

Empowering Young Black Men

By Henry Rock

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Tajze Johnson worked wonders after becoming manager at an AutoZone and has now opened a medical supply store. COURTESY HENRY ROCK

Two years ago this month, Tajze Johnson (pronounced Taj) moved to Charlotte from Rochester, N.Y. Tajze had a keen vision for his future: get his degree in physical therapy and start a business – a personal shopping service for the aged. Little did he know that a chance listening to the radio one Sunday morning would soon accelerate his dreams.

I met Tajze during the last days of recruiting for the inaugural class of City Startup Labs (CSL) in January 2014, shortly after he heard about it on Bea Thompson's show. He was the kind of guy I was looking for – bright, eager, determined to be a business owner and most importantly, coachable.

I was just launching a pilot in collaboration with the Urban League of Central Carolinas, to teach entrepreneurship to young black men. The idea was hatched out of having spent many years selling the value of the black consumer to major brands throughout the country. The owners of the media companies and agencies I worked with were extraordinary entrepreneurs. Each saw what African Americans meant to corporate bottom lines and the country's overall economic vitality. Also each saw business ownership as a direct line to wealth creation.

Tajze took to the rigors of the entrepreneurship bootcamp, 15+ weeks of training, which included character development and self-discovery, experiential learning, teamwork, Lean Startup, and Business Model Generation. His personality and enthusiasm shined through, such that he convinced the judges at our first pitch event, that he was worthy of moving on to the incubation phase, for six months at Packard Place.

It was during that incubation when Tajze got promoted from sales associate to manager at the AutoZone where he worked. Over the past year, he's taken his store from the bottom of the heap to No. 2 in Charlotte for salesmanship, No. 1 in gross sales growth and into the President's Club – as a Top 10 store nationwide. While he surely had the promise, he attributes a great deal of his success to what he learned in City Startup Labs.

CSL is designed to equip black male millennials with the tools needed to create, compete, contribute and excel in a 21st Century marketplace and corporate landscape. And it's young men like him who can be instrumental in addressing Charlotte's socio-economic mobility gap and wealth disparities. The city needs the likes of Tajze, and the program's other students, to become a new class of entrepreneurs.

When Charlotte was backhanded by the news that it ranked last among the Top 50 markets in upward mobility, or that Mecklenburg County was 99th out of 100 counties in the country for percentage of wealth loss, a few things happened. There were feelings ranging from chagrin to outrage. There was the need to “taskforce” it – studying the root causes and effects. And unfortunately, there will be the inevitable back to business as usual. This is a pattern that invariably repeats itself all too often. But Charlotte needn't play out this script. It can do something imaginative – it can empower and equip more Tajze Johnsons.

Young black men represent real human capital. There are opportunity costs associated with not realizing their worth, and the role they can play in closing these gaps, when they bring new ventures to market and innovations to Charlotte.

These young men find themselves operating within a structural context that expects less of them, and either ignores them or vilifies them. But they continue to demonstrate resilience – not unlike green shoots through concrete. So imagine if we saw the untapped economic value that they represent – their real upside potential. I'm certain benefits would accrue to corporate bottom lines and Charlotte's economic benefit.

To address these disparities in Charlotte, we of course need to reach our children early, properly guiding them Pre-K through 12. And we need to help single mothers attain living wages and decent housing for themselves and their families. But we also need black male millennials to be a fundamental part of the equation. For if millennials are our near-term future, then our young black men need be counted on to put their shoulders to the plow too. Let the Tajze Johnsons lead the way.

British economist Sir Anthony Atkinson says “rising income gaps unfairly punish those who suffer bad luck. They undermine economic growth and social cohesion. Perhaps most importantly, inequality in economic resources translates directly into inequality in personal opportunity.”

Tajze sees his vision playing out before him. He's just opened a medical supply store – which his mom is managing. He has been in conversations with the Charlotte Housing Authority to pilot his personal shopping venture, A Million Miles Services. And clearly, AutoZone could not be happier. He can now start thinking about wealth, in real terms, for himself and his family.

City Startup Labs presents a practical way to bridge the divide and close the gap.

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