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Fundraising falloff sidelines Hoop Dreams scholarships

[David Elfin](#) ([Contact](#))

The Hoop Dreams Scholarship Fund, which began as a one-day basketball tournament 13 years ago and went on to help 1,000 students from D.C. Wards 7 and 8 go to college, is ceasing operations, another victim of the nation's ongoing economic distress.

The HDSF Board, in deciding Monday to approve a shutdown over the next few months, projected donations to be down about 50 percent for the upcoming fiscal year.

"For the past several years, we've been deeply concerned about the sustainability of our organization," HDSF founder Susie Kay said in an e-mail sent Thursday to about 500 supporters. "Each year we continue to add new students, mentors, volunteers and many others to our HDSF network. Our ability to raise funds to continue providing our students with resources to serve them in the way that has made HDSF so impactful and special has declined drastically in this particular economic climate."

Although Ms. Kay has been an indefatigable fundraiser, meeting with potential sponsors on a near-daily basis and attending events almost every night in search of more financial support, the economic downturn proved to be the undoing of the organization she founded in 1996 as a young, idealistic government teacher at H.D. Woodson High School.

"The fundraising challenge of nonprofits has been exacerbated by the continuing downturn of the economy," said HDSF board member Ernie Jarvis, managing director of the commercial real estate firm CB Richard Ellis. "The corporate community in this region

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probably has more philanthropic sensibility than anywhere else in this county, but every large organization has cut back on its philanthropic contributions."

"People have asked why not downsize, not serve so many students next year, cut a little here and a little there and live to see another day?" HDSF communications director Lester Davis said. "But then it's not the same organization. Our relationships are the heart of Hoop Dreams."

Some nonprofits provide scholarships for needy students from the District's impoverished neighborhoods, then move on to work with the next year's class. Ms. Kay and the Hoop Dreams staff and volunteer mentors, meanwhile, continued to help their graduates throughout their lives - even those who went off track and spent time behind bars.

"That's what made us special," Ms. Kay said Thursday after sending out the e-mail.

A former Capitol Hill aide who grew up in comfort as the daughter of a Navy captain, Ms. Kay said she was deeply troubled by the inability of the vast majority of her students to be able to afford to continue their education after receiving their high school diploma.

A big sports fan, the American University graduate began her fundraising effort with the basketball tournament that she named after the award-winning 1994 documentary, "Hoop Dreams." With the support of such high-profile friends as Sen. Jack Reed, Rhode Island Democrat, and former White House press secretary Ari Fleischer, Ms. Kay's dream grew into an organization with a \$1.5 million budget. Ms. Kay left her teaching job six years ago to focus on Hoop Dreams full time.

HDSF scholars, approximately 80 each year in recent classes, received SAT preparation, mentoring, and that scholarship money.

"A thousand kids went to college because of one person's dream," said HDSF board Chairman Frank Ross, a retired managing partner at KPMG. "I'm trying to convince Susie to write down everything she did over the past 13 years so that her vision will live on."

It will at least continue into the 2009-10 school year. The members of the Class of 2009, who were saluted by Mr. Reed and other elected officials at a reception at the U.S. Capitol last month, will each receive his or her full promised scholarship.

"I just hope that the kids we served won't have their hopes of the future dimmed by this news," Mr. Jarvis said.

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