I promise to Love You Earth - Yerusalem

STRATEGIC PLAN 2025
A vision for sustained impact and longevity
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Letter from the **Executive Director**

I arrived at Trail Blazers in the fall of 2008, drawn to its unique approach to engaging young people and making our environment a better place. It was, and still is, clear that Trail Blazers is grounded in a kindness and respect for oneself, each other, our communities, and our environment, that is not commonly seen. When I hear from our alumni, their stories of countless lessons learned and lasting connections built stand out. Over the years, “Trail Blazers taught me countless lessons including how to lead and how to be a better parent. Trail Blazers’ approach and its lasting impact is what keeps me personally committed to its success as an organization and drives our consideration for Trail Blazers’ future.

Gathering around the table to translate Trail Blazers’ timeless principles into a Strategic Plan for becoming a scalable youth service organization proved to be a formidable challenge, as we worked to ensure that the plan properly considered the needs of our community and our place in the world of today and tomorrow. As is so often the case, it was people who made it happen. Our energized and passionate contributors are board, staff, campers, parents, alumni, and community partners, who participated in one form or another in the development of this plan.

What we hope is evident is the care with which this Strategic Plan was developed. It is rooted in an excitement of what the future has in store for Trail Blazers as well as connected to our long and deep history of serving young people through outdoor experiences.

It is also our hope that you will join us on this journey to claim Trail Blazers’ place as a “Best In Class” youth organization. This Strategic Plan is a living plan; as we move forward we will critically consider what pieces of the plan are pushing us in the direction of our goals, and what pieces need to be reconsidered. There are ample opportunities to leave your mark on the details of our work and we hope you will take part in that conversation. We welcome your ideas and input as we move along.

To the next 130 years, and beyond!

Riel Peerbooms
Executive Director
Letter from the **Board Chair**

When I joined Trail Blazers’ Board of Trustees in 2010, it was a passionate, albeit small, organization that focused on delivering its unique Overnight Camp experience to approximately 300 campers a summer. Today, in 2020, Trail Blazers is engaging over 2700 young people through a robust portfolio of summer and year-round programs!

Looking back on the past decade, I can’t help but be amazed by Trail Blazers’ growth and increased impact. But what amazes me the most is the one thing that has not changed at all: the dedicated passion for delivering uniquely impactful experiences that enticed me to join the board so many years ago.

This dedication and passion underpins Trail Blazers at all levels: from our front-line staff singing along with campers as they hike on the Appalachian Trail, to the senior staff who thoughtfully guide the development of current and new programs to ensure we are effectively meeting our young people’s needs and not pursuing growth for the sake of growth, to the Board of Trustees who work to support Trail Blazers and keep the organization accountable for achieving its goals and fulfilling its mission.

This same dedicated passion underpins this Strategic Plan—a plan designed to provide the focus and direction needed to propel Trail Blazers to a new scope and level of impact for future generations upon generations of campers to enjoy. We are grateful for our passionate supporters, alumni, program partners, and board members, who participated in the development of this plan and without whom Trail Blazers’ work would not be possible. Our success is your success.

I look forward to working with our Board to put this plan into action, a feeling I share with my Co-Chair, Marc Hyman, and the rest of the Board of Trustees. We have several exciting and challenging years ahead of us! However, I am confident that this Strategic Plan will guide us in navigating this new phase, establish Trail Blazers as a true leader in nature-based youth development, and ensure future youth will have access to programs where they can learn and grow into their full potential.

Hugh Babowal
Co-Chair

Marc Hyman
Co-Chair
In 1887, John Ames Mitchell, editor of Life magazine, raised $800 to send 266 children from New York City to the Life Fresh Air Farm in Branchville, Connecticut. Since that first summer, Trail Blazers has sponsored thousands of children to take part in outdoor adventures where learning happens experientially – by living and playing together, and experiencing the challenges and opportunities the natural environment offers.

Anchored first by the ideas of brilliant, passionate, and inspired people like Lois Goodrich and L.B. Sharpe, and later by the magnificence of the Mashipacong estate in New Jersey, thousands of lives were enriched through experiences that are often out of reach for too many. In a world that has seen growing inequality in recent years, the issue of access is more profound than ever; in a world dominated by screens and social media, Trail Blazers’ values are both timeless and timely.

We envision a world where all people have opportunities to go outside and grow within.

After the last 10 years of growing and testing, we have put together the first long term, ambitious plan to bring Trail Blazers to the forefront of the arena it plays in, and to continue to deliver the promise of LB Sharpe and Lois Goodrich: to be a best in class youth services organization that is truly available and accessible to all.
**BY THE NUMBERS**

- **300**
  - Number of campers in our flagship overnight camp

- **30,000**
  - Number of youth served since 1887

- **9**
  - Programs in our portfolio

- **600**
  - Number of campers in our Brooklyn day camp, and growing!

- **1887**
  - Our first summer at the Life Fresh Air Farm, Connecticut

- **1938**
  - Moved to our current overnight site at the Mashipacong Estate, New Jersey
2700
Camper served annually across all programs

100
Percentage of campers who receive scholarship support

500
Number of campers in our after school program

1953
Renamed Trail Blazer Camps, better known as Trail Blazers

97
Percentage of campers who show statistically significant personal growth

200
Number of staff making a difference annually
Through outdoor experiential programs, accessible to all, Trail Blazers equips and empowers youth to build values for life.

DIVERSITY AND BELONGING
We value unencumbered access to diverse learning spaces where all youth and families know that they belong.

OUTDOOR ENGAGEMENT
Screen-free, environmentally-focused outdoor exploration (and the SEL development that comes along with it) allows youth to connect deeply to themselves and the world around them.

CHALLENGE AND DISCOVERY
We embrace the development of a growth mindset and the plain joy that comes from persevering to develop new skills and discover new things.

PLAYFULNESS AND FUN
We know that free play and exploration offer youth essential opportunities to develop interests and build positive social connections.

SKILLED AND CARING ADULTS
Our staff teams are our most valuable resource — program experience is built on the relationships between our staff and our campers.
When young people participate in our programs, they develop skills and values collectively known as Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills, and include skills such as self-management, persistence, social awareness, positive community engagement, and goal-directed behavior (to name a few). Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that SEL skills are predictive of future success.

While there are many organizations and programs designed to promote the development of these skills in young people, we know through anecdotal as well as statistically-validated evidence that our approach is especially effective: over 97% of our participants improve in one or more skills that have been demonstrated to contribute to long term success.

“A mind stretched will never return to its original form ...
I found it to be true every time I attended Trail Blazers.”

— TBC Alum
HOW WE CHANGE LIVES

We make our secret sauce by bringing together the right ingredients and the right strategies to produce immediate results.

THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS
- Time Outdoors
- Caring Adults
- Diverse Groups
- Dynamic Spaces
- Hands-On Learning
- Environmental Engagement

THE RIGHT STRATEGIES
- Small Groups
- Voice and Choice
- Decentralization
- Staff Development
- Embracing Challenge
- Skill Practice and Mastery
- Play and Exploration
- Uniform Knowledge Toolkits
- Unencumbered Access

SHORT TERM OUTCOMES
- Care for self
- Increased self-management
- Belief in one’s own abilities
- Consideration of others
- Strengthened empathy
- Ability to see others’ perspectives
- Comfort with collaboration
- Community mindedness
- Group collaboration
- A vision of oneself as part of a larger collective
- Development of positive purpose
Environmental Stewardship
Understanding of ecological interdependence
Consideration of resource use
Sense of connection to the natural world

LONG TERM IMPACT

· Strengthened Communities
· Increased Environmentalism
· Thriving Young Adults
OUR PROGRAMS

CAMP PROGRAMS
Overnight Camp, Day Camp, School Break Camps
Summer camp programs made us who we are today and continue to be at the heart of everything we do. Overnight Camp, Brooklyn Day Camp, and our School Break Camps provide memorable outdoor adventures where learning happens experientially—by living and playing together and experiencing the challenges and opportunities the natural environment offers.

SCHOOL PROGRAMS
After School, Recess, Summit
What started as Under One Sky After School (UOS) has grown to include a dynamic roster of school-based programming in Brooklyn, including Recess, an in-school program of play coaching, and Summit, our newest adventure for middle school students. We bring outdoor programming directly to the students in our neighborhood schools to expand the notion of environment to include everywhere we live, work, and play.

LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS
SYEP, LIT, UOS Internship
Both summer and school-based programs include opportunities for high school youth to engage, connect, and grow through leadership roles. We partner with New York City’s Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) for Day Camp, provide paid internships in Under One Sky for local high school students, and offer 4-week Leaders in Training (LIT) programming at Overnight Camp.
Led by a handful of dedicated board members and administrative leaders, we spent six months thinking, discussing, and designing this plan. Several rounds of feedback from our alumni, current participants, funders, school principals, parents, and others ensured that this plan is grounded in both our rich history and experience, as well as supported by our current stakeholders.

This plan provides Trail Blazers with a map that leads us to more effectively, more consistently, and more broadly deliver our unique offering: environmental programs that help youth become better prepared to face the challenges of adulthood.

Throughout the development of this plan, overarching ideas on what will guide the organization in the next few years emerged. These overarching ‘lenses’ will guide staff and board, as the plan is put into action and monitored for its effectiveness, over the next 5 years.

**TRANSPARENCY**

**DIVERSITY, EQUITY, and INCLUSION**

**DATA UTILIZATION and INTEGRATION**

**OUR UNIQUE LIVING HISTORY**

The plan is organized to consider three main themes that will set the direction for Trail Blazers, and will directly contribute to our ultimate goal: to be a best-in-class youth services organization.

**PEOPLE AS PRIORITY**

**FINANCIAL AGILITY**

**OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE**
TRANSPARENCY
As a public non-profit, we aim to have our practices and decision making processes be as transparent as possible, both internally and externally.

- How do we communicate with our stakeholders and staff?
- What information can and should be readily available?

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, and INCLUSION (DEI)
DEI will be considered across all areas, anchored by a board-developed and adopted DEI policy.

- Who needs to be included in DEI consideration?
- How do we ensure that our organization is truly diverse, equitable, and inclusive?

DATA UTILIZATION and INTEGRATION
Relevant data will be part of organizational decision making whenever possible.

- What systems are available to gather, process and integrate data effectively?
- What data do we currently utilize and what are we lacking?

OUR UNIQUE LIVING HISTORY
Our 130+ year history is an anchor that ensures the continuity of our organization and the uniqueness of our program model.

- How do we consider our history when looking towards the future?
- Which aspects of our history should inform our decisions?
ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Success will be defined by looking at the organization from several different angles. The five questions below are designed to frame how we think and talk about Trail Blazers.

Who are our children and families?

How do we measure camper growth?

Who are our leaders?

Do we have a sustainable people model?

Do we have a sustainable financial model?
People as Priority

We are a group of deeply passionate, kind, and dedicated folk who share a belief in the value and power of our unique program. It is for this reason that we highlight the central importance of people as priority in what we do today and in how we build a prosperous future. We focus on:

- STAFF STRUCTURE
- CAMPERS, FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS
- ALUMNI and HISTORY

Financial Agility

We need the financial agility to ensure that the life changing programs we provide are offered at an exceptional quality today, and continue to be offered into the future. We focus on:

- FINANCIAL EXCELLENCE
- DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS
- MASHIPACONG ESTATE

Operational Excellence

Our focus on operational excellence recognizes that programs cannot excel without excellent scaffolding to support them. We will invest in and build out the capacity to manage, promote, and execute our programs efficiently, without needing to sacrifice operational needs over program needs. We focus on:

- BRAND IDENTITY, MARKETING, AND PUBLIC RELATIONS
- BOARD EXCELLENCE
- INTERNAL OPERATIONS

Best In Class

Trail Blazers has operated for more than 130 years with a remarkable degree of consistency. We have been doing many things right. The three focus areas introduced above are in service of our highest priority: lifting our organization up, aligning with today’s world, and delivering exceptional programs that position Trail Blazers to stand shoulder to shoulder with any high caliber youth program.
People as Priority

Staff Structure
A team structured to support organizational stability, excellence, and growth, evidenced by:

- Diversity of people, perspectives, and experiences.
- A high performing core administrative team.
- Strong directors in key operational positions.
- High performing program delivery staff.
- High staff retention rates.
- An organizational culture emphasizing the employee experience.

Campers, Families, Community Partners
Enthusiastic and dedicated participants, families, and community partners who understand and believe strongly in the Trail Blazers experience, evidenced by:

- High approval, retention, and enrollment rates.
- High percentage of referrals coming from current participants and program partners.
- High percentage of participants enrolled in more than one Trail Blazers program over multiple years.

Alumni and History
A dynamic alumni base that leverages Trail Blazers’ history for the benefit of organizational development, evidenced by:

- Clearly defined objectives for alumni engagement.
- High participation from alumni in Trail Blazers events and conversations, with representation from all decades of attendance (1940s - present).
- Measurable alumni impact in the categories of development, public relations, and programming.

Financial Agility

Financial Excellence
A versatile and diverse financial model, evidenced by:

- Formalized approach to considering financial contributions of programs to operational core.
- Incorporating programmatic investment in the growth and stability of the organization.
- Planned annual budget surpluses to support appropriate size reserve and capital funds.
- Formalized approach to considering reserve needs and annual contributions to reserve and capital funds.
- Professional financial management practices with appropriate internal and external controls, processes, and workflows.

Development and Communications
A diverse funding portfolio and approach that maximizes Trail Blazers’ support network, evidenced by:

- Increased fundraising capacity to support a growing budget.
- High donor retention by audience segment.
- Diversified funding streams.

Mashipacong Estate
An estate that is intentionally central to the identity of Trail Blazers and its programs, with a comprehensive approach to capital, inventory, and property management, evidenced by:

- Well-maintained grounds, buildings, and property that allow for a high quality program experience.
- Modernization that preserves and reflects Trail Blazers’ rich history.
- Planned capital reserves linked to capital plan.
- Effective participant and stakeholder engagement with property.
Operational Excellence

Brand, Marketing, Public Relations
Effective promotion of a brand identity aligned with our mission and vision, evidenced by:

- High-quality, accessible, and relevant marketing that reinforces the mission/vision of Trail Blazers.
- Brand-consistent, visually exciting content.
- Marketing content and PR events that clearly and effectively describe the organization and its programs, as well as align program expectations with program experience.
- High public and community recognition of our brand.

Board Excellence
A dynamic board actively engaged in governing, funding, and guiding the organization, evidenced by:

- Diversity of perspectives to inspire creativity and drive innovation.
- Intentional and proactive governance.
- Transparency of board member expectations, effectiveness, and results.
- Attainable, ambitious goals that are met or exceeded, with accountability front and center.

Internal Operations
Operational structure that supports high quality execution of each organizational bucket, built to support future growth, evidenced by:

- Forward-thinking development of management systems and policies.
- Transparent operational requirements for all departments.
- Clear evaluation and benchmarking processes.
- Adherence to strategic plan.
By prioritizing the people we serve, increasing our financial agility, and striving for operational excellence, we place Trail Blazers on a firm path towards being a best in class youth organization.

A diverse portfolio of high-impact experiences aligned around our mission, vision, and program principles, evidenced by:

- High execution of strong program content.
- Relevant and well-considered program growth.
- Strong public and community recognition of Trail Blazers as an active leader in the fields of camping, youth development, and outdoor education.
OUR BOARD and STAFF

Board Chair
Marc Hyman

Board Chair
Hugh Babowal

Treasurer
Louis Milea

Secretary
Grace Kurdian

Trustees
Nathaniël Drake
Ryan Goodman
Hélène Horsham Bertels
John Howie
Eamonn Johnston
Anna Krassy
Erez Levin
Chris Macios
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George Kunath
Arthur Fishelman

Advisory Board
John Peris
Nihad Rahman
Lee Simonson
JOIN US!
There will be ample opportunity to leave your mark on this plan, and we hope you will join us on this journey.

Comments or suggestions? Please let us know!

Riel Peerbooms
rpeerbooms@trailblazers.org
212-529-5113