

# LIFE OF THE MIND

Issues | Ideas | Reflection

## PHOENIX RISING

By Bill Ibelle

**I**T'S A LONG WAY from Geneva Avenue in Boston to Geneva, Switzerland. But for Stanislas Phanord, SSH'14, the physical journey from the tenements of Dorchester to the diplomacy capital of the world was the easy part.

Having run away from an abusive home as a teenager, Phanord entered his final month of high school with a dismal 2.0 GPA and a part-time job at a grocery store deli counter. His life appeared to be mapped out for him.

"When I ran away, I thought my life was over," he says. "I didn't care what happened to me anymore. I had given up."

Five years later, Phanord's life map is transformed.

In May 2014, he graduated from Northeastern with high honors and two of the nation's most prestigious postgraduate scholarships, a Fulbright and a Rangel. He also has an ambitious eight-year plan that includes a summer internship with the congressional human rights commission, a year teaching English to disadvantaged youths outside Paris, a two-year master's degree in public policy, and at least five years in the U.S. Foreign Service.

The story of Phanord's decision to become a diplomat is as remarkable as his academic transformation. But to understand the significance of where Phanord is going, you have to understand where he came from.

### RUNNING TO NOWHERE

Born in Haiti, Phanord moved to the United States at age 3 and grew up in a succession of apartments in the toughest neighborhoods of Boston. His biological father was out of the picture, and his mother was ... well ... "not exactly mother of the year," as Phanord politely phrases it.

One Friday afternoon when he was in the second grade, his mother told him she'd be "out of town for a while." After school, he was supposed to take his two younger brothers to the house of an elderly woman in the



neighborhood. When he arrived, the woman didn't seem to know why he was there and chased the boys away.

Not knowing what to do, Phanord, just 8 years old, took his brothers back to school. They were placed in a foster home, where they remained for the next three months while his mother fought to regain custody.

"We literally cried ourselves to sleep for a month," he recalls.

Although the family was eventually reunited, life in the Phanord household remained chaotic. When Phanord was 16, things took a dramatic turn for the worse after his stepfather arrived from Haiti and repeatedly threatened the boys with physical harm. A year later, his mother inexplicably discarded his bed, so Phanord spent the next several months sleeping on the floor.

"I know that sounds crazy. I guess she was sending me a message."

The message became much clearer the next spring when his mother started smashing his things in the hallway and his stepfather punched him in the face, drawing blood.

"I said to my mother, 'Did you see that?' She looked me in the eye and said, 'I didn't see a thing.' I realized in that moment that I couldn't even trust my own parents," Phanord says.

He paced back and forth in the front hallway, trying to decide what to do. Then he jammed his schoolbooks into his backpack and left.

"Walking across that threshold was one of the hardest things I ever had to do in my life," he says. "I left with literally nothing but my schoolbooks and the clothes on my back."

Phanord stayed with high-school friends and tried to find escape through video games. As far as he was concerned, his life was over.

But two people—a high-school guidance counselor and an English

teacher—refused to give up on him. They told him about a new program that was being started at Northeastern and urged him to apply.

### FROM THE BRINK OF DISASTER

Funded by 25 individual and corporate sponsors, including an inaugural donation from Rick Wrightson, UC'71, Foundation Year was established in 2009 to give struggling Boston youths a shot at a college education. The program is an intensified freshman year—12 months, five days a week, eight hours a day.

With his 2.0 GPA and difficult family background, Phanord was typical of Foundation Year students.

**"I LEFT WITH LITERALLY NOTHING BUT MY SCHOOLBOOKS AND THE CLOTHES ON MY BACK."**

"This is a big challenge," says program director Molly Dugan. "Our advisers have to be experts in homelessness, food stamps, domestic violence, neglect, and more. We take on some of the most fragile students in Boston."

Bolstered by the support of his Foundation Year professors and advisers, Phanord was determined to succeed. But life doesn't take a vacation just because a person decides it's time for a change. In November of his freshman year, Phanord got word that his mother had died.

While cramming for the first final exams of his college career, he had to arrange the funeral, find public funding to pay for it, and take custody of his middle brother, who was still living in his mother's apartment. Meanwhile, he was pulling all-nighters and catching a few hours of sleep in a classroom or the university library.

"I was trying to use schoolwork to escape from the reality of what was

happening," he says. "It was tough trying to be strong for my brother."

As emotionally difficult as this was for him, an even bigger issue was lurking beneath the surface.

A year and a half before her death, Phanord's mother had sent his youngest brother to Haiti and left him there. Phanord doesn't know why. What he does know is that a year later, his mother and stepfather left the middle brother alone in the Boston apartment and flew to Haiti. The purpose of their visit is unclear, but several weeks later Phanord's mother returned without warning, badly burned and saying that the stepfather had tried to murder her.

The youngest brother, meanwhile, was still stranded in Haiti.

When the mother died after a long illness that November, Phanord realized it was up to him to rescue his youngest brother from Haiti.

Fortunately, he had some help—a U.S. diplomat who worked political channels to win release of the boy.

"It was because of that diplomat that I was able to see my brother again," says Phanord. "I had originally planned to study psychology to work with disadvantaged youths like myself. But when I transferred into Northeastern, I switched into political science. I want to do for others what that diplomat did for me."

### A MAN WITH A PLAN

From that moment on, everything Phanord did at Northeastern was focused on becoming a diplomat. He flew to Geneva for a Dialogue of Civilizations with the United Nations and stayed on for six months as a research intern at the Centre for Security Policy. He studied Arabic in Morocco and French at two locations in France.

But his most powerful global experience came in 2013 during a two-month stint as a human rights intern

in Senegal, where he conducted research on the Talibe boys—children abandoned by their families and sent to abusive religious schools.

Based on his extensive field interviews, Phanord learned that from ages 5 to 18 the boys live at these Quran schools, where they are frequently beaten and forced to beg for their meals. They cannot leave until they have memorized the Quran.

“At times, I saw myself in those boys,” says Phanord. “They were sent away like I was. They couldn’t trust their own parents. I saw them as my little brothers.”

### PAYING IT FORWARD

Back at Northeastern, Phanord volunteered as a teaching assistant with Foundation Year and joined LEAD, a student group that helps Boston Public Schools students with their college applications. He takes pride in having helped a girl named Gina, who grew up in a violent neighborhood and, like him, had to work throughout high school to help pay the bills. Gina got into her top-choice college—American University in Washington, D.C.—and went on to earn a Gates Millennium Scholarship.

Phanord says his life experiences make him good at earning the trust of youth like Gina and the Talibe boys. He knows the feelings of isolation and humiliation that come with a troubled childhood.

“I was ashamed to talk about my story at first. The scariest part was the possibility that people would pity me. It’s the worst feeling when someone sees you as an object of pity. It’s the opposite of being admired.

“Now it’s different because my story has become one of overcoming adversity. Now people don’t pity me; they see me as someone to be admired—someone who can inspire others with similar backgrounds.”

Photo: Mariah Jauger



From left to right, Gary Gottlieb, CEO of Partners HealthCare; Jeff Selingo, contributing editor at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*; Northeastern president Joseph E. Aoun; and moderator Kara Miller of WGBH.

### POLL RESULTS

**A nationwide poll of top business leaders revealed:**

**54%**

believe the U.S. higher education system lags behind both developed and emerging countries in preparing students for the workforce.

**96%**

say innovation in higher education is crucial for our workforce to remain globally competitive.

**97%**

believe experiential learning opportunities should be expanded.

**89%**

believe entrepreneurship education should be expanded.

**87%**

contend that most college graduates lack the skills critical to success.

## ENHANCING THE TALENT PIPELINE

By John Ombelets

**BUSINESS LEADERS ARE** concerned that American college students are graduating without the skills needed to thrive in the modern workplace. According to Northeastern’s third national survey exploring the relationship between American universities and industry, the vast majority of business leaders fear that we are falling behind our global competitors.

During the university’s third summit, titled *Innovation Imperative: Enhancing the Talent Pipeline*, President Joseph E. Aoun emphasized that “ultimately, we have to prepare our students not just for their first jobs, but for life.” He added that it’s crucial to integrate classroom and work experience because “through that, you not only learn job skills but also social skills.”

In fact, the survey showed that the skills most coveted by industry leaders are the so-called “soft skills,” such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability.

Jeff Selingo, a contributing editor at *The Chronicle for Higher Education*, questioned why more universities do not follow Northeastern’s co-op model.

“You have to give these students real experiences,” he said.