

THE PROMISE OF YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Closing the Opportunity Gap in Greensboro



There is a strong case for investing in developing young people as entrepreneurs. This report distills learning from change agents in Greensboro about how we can rally to support the development of our young people through entrepreneurship. Here's the case:

- There is a great economic and opportunity gap in Greensboro. This gap cascades down to the next generation, who grow up with less opportunity to build skills, networks, and income. *Entrepreneurship is one way to close this opportunity gap.*
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- *Young people are motivated to earn money and use their abilities, but they need support.* Not all families have the time, resources, or skills to provide their children with the support needed.
- Greensboro can help close the gap by stepping up to offer young people the opportunity to *learn and earn* through entrepreneurship.
- Entrepreneurship is not just about becoming an entrepreneur, it is a means of *building capacity for work and life*. Children grow confidence, discipline, communication skills, and networks. They learn how to plan and work a strategy. They learn to deal with failure and rise above adversity. The help they receive is not just an investment in their business but their potential.
- Greensboro has *aspirations to be a hotbed for entrepreneurship*. This report finds that entrepreneurs often first start in pre-teen years.

Social Networks and Poverty

Entrepreneurship is a way to expand networks that make a significant difference in opening up opportunities over the course of a life. An expansive new study, reported on in the New York Times¹, based on billions of social media connections, helps explain a path out of poverty.

The new analysis — the biggest of its kind — found the degree to which the rich and poor were connected explained why a neighborhood’s children did better later in life, more than any other factor.

These cross-class friendships — what the researchers called economic connectedness — had a stronger impact than school quality, family structure, job availability or a community’s racial composition. The people you know, the study suggests, open up opportunities, and the growing class divide in the United States closes them off.

The new study shows that even in places lacking in other kinds of social capital, an increase in cross-class relationships is enough to benefit children’s economic prospects. And it’s this kind of social capital that has decreased as the country has

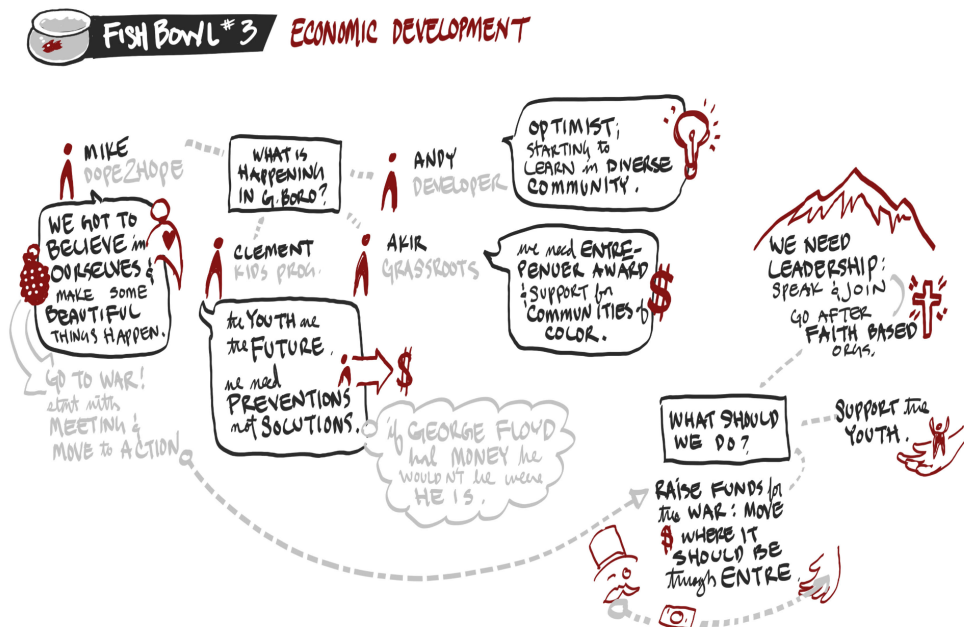
¹ Vast New Study Shows a Key to Reducing Poverty: More Friendships Between Rich and Poor
<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/01/upshot/rich-poor-friendships.html>

become more segregated by class.

We can help young people gain broader networks of support and inspiration in Greensboro and address this critical factor in poverty.

Mind Your Biz: Engagement & Input

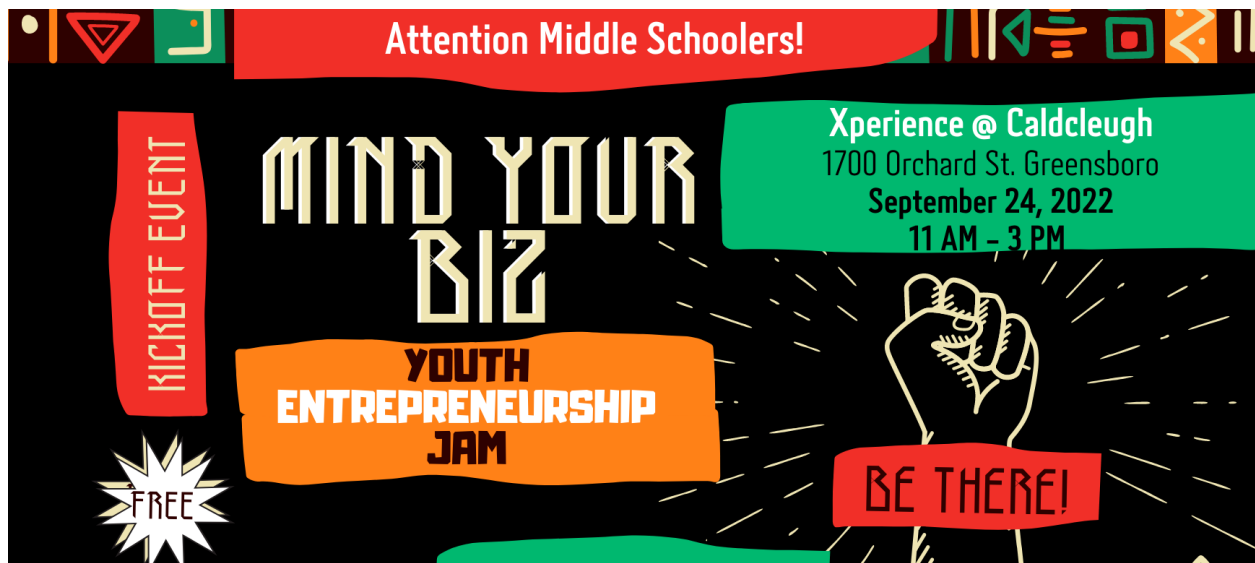
In the wake of the COVID epidemic, CoMetta convened a gathering of local change agents in Greensboro to assess critical needs in the community. Among the issues that surfaced during the four-hour group conversation were the housing crisis, the drop in well-being, and the economic divide. There was a deep concern about young people who were caught in the midst of it all and being lured down pathways that offer money and belonging by way of drugs and gangs. The sense was that middle school represented a critical turning point.



A visual representation of an element of the change-maker conversation that sparked this effort

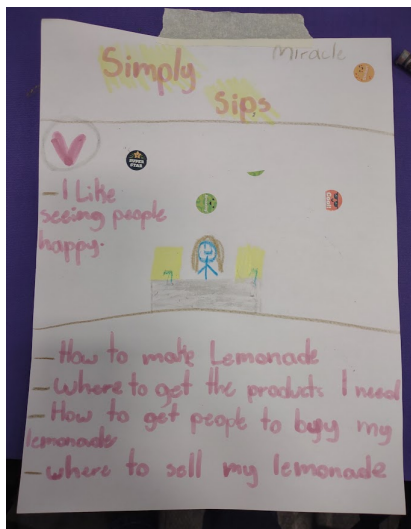
The group honed in on the potential for developing a youth entrepreneurship effort that would focus on middle school students in East Greensboro. A participant emphasized that young people need money and if they can't get it from their families, they may be lured to steal, sell drugs, or sell their bodies to get it. The insight is that youth entrepreneurship can channel these energies down a positive path, give young people access to money, and build essential skills that can last a lifetime.

To validate this insight, we wanted to get input from young people about their needs and interests. A team of individuals, assisted by a network of community organizations (see sponsors and partners), conceptualized an event titled **Mind Your Biz**.



The Mind Your Biz gathering held at the **Xperience @ Caldcleugh** was designed to gather input and provide the participants with an entrepreneurship experience. The event attracted nearly 20 middle-school children interested in entrepreneurship. The event included a panel discussion with entrepreneurs about their journey, a workshop on money, and a poll on interests. We had targeted middle school students but many parents chose to accompany their kids. It's clear that the children who step on entrepreneurship paths often do so with the benefit of parental support. Here's more of what we learned.

- Many entrepreneurs start young. Many started in their pre-teen years with things like selling lemonade, bracelets, spinners, and slime.
- Parents play a pivotal role in providing support. Encouragement is key along with practical assistance like seed funding and help in getting to markets.
- Becoming an entrepreneur is about human development. Building confidence is an important factor as is acquiring a host of essential life and leadership skills.
- Community markets like People's Market and Curb Market are launch pads where young people can start to sell items.
- Starting a business often stems from social motivation. Entrepreneurs on the panel said they wanted to make things better for others while building their businesses.
- Many of the middle school children at the session already have some kind of activity to earn money and almost all who attended are interested in starting one.



Parents view posters of business ideas created by middle-school students at Mind Your Biz

INSIGHTS FROM ENTREPRENEURS

Mind Your Biz included a panel discussion with entrepreneurs from Greensboro. The panel highlighted a number of themes and patterns, along with individual stories of entrepreneurial journeys.



Panelists

- Gene Blackmon, Prestige Barber School
- Matthew Mullens, Empasta
- Anu Jones, Nunu's Drinks
- Trinity Jones, PoP GLiTta
- Valerie Jones, SPOT Television

Starting Early

Gene Blackmon runs Prestige Barber College. He got into barbering at 10 years old. He stated: "One of my friends wanted me to shape him up. From then I told my mama that I wanted to get clippers for Christmas." He says he was doing well in middle school and high school but got into a little trouble around 16-17 years old. "Nobody would hire me and I had to fall back on something that I was interested in when I was growing up. From there, I went from being a barber to owning a shop and helping other people become entrepreneurs through barbering."

Matt Mullens who runs a plant-based food business named *Empasta*, shared a similar story. He said he started his entrepreneurial journey around middle school with YouTube, doing a kind of personal branding. He had a couple of hundred subscribers. He says: "I learned what I was really passionate about around the college timeframe. My current business started in my undergrad. I wanted to really do something that could have an impact on the environment and that led me to start my plant-based food business."

Anu Jones started *Drinks by Nu* her juice business in elementary school. She says: I was always selling things and making money from selling snacks at school to selling slime and spinners. I started my lemonade business when I was 11 and was encouraged by my mother to sell at my local farmers market and the People's Market, which I still sell at today. We meet every Thursday. I've been doing this for five years now. And from my journey, I've grown from having small cups of lemonade with no lids for \$1 to bottles and 10 different flavors that I sell for \$3 and \$4.

Valerie Jones recounted that she started her entrepreneurial journey in middle school. She says: "I used to buy things for 10 cents at the stores and sell them for a quarter at school. And I was very good too because everybody gave me their lunch money. Then I started taking pictures and stuff like that and went to school for communication. So I started my video production business when I was in college. I learned public relations and gained a lot of skills. When I met my husband, I was like, you know, we could do like a TV show. It seems like really so he was really good at editing. So that's how we started *Spy TV*. and went and interviewed a lot of celebrities like Jay Z and Nas and Ice Cube and people like that. Now I feel more drawn to community issues because I love regular people more than I love celebrities."

Launch Pad

Gene said he started cutting hair for friends from the neighborhood in his grandma's bathroom.

Anu said she got started at farmers' markets. She says: I'm still at the flea market and mainly the People's Market. And then from there, I got opportunities to sell at events and festivals.

Matt said it was at the Yanceyville Curb Market Following that provide a place to first sell. From there other opportunities emerged.

The Importance of Learning

Gene Blackmon states that when he was younger, people thought he was not good enough to cut their hair. He says, "I continued to be a student and work on my craft. And I always had confidence in myself. Whenever I did get a shot, I gave it my best to try to make sure that I started building and gaining confidence with people."

Matt Mullens shared a similar reflection. He says, "when you're starting off, a lot of kind of doubters aren't sure of your capabilities, and you have to really kind of just walk the walk, talk the talk, and do what you do. I had a lot of obstacles, starting out with just getting a food business going and making sure that it met all certifications you need. Not to mention, I started like, maybe a year, about a year right before the height of the pandemic. So I started off in the farmers market and that closed down. I had to figure out how to adjust so that's when I pivoted to e-commerce. I had to get over the hurdles of how do you ship the product, how do you deliver it, package it and present it in a way that people want it. That's all the learning curve."

Anu explained: "The biggest obstacle to being an entrepreneur this young is that people don't really take you seriously when you're not you are not 19. You just have to know that you're not better than everyone but you know, you're not any less than because you don't have an LLC or an inc. behind your name. Just know that you have to start from somewhere. It's good to start now and then maybe in the future you can grow and be bigger than you are before you were before."

Valerie Jones offered that gaining confidence and control is a big thing. When you work for yourself, she says, you can control your income. "If you work hard, you get paid; if you don't, you don't. So to me, being an entrepreneur is one of the

things that is helpful even if you have a nine-to-five job. You might want to get something on the side that you do because you never know when the doors close or a pandemic happens. I had a job in a TV station, but I also had a child who has special needs. So I needed to stay home with him. So if I didn't have my side hustle, then I would have been in more of a dilemma. But when I found my son had autism, then okay, boom, I said I'm quitting the job and I'm gonna do my business full time. It has been going ever since."

Advice for Entrepreneurs

Gene stated the need to master your craft. He said: "What I would encourage you to keep in mind is that you want to always master your craft. Whatever business you choose to get into master, master it; learn as much as you can always remain a student and learn as much as you can. The other thing is, you want to be trustworthy. You want your clients-customers to be able to trust what you're doing and whatever product you put out. And the other thing, which is probably the most important thing for me is to master customer service. You can have a great product and bad reviews from poor customer service."

Matt emphasized perseverance. He explained: "There will be tough days hard days where you may not know how you're going to get through the day. Some days you know you will work hard and not get paid as much as you thought or hoped. Keep pushing. Another thing is to be resourceful as well. A lot of times you know you got to kind of bootstrap yourself up and figure out how to get things going, so look around for community partners and friends and family. Don't try to just do it all yourself. Learn to ask for help and acknowledge when you may need help. At the same time, you know practice your craft or skills so that you know what you're doing."

Anu stated that her advice is just to start now. Really brainstorm what you like to do and the types of things you are interested in. Branch off of those ideas and establish something for yourself because now you have a support system. Have your family help you with what you're doing and help you grow. In the future, you have already something established for yourself, not only to fall back on, but you know to build up.

Valerie encouraged parents present to support their children. As a mom, she said, it's a chore. I did it because I knew that it was gonna build her and it saves me money because she has her own money to buy things. When she goes to college she may have money that doesn't come out of my pocket. So she's learning self-sufficiency at an early age, as I did.

Social Impact

Trinity said her business is connected to helping people out. Because you have a lot of girls like me who struggle to have self-confidence. I want to help girls to be themselves and stop worrying about what other people think. I also know we want things that we can't afford. So I want to make products that are affordable for us.

Gene said that entrepreneurship is about solving problems. He said: I realized early in my entrepreneurship journey that if you're able to solve a problem, you have the potential to make money and be successful in your business. A lot of times if our passion is attached to what we're trying to do when there's a problem. I've understood that there was a certain demographic that has a criminal background and can't find employment. I knew that if we were able to establish a school on Phillips Ave – which is one of our hoods in Greensboro – that will provide an opportunity for some young men and young women who may not be able to find employment or another school or college. So I was able to find a problem and figure out how to solve that problem. And that's how we're connected to helping the community and making money at the same time.

Matt said: I encourage you all to think about problems in your everyday lives that you may think like, oh man, nobody's talking about this or you may have persevered and solved it yourself. Well, then you can solve that for other people as well who may have been going through a similar problem. For me, it was the lack of plant-based foods that I saw in certain areas and I wanted them to be more accessible. I was cooking at home for myself and I figured hey, other people may want this product as well for themselves. So that led to starting a business and having customers consistently. So just reflect on your everyday life and those little problems that you may solve and not think much of it. Those can be big problems for somebody else.

Anu said that a small business is about fellowship. “If you've ever been to a farmers market, you see a bunch of people around laughing, enjoying themselves, and also selling things. I was delighted that I really met so many people selling at farmer's markets and events and created so many new friendships and bonds.”

Valerie offered the students encouragement. “Hopefully I will see you guys in markets or on the Internet or somewhere selling or just, you know, becoming successful. I see so much success in this room when you guys were talking about what you want to be. The sky's the limit. Nothing is impossible. If you can do something to make yourself money it will help you out a lot and help you afford things.”

Mind Your Biz Poll Findings

With help from **Guilford College**, we polled the students at the session to understand their experience and interest related to entrepreneurship. Here's what we learned.

Interest in making money: All the students in attendance expressed an interest in making more money.

Most earn their money: While half of the middle schoolers indicated that they get some money as gifts, most said they earn their money (80%). This included doing chores but also selling things.

Understanding and interest in entrepreneurship: The students reflected a good understanding of what an entrepreneur is (someone who starts their own business; not a role that requires a college degree). Almost all the students indicated that they were interested in starting a business. While just a couple of the participants said they already run a formal business, almost all (90%) indicated that they believed they could learn to do so.



Participants responded to the poll conducted by Guilford College on their phones

Types of business: In response to the question as to the kind of business they would like to start, the students mostly named food and fashion ideas:

- candy and t-shirts
- lemonade stand
- southern lemonade
- selling sweets
- bracelets
- jewelry
- a fashion business
- cleaning for seniors
- games
- stationary

Existing ability: To the question as to what they have to bring to their business idea, students named creativity, manners, smarts, sociability, time, athleticism, and simply being human.

Support needed: Asked what they might need, we heard an appreciation for access to sources but also personal development:

- money/investment
- motivation
- organization
- good business ethic
- a place for business
- supplies
- everything

Future aspirations: When asked what they might like to be when they grow up, the responses included:

- a forensic scientist

- change agent
- cognitive neuropsychologist
- engineer
- fashion designer
- investor
- truck driver

These responses indicated that the interest in running a business may be more motivated by earning money than the idea of entrepreneurship itself, though students interested in fashion design envisioned having their own product lines.

Learning preferences: Asked how they would like to learn, they identified an equal interest in:

- Face-to-face learning with peers
- Online
- Being mentored

About a quarter of the students indicated that they could do it on their own.

Time for learning: In terms of time available for learning, half the students said after-school or on weekends. About a third indicated they would like to do it on their own schedule.

Venue for learning: In response to the location for learning, students identified a community center/YMCA as the top choice, followed by school and online options. Only one student named church as the preferred place to learn.

Satisfaction with the session: In response to the Mind Your Biz session, the students said they felt great, happy, and inspired. Informal interactions with parents after the session indicated similar sentiments of appreciation and an interest in more such opportunities for their children.

PoP GLiTtA: Building a Business & Building Confidence

Trinity Jones, a middle-school student, is the founder of PoP GLiTtA, a company that specializes in handmade accessories. Trinity launched her business when she was seven years old with the help of her mother, Bettina Jones. She started it because she saw kids being bullied for the way they look. We're all not made to look the same, she says, and she wanted all kids like her to "feel pretty on purpose.". Her mother encouraged her to build her business to build her confidence. A secondary motivation was having money. Trinity wanted to have some spending money and to help the homeless.

Trinity and her mother started first selling used clothes at a flea market. They then created their first product, a bracelet. Soon, they started receiving invitations to sell at events and malls. The community kept encouraging and pushing us, says Bettina.



Trinity's mother says she started to see her daughter's confidence and sense of agency surge. Trinity has had to make a lot of sacrifices with her time to run a business. She's had to get to things early and miss parties. Selling is hard, she says. You have to deal with rejection. The 'no's can be exhausting but it trains you to be a fearless person who can deal with a multitude of personalities. Learning is an important element of being an entrepreneur. After every market, Bettina and Trinity review what she learned and can improve on her craft.

Trinity says she sees other kids who don't see a future for themselves. A number have noticed what she is doing and expressed an interest in wanting to work for her. Trinity hired a friend as a helper. She wants to help other kids start businesses too. Trinity says that "All kids have the potential to run their own businesses. They just have to put the work into it and they may need somebody to help them with it."

An ecosystem of support is helpful, says Bettina, because it is not easy to do this on your own. Kids need programs to learn and be inspired. If you have a youth entrepreneur, you definitely have a parent behind the child, she says. But not all parents are able to help. The kids can all use a mentor, someone outside of their parents. It is good to have a cohort of children who will be together where you take them through the process step by step – from idea to product to running a business and how to sell and market.

At an event like Mind Your Biz, says Bettina, the wheels start turning for kids about what's possible. The kids were creating a vision of what they want to do and what they have to offer. You need to see the idea and feel it in your heart, says Bettina. If you have a million ideas but you don't act on it, it goes away.

Trinity wants to have her own clothing line and expand PoP GLiTta. Bettina says with pride: "I see my daughter may grow up and never have to work for anyone."

Recommendations: Moving from Insight to Action

Greensboro envisions itself as an entrepreneurial city. The stories of entrepreneurs indicate that their entrepreneurial journey started early. If we want to build a seedbed for entrepreneurship in our community, we can perhaps do no better than invest in young entrepreneurs. **Here's how we can seed the opportunity for young entrepreneurs to grow and rise.**

Entrepreneurial Essentials: This would entail a series of short videos from local youth and adult entrepreneurs sharing key practices for starting and running a business – creating a product, branding and marketing, distribution and selling, customer service, dealing with rejection, etc. These would be shared freely on social media. These videos can be underwritten by local businesses or nonprofits.

Quarterly Entrepreneurship Camps: For those with a strong interest in learning to launch a formal business, we would offer quarterly weekend programs where students can work in teams to envision and fashion a product and then sell it. It would help kids who have ideas build skills and confidence. Like *Mind Your Biz*, these sessions would be energizing and inspirational. We would encourage parents to also come and learn how they can support their children.

Youth Entrepreneurship Accelerator: This would be a fellows program for a subset of youth to go through a longitudinal process of actually creating and marketing a proprietary product or service. They would receive skill development, mentoring, and, potentially, a small infusion of venture funding. We see the opportunity to team up with local businesses that can provide mentoring and support.

Over time, these efforts can be expanded. What they enable is not just entrepreneurship but connection and support for kids with dreams and the willingness to work. It is also a means for local businesses to support local kids in a meaningful way.

How You Can Help!

There are a number of ways to engage with this effort and make this real:



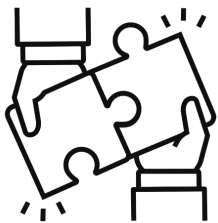
Technical Assistance – Provide help for creating and sharing the video assets on entrepreneurship.

Mentoring – Guide the young entrepreneurs in launching their businesses, sharing knowledge and encouragement.



Program funding – Underwriting for creating video and program resources.

Venture funding – Provide seed funding that can be used to start or expand businesses.



Help with organizing the effort – Volunteer assistance in running the overall program.

At the end of the day, we all have a role to play in closing the opportunity gap in our community. If you're ready to help build this gamechanging entrepreneurial foundation for young people in Greensboro and help close the opportunity gap in Greensboro, please contact Lyndon Rego at comettaconnect@gmail.com.

Acknowledgments

Mind Your Biz was the result of the efforts and support of a number of community partners.

Partners & Sponsors

- AZ Development
- CoMetta
- The Corner Market
- Deep Roots Market
- Greensboro Parks & Recreation
- Greensboro Neighborhood Association
- Guilford College
- The People's Market
- Poetry Basketball
- Robert Winslow
- Susan Sassman & Associates
- The YMCA

Organizers

- Michael Harris
- Courtney Harrison, Guilford College
- Clement Mallory, Poetry Basketball
- Lyndon Rego, CoMetta
- Susan Sassman, Sassman & Associates
- Jeffery Surgeon

Panelists

- Gene Blackmon
- Matthew Mullens
- Anu Jones
- Trinity Jones
- Valerie Jones

Facilitators

- Clement Mallory, Poetry Basketball
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