



## **Antoinette C. Dendtler (1972-Present)**

**Founder and Head of School  
Environmental Community Opportunity  
Charter School**

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*“Find your path and run your own race.”  
- Antoinette Dendtler, 2006.*

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### **Early Life and Career**

“Some people were born to work in the environmental field,” says Antoinette Dendtler. “I believe I am one of those people.” Dendtler remembers being curious about the natural world as a child; she remembers once, while working on a middle school science project, she insisted her father take her to a limestone quarry so that she could pick the rock herself. Today, Dendtler, founder of the Environment Community Opportunity (ECO) Charter School in Camden, New Jersey, merges her passion for the environment with an equally strong passion, for building future generations of environmental stewards.

Dendtler attended the College of Wooster in Ohio as an undergraduate, graduating in 1994 with a bachelor’s degree in urban studies. For two years after graduating, she worked in Sewickley, Pennsylvania as a Howard Heinz fellow - a fellowship program designed to bring talented people of color into the educational field. There, she taught literature at Sewickley Academy, where she introduced her students to nature poetry and sometimes conducted classes outside. Dendtler says the job allowed her to “wed my two passions—teaching and the environment,” and affirmed her desire to become an educator. Dendtler went on to get her master’s degree in education from Harvard University.

### **Contributions**

Dendtler worked in private education for a number of years, all while doing volunteer work in urban areas. She says that after watching children who failed to achieve, she saw patterns emerge. “I saw that students who weren’t doing well were in need of access to wider educational resources,” she says. “I wanted to be an information sharer, someone who could help lead teachers and parents in the right direction with regard to those children.” Dendtler realized that she could concentrate on these issues if she focused her work on urban areas. After volunteering in both urban and rural communities, and after working on a

combination of environmental and educational issues, Dendtler realized the need for systemic change in educational institutions. Wanting to attack the problem from the ground up, she decided to start her own school.

Dendtler's primary goal in starting her own school was to increase the academic achievement of urban youth, as well as increase the presence of people of color in the academic and environmental fields. "I wanted to be on the forefront of getting more traditionally underrepresented populations working on these issues," she explains. She started developing a concept for her school in the spring of 2001; after four years of gathering funds, researching designs, and garnering community support, the ECO Charter School opened in September 2005. Dendtler says she chose Camden as the school's site because of the city's many economic and environmental problems. "It's home to superfund sites and brownfields," Dendtler says. "Industry pollutes the city's air, and a sewage plant that sits on the edge of town. There have been times when brown and black water has come out of the pipes. The citizens of Camden weren't warned about any of this." Dendtler sees one of ECO's purposes as educating students about environmental hazards in their surroundings so that "history doesn't repeat itself."

## **Importance of Mentorship to Career Development**

In her effort to get ECO started, Dendtler relied on several mentors for both inspiration and guidance. Shuna Miah, founder of a Philadelphia charter school where Dendtler briefly worked as Director of External Affairs, was an important mentor. "He encouraged me to start my school," Dendtler says. "He was an invaluable resource...he helped me think of the community I wanted to impact, and the responsibility of running a school." Heather Ngoma, director of the New Jersey Charter School Resource Center, helped Dendtler to network, to find technical assistance and to understand the complexities of school design and implementation. Dendtler is also an Environmental Leadership Program (ELP) fellow; several of her co-fellows provided support and creative inspiration as she thought about sustainable school design. Dendtler is happy that she can now play that role to the teachers she has brought on board at ECO, though her work limits her ability to mentor in the larger community.

"People in the environmental field tend to focus on the symptoms of environmental ills, but they seldom incorporate, in a significant way, elements of sustainability and the role children play in inspiring and creating systemic change," Dendtler says. "It's impossible to build a critical mass of individuals who are dedicated environmental advocates without incorporating the voices of young people. They need to know how to use the correct vocabulary, and they need to have the mindset necessary to undo the damage that has been done to the earth in the past 150 years." She says she will not be satisfied with her work until she sees every student leaving ECO having accomplished the school's objective of becoming "adept learners, community leaders and environmental stewards." Dendtler says that opening the doors at her school has been a tremendous accomplishment, one that continues to gratify her every day. "Watching one of my students pick up a silk worm for the first time, or complete designs for a frog pond, has been an awesome experience for me," she says. "I love hearing the kids laugh when they predict the color of spring bulbs in the fall. I know they are gaining valuable lessons. These are the moments that validate all the challenges I went through to open the school's doors."

## **Advice of Young Professionals**

Dentler says the fact that there are still many children who don't benefit from such experiences remains a driving force behind her work. Her experiences have given Dentler a strong awareness of the need for systemic change in environmental education, and educational institutions more broadly. "Children hold the future," she says. "They are the individuals who will make the final determination for us. [Environmental education] is my life's work. I've chosen it because there is a clear need for it." Drawing from her own non-traditional approach to the environmental field, Dentler encourages other young people of color to take innovative approaches to the environment. Her advice to minorities considering environmental careers is straightforward: "Find your path and run your own race."