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## The Promise Of: He engages Triangle businesses to guide path of children in Southeast Raleigh

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Kirby Jones has been driving the same route into downtown Raleigh for about 30 years, long enough to be struck by a profound irony: Two of the state's most notable institutions are within a three-minute drive of one another alongside Western Boulevard. "The irony in the juxtaposition of N.C. State University and NC Central Prison is incredible," Jones said. "Here stands two magnificent institutions, almost side by side, which speak of life outcomes that are a thousand miles apart. Our objective at The Daniel Center is to change the stat that said more kids from Southeast Raleigh will end up at Central Prison than at N.C. State University."



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Kirby Jones founded The Daniel Center for Math and Science in 2010.

Jones founded The Daniel Center for Math and Science in 2010 because he wanted to change the trajectory for children living in Southeast Raleigh, an area where he said children, young adults and families face the same stereotypical issues of gang involvement, violence, drug use and extreme poverty as in any other inner-city neighborhood across the country. "The only difference in Southeast Raleigh and south central L.A. or west Baltimore is scale," he asserts.

One notable difference: Southeast Raleigh has the Daniel Center, which for 10 years has been helping to change “the default setting” of the children it serves.

“If you can ever change the default setting of a child, that is 85 percent of the battle; they will take care of the other 15 percent toward success in life,” Jones said. “What is necessary to do, and the real secret sauce of what we do, is to change that default setting.”

“I felt the closest thing to a silver bullet was education and, in particular, STEM education because math and science was where the biggest education gap exists for this population,” he said. “Another reason is because STEM offers a large pool of livable-wage careers. If the goal is to break the cycle of generational poverty, we want the kids to be prepared for fields that will break that cycle and lead them to job security. From a very high level, that is the onus behind the Daniel Center.”

The secret sauce may be instilling confidence and motivation while helping children recognize opportunities, but the success of the nonprofit is firmly rooted in Jones’ vision and a clearly articulated business model.

Sam Houston, Jr. remembers well the start of The Daniel Center. Houston, who is president and CEO of the North Carolina Science, Mathematics and Technology Education Center (NC SMT) and on the board of directors for the Daniel Center, says when Jones described his vision for the center it so clearly aligned with the mission of the NC SMT that the Burroughs Wellcome Fund provided a \$50,000 grant for the nonprofit to get started.

“At the SMT center, STEM stands for “Strategies That Engage Minds,” Houston explains, “And Kirby’s vision for giving kids a chance to do that through the Daniel Center was so clearly articulated.”

“There’s a legacy from the Daniel Center that will be lasting; it’s not about diversity only, it’s about doing the right things for young people, whoever they are,” Houston says. “Education is about being sure young people become independent learners and thinkers; understanding how to think, how to make sense of

information and know what to do with it is powerful. Much more powerful than knowing the right answer to a [question]. What the Daniel Center represents and what Kirby has put together is a setting where young people not only learn skills, they also learn how to think. They learn how to know what to do when they're not sure what to do."

On paper, the Daniel Center will look like any other five-star, licensed child care program. Children can enter the pre-K program as early as age 3, stay at the center through the school-age program for ages 5 through 12, and continue in the center's teen support program. It's a long-term model that mentors and supports young children to mature youth, providing a stability and view of the world that many don't find in their home or school settings.

"We target low-income families who have childcare vouchers, and because we're set up with Wake County to accept vouchers it gives us a fair amount of stability in our business model, so that we don't have to rely totally on donations and grants," Jones said. "We do everything a daycare center would do: providing before- and after-school transportation, all the things you would expect at a Kindercare or LaPetite. The difference is when they come here we provide high-quality, much-needed childcare and mentoring."

Roughly 45 percent of the \$470,000 operating budget is covered by the vouchers and the remaining 65 percent of revenue comes from corporate donations and grants. Demographics skew to slightly more girls (55 percent) than boys (45 percent), and the majority of children, roughly 98 percent, are African American with white or Latinx children making up the remainder.

By contrast, only 8.7 percent of the 680 students enrolled in North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics' 2019-2020 residential program were Black, while 46.3 percent were white, 27.8 percent Asian, 10.6 percent multiracial and 1 percent Latinx.

Currently there are 51 children actively enrolled across the three programs at the Daniel Center, but that doesn't include those who have graduated. "We stay in touch with our college kids, offer them scholarship programs and any support we can give them," Jones said, adding there are six or seven former Daniel Center children now enrolled in college.

The first student to be enrolled in the Daniel Center was Williard Jones, Jr. (no relation to Kirby), and he is now attending Wake Tech where he expects to graduate in 2023. "Williard was one of the first kids among our cohort of students old enough to have already graduated from high school, and I tell him he is forever the president of the student body at the center," Jones said.

Williard credits his years at the Daniel Center for having helped him see career opportunities he might pursue, and the center supported him with an in-house scholarship – first to go to Shaw University, and then to transfer to Wake Tech where he is pursuing a business major with plans for a career in real estate.

"They helped me build my communication skills and they were always there for me when I needed help in school and to help me get where I need to be," Williard recalls. "I started at the center when I was 9 and stayed through the teen program; my little brother is there now in the teen program. I didn't know what I wanted to do, and they helped me see what I could do. I remember people from different companies came in and gave us feedback on their careers."

Corporate partners play a huge role in the success of the center, not only in providing grants or donations, but also in providing role models. "We take a lot of time to recruit volunteers from STEM-based companies to come do presentations to our kids about what they do in the real world – now, we are doing virtual presentations. When scientists, engineers, architects, people in health care or finance present real-world applications it is a huge benefit to our students," Jones explains. "We find many times companies will connect for the volunteer opportunities and monies will come later. You don't have to give money to volunteer."

As a licensed childcare center, the Daniel Center qualified as an essential business and has remained open throughout the pandemic. When schools moved to online learning in March, the center transitioned from its standard after-school program to the full-day model that it typically only offers during the summer.

"That was the biggest shift for us, going to full days in March, but it meant we were able to provide the children with internet access, laptops, and, most importantly, teachers who could supervise and

assist them. We're continuing in that mode now, even though some kids are back at school for staggered in-person learning, but most of our kids are here full days," Jones said.

His parting advice to business leaders: Realize we have a choice. We can each do something to help or we can face the consequences of watching a growing population that can become productive, or counterproductive.

**Connie Gentry**

Reporter

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