Expanding Opportunities for Springfield’s Minority Youth

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By Dominic E. Watson

For more than a decade, I’ve seen hundreds of Springfield’s minority youth build confidence and skills through The Springfield Project (TSP) workforce development program.

We’ve helped connect more than 600 minority youth with over 50 businesses across the city, giving them opportunities to build their network and horizons all while cultivating life skills through employment. And for the past five years, the Community Foundation for the Land of Lincoln has been a consistent partner to help us achieve these results, even through the COVID-19 pandemic.

A multi-year Communityworks Fund grant from the Community Foundation has given The Springfield Project the ability to continue vital initiatives like the Workforce Development Program. This program is helping propel the development of local minority high schoolers through trainings on leadership and STEM skills such as coding.

More than a decade of inspiring stories have come out of the Workforce Development Program. Whether it’s a springboard for a minority student learning at a local engineering firm and applying those skills to their current career, or understanding the ins and outs of the Springfield Police Department and using that knowledge to work as an officer, we’ve seen the program spark opportunities countless times for youth.

It’s addressed a gap that continues to need attention in Springfield. While TSP has collaborated with the Springfield Black Chamber of Commerce to develop new initiatives that complement the Workforce Development Program, that particular program remains unique to the community. And it’s been just more than a year since Governing Magazine published its investigative series “Segregated in the Heartland,” which identified Springfield, Illinois as home to one of the nation’s most segregated residential areas between blacks and whites.

Breaking through this troubling divide is challenging, but initiatives like the Workforce Development Program and others provide hope. Through a Youth Codeathon in partnership with Google, 30 minority students worked with a professional coder to learn and develop their own software program. Transformation struck through The Young and Powerful Leadership Institute, which was built around personal development and entrepreneurial development, as those in attendance developed one-year action plans for their respective projects.
The Workforce Development Program is an opportunity for students to build experiences in a summer that can shape the rest of their lives. It gives them a chance to engage with a CEO or office professional who mentors them. It provides opportunity to soak up knowledge and experience, so when they enter the workforce, they’re able to have successful careers in any field of interest.

Our success rate is through the roof. Ninety-nine percent of students, once they’re hired, finish the Workforce Development Program. To me what it says is, no matter what part of town they’re from, or what their background is, kids want to work and improve themselves and their community. They’ve proved that.

The Springfield Project is committed to solving community problems through collaboration. Through partnerships with dozens of local business, the Community Foundation, Springfield Park District, Sangamon County Community Resources, and more, it’s hugely rewarding to see the trajectory of hundreds of minority youth shift for the better.

We encourage you to join us in producing meaningful, quantifiable results to reverse decades of inequality in Springfield. To make that happen, leadership is needed from all levels of our community to make a lasting impact.

*Dominic E. Watson is a board member of The Springfield Project and President of The Springfield Black Chamber of Commerce.*