together and form coalitions, they can make powerful statements to the people making decisions about where tax dollars go and the direction of our educational systems and infrastructure. And, when superintendents are creative and form partnerships with big business or with community-based organizations, they can significantly and exponentially increase the impact they make. I would just say to the superintendents of the public schools in this country: thank you. I admire you and am forever grateful to you. Don't ever give up. ♦

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Posse Scholars

- Posse Scholars graduate from college at a rate of **90%** (compared to the national average rate of 16% among students from low-income backgrounds)
- **48%** of Posse alumni are earning or have received a graduate degree five or more years after graduating from college
- Since 2014, Posse Scholars have won over **200** prestigious national fellowships