

**Testimony before House Education and Labor Committee
Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities**

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Madam Chairwoman, Congressman Platts, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to talk about the importance of national and community service. As a child advocate and someone who served as a volunteer for many years, it is my hope that my testimony will help renew the spirit of service and encourage the desire of volunteers to continue their efforts towards enriching the lives of children, particularly in the quest to learn and master the skills associated with creativity and problem solving. Most importantly, I hope this hearing will help encourage new volunteers to develop a passion for community service.

I am here today on behalf of Destination ImagiNation, Inc, an organization that for nearly a quarter of a century has utilized volunteers throughout the world to help children grow and truly make a difference in their communities. I can unequivocally say that without the efforts of our tens of thousands of volunteers, we would have been incapable of growing into the world's leading non-profit corporation providing a community of creative problem solving programs for youth and adults of all ages.

Destination ImagiNation, Inc, which is headquartered in Congressman Rob Andrews' district in Glassboro, New Jersey, is the product of a twenty-five year path that

has dedicated itself to helping all those who participate in its programs understand the importance of teamwork, creativity and problem solving as part of a life-long “learning process.” The result is that each year, thousands of participants from age 4 to adult throughout North and South America, Europe, Asia and even South Africa become excitedly involved in the power of creativity and problem solving in an effort to ultimately help make our world a better place in which to live.

Destination ImagiNation, Inc. is a Community of several different programs all of which focus on the creative problem solving process. Over the past quarter century, our programs have been conducted by volunteer Affiliates, in schools, community organizations, churches and synagogues in all fifty states and in over forty countries.

The **Flagship Destination ImagiNation** program is the oldest and largest of the Programs. “DI”®, as it is fondly regarded throughout the world, is a community-based, school-friendly program where young people take what they know and what they do well and learn to apply it to solve Challenges. DI is not so much a program but rather a process of learning HOW to be creative so that its participants will develop life-long problem-solving skills that carry over into everyday life. The goals of the program are intended to:

- foster creative and critical thinking
- learn and apply Creative Problem Solving methods and tools
- promote the recognition, use and development of many and varied strengths and talents
- develop teamwork, collaboration, and leadership skills while developing self respect for oneself and the team members with whom they work
- nurture research and inquiry skills, involving both creative exploration and attention to detail

- encourage competence in, enthusiasm for, and commitment to real-life problem solving.

Our primary goal is for participants to learn these skills while solving the Challenge selected by the team. Teams of up to seven members work together for two to three months in the development of a given DI Challenge in areas such as; Technical/Mechanical, Improvisation, Science, Theater Arts, and Structural/Architectural Design.

The teams are aided by a Team Manager volunteer, who assists them as a Socratic facilitator. Upon completion of the solution to the Challenge, the teams may participate in a local tournament or will progress on to regional and state tournaments. We are currently in the final stages of our Affiliate Tournaments throughout the world. As a matter of fact, this past weekend I had the pleasure of seeing Congressman Mike Ross at the 25th Annual Affiliate Tournament in Arkansas. This coming Saturday, I will attend the Maryland 25th anniversary Tournament in Congressman Sarbanes' district.

During the course of the program year, depending upon the size and level of participation within the fifty-six international Affiliates, over three hundred local, regional and state-wide Affiliate Tournaments will occur culminating in an annual Global Finals event which gathers nearly eighteen thousand participants (half of those volunteers) to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. Over the history of the organization, the Flagship program has touched millions of children in five continents, all

of whom recognize the contributions of the volunteers who enabled them to take their respective journey into the world of creative problem solving.

This recognition and appreciation of the importance of service helped create a recent addition to the Destination ImagiNation Inc. Community of Programs. **Project Outreach®** was developed by a group of Alumni of the Flagship program to utilize the creative and critical thinking skills they had learned in the Flagship program and apply them to real life situations. Simply, Project Outreach became a creative learning experience with a service outcome that combined the energy of youth, the educational value of creative problem solving and the motivation of peer support and recognition into a service learning program. Middle and high school students participate in this program and are facilitated by volunteers who serve as Team Advisors, Tournament Managers, or Tournament Volunteers. Since its inception in 1995, Project Outreach teams have developed and solved numerous community challenges such as:

- Collecting thousands of items of clothing for the homeless
- Implementing school clean-up drives and environmental education programs
- Presenting programs instructing children about the dangers of speaking to strangers
- Developing a nature walk
- Building a handicapped – accessible playground
- Collecting truckloads of paper for recycling
- Raising funds for a shelter for battered women
- Designing exercise to build self-esteem
- Assisting in the building of low-income housing

As we continue a challenging journey into the future, the ability to utilize the skills associated with problem solving in a community setting will be paramount to a successful and meaningful future. Adult volunteers interested in providing a foundation

for that success to occur are an important ingredient in helping the youth of our country and the world understand that there is optimism for the future if they in fact are an active part of the process.

Of particular interest to this Committee is our technology-based program called **Tech Effects**[®] which combines basic technology education and teamwork with creative problem solving. The Tech Effects program links directly to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (S.T.E.M) education standards and presents S.T.E.M. to participants in a fun and challenging format in a six to eight week program built around a “Tech Focus” – a specific area of technology. As teams of five to seven kids explore the “Tech Focus” they ultimately build a device that applies that specific type of technology in solving a task in the form of a challenge solution. The solution is subsequently presented in a classroom setting or entered into a competitive format in an after school program, summer program or Tech Rally sponsored by Destination ImagiNation Inc. Affiliates or other groups such as the Boys and Girls Clubs. Tech Effects offers kids the opportunity to develop teamwork, collaboration and leadership skills while encouraging a competence in, enthusiasm for and a commitment to real-life problem solving through the use of technology-based activities that again find their way into the world of creativity and problem solving.

From our **Rising Stars!**[®] program that works with four to seven year olds, to our **Dicor** program for adults, the Destination ImagiNation Inc. Community of Programs continues the mission of the organization in helping develop the problem solving skills

needed to be successful. A more thorough description of each of our Programs follows this testimony.

Generic to the success of Destination ImagiNation Inc. is a core of thousands of dedicated volunteers who, on a yearly basis, enable the organization to exist. As a former volunteer of eighteen years, I understand that volunteers are the core to our accomplishments.

In any given year, our organization will use approximately thirty thousand volunteers. Throughout the history of the organization, it has been blessed with concerned adults who genuinely care about the future of our youth and their ultimate ability to problem solve in a challenging and demanding future. Our volunteers come from a wide variety of backgrounds and interests including educators, family members of participants, youth in the community, corporate volunteers, members of community civic organizations such as Rotary, Lions, and Optimist Clubs, and from professional fraternities associated with colleges and universities. Simply put, they are moms, dads, aunts, uncles, grandmas, grandpas, corporate leaders, the spouse of a member of Congress, the Alumni of the organization, and anyone else who understands the importance of instilling the ability to problem solve in the youth of today in an effort to secure our tomorrow.

Our volunteers are our Affiliate and Regional Directors, our Team Managers and Appraisers, our Challenge Developers, our International Challenge Masters, and our

Affiliate Training Directors. In essence, they are the heart and soul of the organization and each year they return time and time again to offer their services. In fact, we find that many of our volunteers continue to serve the organization long after their children are no longer a part of the program.

As an organization that prides itself and its existence on volunteers, we seek on a yearly basis to expose awareness of the organization to potentially new volunteers. We do this by conducting awareness sessions for community public service organizations, by explaining to our adult D1cor corporate consulting participants the programming that we provide to children in hopes of getting them involved, and by disseminating promotional literature to all support groups and organizations interested in working with kids.

Interestingly, one of our best sources of volunteers is attendance at annual Tournaments. Interested spectators get to see first hand what kids are doing and even have the opportunity to speak with them about the process associated their creative problem solving abilities. We have been successful in attracting the interest of local media in our Tournaments and as the word successfully spreads, we obtain additional volunteers.

Finally, we rely on our corporate sponsors who generously not only support the organization with financial gifts, but also offer the awareness of the organization to their employees who subsequently find interest in supporting what we do with children. We

have been grateful for the generous support of many corporate entities and foundations over the years. Our current list of supporters includes the National Dairy Council, 3M, Velcro USA, Inc, the Association of Equipment Manufacturers, the Staples Foundation and Sci Fi, which is part of NBC Universal. A complete list of current and former supporters follows this testimony.

As is the case with many volunteer dependent organizations, we never have a shortage of kids who want to participate in our programs. Our challenge has become one revolving around ways to continue to attract adult volunteers. Although we continually utilize the efforts detailed above to attract volunteers to our organization, we most readily admit that it is a continual challenge to secure them.

As Destination ImagiNation, Inc. moves forward into its next quarter century, we need to continue our effort towards finding new volunteers to perpetuate the vision and mission of the organization. We need to continue to attract volunteers through the outreach in local communities.

If innovation is truly a valued notion in our society, then corporate America must continue to support the types of programs offered by organizations such Destination ImagiNation, Inc. It is only through this kind of partnership that we will develop the next generation of problem solvers who will in fact know and understand HOW to innovate. corporate America should continue to embrace and financially support through volunteerism programs that develop the skills needed for the future.

We need to also continue our work in the private sector to increase the understanding of ways in which corporate employees can serve the non-profit sector as Trustees so they can lend their knowledge, expertise and generosity in the continuation of the mission and vision of the non-profit.

Additionally, non-profit organizations need to do a better job coordinating with each other to explore ways in which we can combine our talents and resources to better serve the youth of America.

The future of this country and the world of which it is a part, is an optimistic one that demands its youth understand how to generate ideas, focus on them and then ultimately solve the complex challenges they will face.

And finally, we need to always remember the words of a meaningful age-old saying that states: *“a thousand years from now it will make little difference what kind of house we lived in, what kind of car we drove or how much money we had in the bank. What will be important is that we individually and collectively have made a difference in the life of but one child.”* It is through that effort that we will secure the future of our country and of our world one child at a time.

I thank you for the opportunity to testify and look forward to working with the Subcommittee in finding new and continuing ways to renew the spirit of service in our country.

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