



The Innovation Initiative

# Hackathons Support Underprivileged Youth

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***Cat Volz:***

This is Cat Volz for The Innovation Initiative, and I'm here with my friend Kalimah Priforce. I remember when I met you. The first time I walked into your room, and on your computer was an article that was published for Huffington Post. And I was so proud of you, and I was still in school, and I thought, "Wow! I want to do that. This is an entrepreneur." What were you doing then and what are you doing now?

***Kalimah:***

And so I run Qeyno Labs as Headmaster/CEO, which means that part of my work is running a tech startup but also running a school. And that time, it was just a tech startup so developing apps in the education space around career discovery, helping to connect kids and really find exciting ways to career possibilities along STEAM - what we call "Science, Technology, Engineering, Art Design, and Mathematics." Trayvon Martin was a young man who was gunned down by a person who was, I guess, trying to be some sort of security. And it just became a very controversial case. And the person was eventually - wasn't prosecuted. And there was this question long - just before the Black Lives Matter movement around the worth what it is to be a minority in this country - especially as young black males. And so I thought well Silicon Valley, the big tech companies, aren't having this conversation. Why not do something that can create a conversation that is inviting for techies like myself? When I was twelve years old, I had a fight with the school bully. And as a result of fighting back against the school bully, I was suspended from school. Now I grew up in a Brooklyn group home, which is orphanage that's run by a

city/state agency. And when you live in a group home, me living with hundreds kids a year, sort of a revolving door, the last thing you want to do is be suspended because then they place you in a special type of group home that is almost a direct connection to prison. And I knew I wanted to avoid that fate, and so I pleaded with the dean of students. And he agreed, but on the condition that I would join his after-school computer class as an in-school suspension.

***Cat Volz:***

Wow.

***Kalimah:***

And in his after-school computer class, there were no boys in the computer class. A lot of girls were in the class to learn typing. And the girls were complaining that there were no boys. And he told me - he laid it out for me. And I was reluctant...

***Cat Volz:***

That's a pro though.

***Kalimah:***

Yeah. Yeah. It was a...well I mean...I just thought to myself, "Oh, wow. I'm just going to be stuck indoors." A bunch of computers.

***Cat Volz:***

Yeah.

***Kalimah:***

And...computers and a bunch of geeky girls, right? But then I

realized how hot geeky girls are.

**Cat Volz:**

Yeah.

**Kalimah:**

Right? Present company included. But it was really amazing because it was my interaction with computers that was different. And so before then... for a lot of students, even now these days, you have an intercity computer lab. And that young person wants to do that computer lab. And they're told what to do; what not to do. They...it has usually them tied to school work. But their relationship with computer technology is boring, and very controlled. And that was my relationship with computers up until then. The dean of students, Dean Carol, I'll never forget him, he left me to my own vices with those computers. And that's when, I believe, my hacker spirit - and I say my hacker spirit because when I was around eight years old, I had a hunger strike against my group home in order to get more books into the group home library.

**Cat Volz:**

Wow.

**Kalimah:**

And so that...I believe that I became a hacker then. But to take that hacker spirit and connect it to technology, now I had a toolset to work with, then that's when I became a technologist. And that was at twelve. By the time I was sixteen, I started my first computer company which I sold at nineteen.

***Cat Volz:***

Wow! You had an exit at nineteen. So you came with a backpack. Did you know anybody here?

***Kalimah:***

No. No. I didn't.

***Cat Volz:***

When did you realize that there were a lot of faces and nobody looked like you, and that inclusion was an issue?

***Kalimah:***

It's interesting. So when you're in a room filled with white people and...

***Cat Volz:***

White males.

***Kalimah:***

Yeah.

***Cat Volz:***

Yeah.

***Kalimah:***

Exactly. And you're one of the few minorities, what they do is that you may not have nothing in common with the person who they have in mind who's the other minority, but they still want to introduce you to that person. And so, "My name is Kalimah." And then they'll go, "Yeah, you should talk to Kevin because Kevin is running a soda pop machine..."

***Cat Volz:***

Something totally not what you're doing.

***Kalimah:***

Nothing, nothing, nothing. But it was...

***Cat Volz:***

It was a minority.

***Kalimah:***

It was a minority.

***Cat Volz:***

You guys should know each other.

***Kalimah:***

It was exact...exact...exact...know each other,

***Cat Volz:***

So they wanted to categorize you

***Kalimah:***

Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. And so I knew that was the...

***Cat Volz:***

There was a problem.

***Kalimah:***

Yeah. Exactly. And so...but there was also something else that lies underneath all that. Right? A lot of conversation around diversity in tech has always been a black and white conversation. But it's also a black and black conversation

or a brown and brown conversation. It's a conversation that happens amongst people of color. And what you have is this disconnect of those minorities who - let's say - they do have jobs in the big tech companies. And I'm not talking about the new ones. I'm talking about some of the older ones like Oracle, or Intel, or Microsoft. And they've had minorities working in those companies for quite some time now - Hewlett-Packard and any of the other companies. When those minorities gained a certain level of income and access, then their relationship to other minorities, especially those who have low opportunity, in many ways was severed. And so there wasn't a pipeline. There wasn't a relationship. There wasn't - I mean there were a lot of parties, and you see a lot of their pictures when they're in Tahoe or Napa. But there isn't a lot of community service or community development connection to those kids. And that's what I saw. That it wasn't about there weren't tech giants building bridges across Oakland, from the Peninsula and San Francisco to Oakland, it was that there wasn't enough advocacy happening in Oakland for those kids to be connected to opportunities, not just there, but to be able to build those opportunities within their community. And so something had to change in that I realized that with my Hackathon Academy, that not only would I have those kids connecting with a lot of those white males or Asian males who dominate the population of Silicon Valley - Yes! Great! Wonderful! - but also wanted them to connect with those who are some of the minorities who are in those companies and bring them out of that place of privilege to actually giving back. And so... and I guess that comes from being in a group home that I believe that we all live under one roof, and so we have to constantly help and support and help one another.

There's nothing more beautiful in the world than that "Aha!" moment that happens with a kid, or that when a kid begins to start formulating that their dreams are possible, and that they're not just a part of anybody else's story, but that they can now start writing their own. I think that that is the most fulfilling, amazing, most beautiful thing that anyone can experience, but especially me.

***Cat Volz:***

Was there a moment that you knew that education was part of your calling with technology?

***Kalimah:***

Not necessarily with technology. And that came later. It was...but in terms of education it was when my eighteen-year-old brother was shot and killed. And I was twenty years old; he was eighteen. He just aged out of the group home system. Then he was killed a couple of months later. He had very little support. And he was killed right behind our old elementary school, which means that on his death certificate was the address of the very school that he and I went to for years. How could a school exist knowing that murder was happening on the same block? Schools have to change that they're almost barbaric. They're almost...

***Cat Volz:***

They're not safe.

***Kalimah:***

...uncivilized.

**Cat Volz:**

Yeah.

**Kalimah:**

They're not...it's uncivilized how our education system works, or how some schools could be funded by that taxes from someone's zip codes as opposed to others. Sometimes I have conversations with people about them moving to different areas - to better areas where there are better schools. And that mindset alone just... to me, tells me that we have failed as an American democracy because we haven't' done the one thing that we could do right that when immigrants - my biological parents are from Haiti, so I'm a Haitian-American, and so part of the immigrant story is my story as well that if you were to poll the most important issue for them, it's education. For most American's it's education, but that's the very thing that we consistently fail on. Opportunity is actually about time. It's about time...

**Cat Volz:**

How you're going to spend it.

**Kalimah:**

How you spend your time. Yes. And so... and that's... is the biggest... one of my favorite writers is Michael Ende. He wrote *The NeverEnding Story*, and he also wrote this book before *The NeverEnding Story* called *Momo*. And *Momo* was about time; people who could steal time. And that time is our most valuable resource.

**Cat Volz:**

It is. Yeah.

***Kalimah:***

And time is what actually creates opportunity. Low opportunity kids can identify opportunity.

***Cat Volz:***

Yeah.

***Kalimah:***

We even pray for it. We're hungry for it. Even when it's a dark opportunity like prostitution or drug dealing or anything. We just know that with the time that we have, that we want something - to be a part of something. To a composer, if they didn't believe in their music, then there's no way that they can create the symphonies and the suites and, you know, the overtures, and all the beautiful music that they make. In the tech world we say, "Hungry." You have to be hungrier than the next person. For me it's belief. I believe more than most other people, especially when it comes to our kids.

***Cat Volz:***

Tell us about the day that you opened your email and it was from the White House.

***Kalimah:***

I was selected to be a White House Champion of Change. I've gotten a lot of awards and fellowships, and they're great. But, you know, I dust them off and put them somewhere into my home and...

***Cat Volz:***

They look a little dusty.

***Kalimah:***

Hey, because I don't spend too much...

***Cat Volz:***

You're so humble.

***Kalimah:***

Yeah because...you've achieved them; now they're a part of you; you keep it moving. You know, I think they're more important for other people. You know, I don't have the background that people tout as where success come from. And so the awards help to persuade those people. But for me, my work speaks for itself. Those of the kids; they're stories; the stories that I tell about just how amazing and brilliant that they are, to me that is what I most look forward to. So an award from the White House is fantastic, but a letter from a parent that says I've transformed their child's life - that I carry with me.