



Informing and connecting businesses in New Jersey

Shadae McDaniel: All Stars Project helps Newark's youth through everything from improv to meetings with CEOs

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NEWARK CHAPTER OF THE ALL-STARS



Shadae McDaniel,
City Leader of the
Newark chapter of
the All Stars Program

In the heart of Newark, down from the Museum of Art and across from Washington Park, is a most unusual community center — a 9,000-square foot space that houses the [Newark chapter of the All Stars Project](#). The organization has been in the city for two decades and in its current space for the past six years. It has helped thousands of residents of all ages find their place in the world through a unique definition of development.

“For us, development is a way where people can see and actually act on opportunities,” city leader Shadae McDaniel said. “And what we do here that’s really special is that we bring people together who typically would never come together.”

Once those Newark residents are involved in the program, McDaniel and her team help develop them by teaching improvisational skills, which they use

literally (there is performance art) and figuratively (they are taught how to handle situations in their personal and work worlds).

“Our work is really grounded in using performance and improv as a way for people to see each other in new ways,” McDaniel said. “And we show them how improv, the idea of building on and accepting offers, allows them to survive and flourish in any situation.”

Most of the programs are geared toward teenagers, with the goal of opening doors for them.

Including in the work world.

The program has a second component that brings inner-city kids into the boardrooms of top companies, enabling them to see a future they may not have imagined. These visits can lead to a coveted summer internship.

ROI-NJ recently caught up with McDaniel to hear more about the program. Here's a look at the interview, edited for space and clarity.

ROI-NJ: How — and why — did the All Stars Project come about?

Shadae McDaniel: The center was actually built on the idea that Newark is a hub. This is a place where people can come and get development, go out in the world and then come back again, getting more development and bringing more people with you. We're talking about everybody: young, old, black, white, poor, rich. Everybody can come here and get development and share it with the world and then come back and get more.

ROI: While the program serves all, one of its key focuses is on young people, ages 16-21. Talk about the twice-yearly programs you have for them.

SM: We have two semesters, one that starts in January and ends in May, and one that starts in August and ends in December. But we are looking for people all year. We have rolling applications and we accept about 120 young people each semester.

One of the things that makes us unique is our grassroots recruiting approach. We go outside and find young people and community members the old-fashioned way, legitimately on the streets, train stations and public housing and in public schools. There's no criteria to participate. There's no required GPA. There's no background check. It's literally: 'Do you want to develop? And do you want to change your community?' If they raise their hand and say, 'Yes,' they're invited in for an interview.

So, we're not necessarily looking for the best and the brightest. Although all of our young people that come through can be. We just want young people who are eager to say, 'I want to do something different.' There's a lot of programs out there that do all different types of things with young people and, typically, there is some type of criteria they fit into. We just want young people from different types of places, because that's how you bring people together the best. And that's where you're going to create new opportunities with each other, because you've never been with the other person.

ROI: Take us through the program.

SM: If they are invited to join a class, the only thing that is asked is that they show up on time, they don't miss any sessions and they dress professionally to the best of their ability. We meet with each class once

a week — either Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday — and we start by doing improv exercises that make them uncomfortable. We want to get them to do some things outside of their comfort zone and take some risk.

ROI: Give us some examples.

SM: Sometimes, it's really silly stuff. We have a game that's called, 'I am a tree.' And you create an object with your body. You might be an apple on the tree or a dog running around the tree. The key is for each person to build on each other. This is how we break down barriers.

One of our programs is (Operation Conversation:) Cops and Kids. That is a police community relations program, but it uses performance to help cops and inner-city kids perform together for the first time — and be in a different relationship that they are used to. You should see the transformation that legitimately happens. When the police come in, there's so much tension and friction. And then they start performing together and you start seeing the laughter. The silliness breaks down all of that tension.

And that's when we can have some real conversations. We start to talk about what it's like growing up here, just being here. A lot of times, the cops come from the same neighborhoods. And, a lot of times, the cops are just a couple more years older than the young people. You start hearing them have conversations about human experiences and you hear that the young people say, 'Oh, I didn't know you grappled with the same things I'm grappling with.'

One of the biggest questions is, 'What do you fear?' The cops say, 'I fear that I might not come home.' And the young people say, 'I fear that I might not make it.' And they look at each other and they're like, 'Oh my God, we are the same.' At the end, they're hugging and crying. It's unbelievable what play and pretending and performing can do to a room in a space that brings people together.

ROI: The Newark experience is central to what you do. How else does it come up?

SM: One of our workshops is our interpersonal performance workshop, where we literally talk about what it means growing up in Newark. And sometimes, for the first time, our young people take a look and say: 'Oh, I now know where I'm at. I now understand that I don't have as much access as others.'

For some, it's the first time they come to the realization that they're growing up poor or that their school

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systems aren't where they should be. And that conversation you can see sparks their whole mindset to go out and have a different world view. Because we're going to take them out in the world.

ROI: Yes, all of this training is preparation for part two of the program, going to companies in Newark and the surrounding areas. Talk about that?

SM: After our improv session, we go to a corporate campus, to one of our partners. A CEO or senior-level executive is our champion there. So, they usually lead the workshop. We do all different types of activities. Typically, the whole point of that is building a relationship with the corporate partners in some particular way. It can be speed networking, it can be a panel, it can be getting broken up into groups and having conversations about their lives or what it means to create a resume from the activities in their lives.

ROI: What is the impact of this?

SM: It's simple: You have to see it to believe it. These are experiences our kids have never had before. And they are real experiences. It's one thing to go up in an elevator to the 20th floor of a building. It's another to meet with the CEO who wants to ask you questions and hear your stories. Our young people leave there feeling they have made a human connection to a company. That's incredible.

And we feel our programs help them make those real connections. Our young people are not afraid to ask questions — or question what companies do. We feel we have broken down that barrier.

So, when they go to the companies, they're not going in naive. They're going in saying, 'All right, there's some things that I don't have, but I know that this person cares about me and that they are in a position to hear me and listen to me and I can ask some good questions.' You see our young kids sometimes challenge them — especially about things such as diversity and inclusion. They ask questions in these workshops that some of our workshop leaders tell me later, 'We've never thought about things like that before.'

ROI: So, we're guessing that, when your young people come back for internships, they are ready to go from Day One?

SM: Exactly. Part of what we learn about this experience is that young people feel like they are responsible to help companies come up with some of their solutions. So, when they come back, they are ready to go.

And we have great corporate partners. Some of our anchor companies, like PSEG, Horizon and NJPAC, are in Newark, but many are in the suburbs, including Fidelity, Goya, AIG, PricewaterhouseCoopers. And we have relationships with some of the most successful

New Jersey corporate leaders, like Kevin Cummings at Investors Bank, Gus Milano at Hartz Mountain and Peter Langerman from Franklin Mutual. They are men who really get behind this work. They aren't only investing their money, but they invest their time and they're completely involved. It's good if you write checks, that's great, but what's really important and what connects everything is that they're involved and make sure that you're either involved through workshops and volunteerism or you're providing an internship to the young people. It's just more than writing checks.

We recently expanded for Jersey City. And you're seeing the same thing happen there, corporate leaders like John Thurlow at RBC. He's the managing partner there and he is just so serious about making sure that the young people are invited into his boardroom.

ROI: It sounds like an opportunity of a lifetime.

SSM: It is, but it is one that is earned. If you are late or you miss a day, you are out of the program.

ROI: That sounds rough.

SM: It's tough love. We are holding these young people accountable. For many, it's the first time that has happened. When someone has to leave the program, we tell them they can reapply. And many come back. And when they do, they thank us. They say: 'I didn't take this seriously enough. Now I'm ready to.'

ROI: It sounds as if you have given them the tools to survive and thrive.

SM: It's an incredible experience. These are young people who would never in a million years have access to this. Those relationships are what really changes things. That's what we mean by development. If they can't even see that the opportunity exists, they won't even act on it. So, the truth is, we have to develop young people to a point where they can actually see that this is even an opportunity. And then once they see it, they have the tools to act on it.

That's why improv is something that gels with our young people. When you get up every day in Newark, you don't know what obstacles are going to come up against. There are more challenges and obstacles than there are for other people who live in other places. So, a lot of times, our kids are constantly improvising their day.

So, we actually use the science behind improv to say, 'OK, how do you find an offer in everything — every challenge, obstacle, opportunity — where is the offer in this? And, then, once you find it, how do you build with it? How do you coexist with the chaos? How do you build an alternative plan? It starts off as these fun and invigorating exercises, but then you start seeing them use it in real life and it's mind-blowing.