



TRAILBLAZERS

I promise
to Love You
Earth - Yerusalem

STRATEGIC PLAN 2025

A vision for sustained impact and longevity



CONTENTS

Introduction	..... Page 4,5
Our Vision	..... Page 6,7
By the Numbers	..... Page 8,9
Mission and Principles	..... Page 10, 11
Why Today?	..... Page 12,13
How We Change Lives	..... Page 14,15
Our Programs	..... Page 16,17
About This Plan	..... Page 18,19
Our Lenses	..... Page 20,21
Essential Questions	..... Page 22,23
Our Themes	..... Page 24,25
Our Goals	..... Page 26,27
Best in Class	..... Page 28, 29
Join Us!	..... Page 30,31

INTRODUCTION

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.

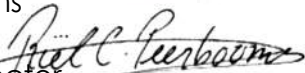
What we hope is evident is the care with which this Strategic Plan was developed. It is rooted in an excitement of what the future has in store for Trail Blazers as well as connected to our long and deep history of serving young people through outdoor experiences.

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



OUR VISION

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, Con-
necticut

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





MISSION and PRINCIPLES

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.

WHY TODAY?

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



LONG TERM IMPACT

Strengthened
Communities

Increased
Environmentalism

Thriving Young
Adults

Environmental Stewardship
Understanding of ecological
interdependence
Consideration of resource use
Sense of connection to the
natural world





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.





ABOUT THIS PLAN

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

OUR LENSES

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?



OUR THEMES

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.*



OUR GOALS

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.



BEST IN CLASS

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

Nathaniel Drake

Ryan Goodman

Helen Horsham Bertels

John Howie

Eamonn Johnston

Anna Krassy

Erez Levin

Chris Macios

Dana Muldrow

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William D. Bouw

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Arthur Fishelman

Advisory Board

John Peris

Nihad Rahman

Lee Simonson

**Executive Director**

Riel Peerbooms

Director of Operations

Molly McCue

Development Director

Tiffany Caton

Director of Facilities

Steve Bates

Director of Programs

Jennifer Bombardier

Overnight Camp Director

Christopher Thomasson

Day Camp Director

Callie Radday

School Programs Director

Philip Robinson

Office Manager

Stephan Lendor

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!

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**TRAILBLAZERS**
GO OUTSIDE, GROW WITHIN

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