

## Boston Educator Fulfilling MLK Jr.'s Dream

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*Earl Martin Phalen founded the Phalen Leadership Academies whose mission is to provide, beautiful, clean, safe, empowering educational environments where children thrive academically.  
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Earl Martin Phalen, whose middle name is a tribute to the civil rights leader, was a black child adopted by a white family in Norwood, Massachusetts at the age of two.

Earl was the Phalen's eighth child and his mother Veronica was inspired to adopt him after reading a sobering article in the newspaper.

"There was an article on the front page of the Boston Globe that said 70 percent of Black Boys in Massachusetts Foster care system would end up in prison by the time they were 21," Phalen said. "So my mom said if I can't be a freedom rider, we are going to adopt a black boy and give him a loving home."

Earl was a black child growing up in a large, loving white family, however he recalls how his first exposure to racism during a third-grade dodgeball game changed his life.

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"We won and were teasing a little and then this boy said 'at least I am not an n-word.' I just kind of froze," Phalen recalls.

"I felt hurt. I felt embarrassed. I said to myself maybe if I become a politician maybe if I become a mayor of a city I can use that to make sure no one else feels the way I'm feeling in this moment."



His political aspirations led him to Yale and Harvard Law School, but after organizing a mentoring and tutoring project with children in Roxbury, Phalen realized his true calling was education, not politics.

- [Stories of How MLK Changed Lives at Key Moments](#)

"We found that most of the kids were working at a third-grade level and they were middle schoolers," Phalen said.

Phalen created Building Educated Leaders for Life [BELL] in 1992. It started with just 20 Boston Public School children and now serves nearly 20,000 students throughout the country, including Detroit, New York, and Baltimore. The after-school and summer enrichment program has a track record of improving reading, writing, and math skills.

After 17 years, Phalen left BELL to lead his newest passion, Phalen Leadership Academies. The mission is to provide, beautiful, clean, safe, empowering educational environments where children thrive academically. The children refer to themselves as scholars rather than students.

Phalen considers how his life is aligned with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy.

"The goal is social change. There are 100 ways to get there," Phalen said. "I'm trying to use one way which is let's give our children the type of schools they deserve. Give them the type of future they deserve."

There are twenty Phalen Leadership Academies around the country and the schools are named after Earl's parents, George and Veronica Phalen. It's a tribute to the loving couple from Norwood who changed the world for a young boy, a boy who grew into a world-changing man.