

Guide to Workforce Development

Charles, Year Up's Executive Director celebrates with Year Up student. The program boosts a 'high expectations, high support' atmosphere.
Photo by Taylor Reese



The Future of Our State's Economy Depends on Workforce Development

BY HASSAN CHARLES

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, 5 million young adults are out of school, out of work and unable to find a path to self-sufficiency or a family-sustaining wage despite having the talent and motivation to succeed. Delaware is ranked near-last – 41st out of 50 states – in youth disconnected from the economy (talkpoverty.org). At the same time, more than 12 million jobs will go unfilled over the next decade simply because employers cannot find workers with the skills needed for the 21st century economy.

Governor Carney said in his 2020 State of the State address that we need to “make Delaware’s economy more agile, more innovative and more sustainable,” yet it’s clear that many of our education and training systems are out of touch with employers’ needs and out of reach for young adults. Correcting this failure is both a moral imperative and economic necessity.

Without ensuring we are tapping into all the talent that is out there, regardless of zip code, our economy cannot reach its full potential.

As head of a local nonprofit advocating for an inclusive economy that benefits all citizens, I’ve seen firsthand how cross-sector partnerships between employers, educational institutions and workforce development programs can empower young adults to move from unemployment or minimum wage jobs to a meaningful career in just a single year. One year after completing our program, Year Up Wilmington graduates are earning an average starting salary of \$42,000 per year – more than six times their average annual earnings before joining Year Up.

Two of our recent graduates, who joined the program as a couple, Ronald Shackelford, Jr. and Taylor Brown, were scrambling before joining Year Up. Their lease was up and they couldn’t afford another security

“I heard many of the Year Up staff tell their stories to us, and how they’ve watched previous students transform into people that they themselves didn’t even recognize... How could I succeed and live up to the expectations of this program?”

— Ronald Shackelford, Jr.



Above: Shackelford, Analyst, Corporate & Investment Bank, JPMorgan Chase and Year Up January 2020 graduate poses in front of Year Up college partner, Wilmington University. Left: Shackelford’s fiancée, Taylor Brown (also a Year Up graduate) and son, Ronald Jr. celebrate the couple’s graduation from the program in January. Photos by Emir Lake



deposit, so they and their son moved in with Ronald’s parents. Ronald recalled his thoughts during the first weeks of the program: “I heard many of the Year Up staff tell their stories to us, and how they’ve watched previous students transform into people that they themselves didn’t even recognize. All the while, I thought to myself: How crazy I was for even halfway believing that this could be the same for me. I – the one with a seedy background, at best. I – the one with tattoos plastered all over my body, including my face. I – the one that has never been exposed to the corporate world in my life. How could I succeed and live up to the expectations of this program?”

Throughout the program, Ronald and Taylor showed their grit and determination, attending their Year Up classes and college courses at Wilmington University all day and working most of the night. Now, they both work at JPMorgan Chase & Co., and will have a combined mid six-figure income for 2020 and beyond. Ronald and Taylor can now provide for their family and contribute to the state’s economy because they were given an opportunity, and were willing to put in the work.

Businesses can be part of this shift towards economic justice, and do good while doing well. Our model and successful outcomes provide two important lessons for how to expand opportunity for citizens across all neighborhoods, demographics and socio-economic statuses. First, we must

consider that a more traditional education/career path may not work for everyone, and second, it’s critical to have a demand-driven approach. We must identify what local employers need in terms of technical and professional skills. Then we can provide targeted skills development that meets those needs, combined with work-based learning.

Our state and country need a labor market that provides all citizens with multiple or guided pathways to acquire the skills they need to find good-paying jobs. That is what workforce development is about. It is about questioning the systems, policies and practices that perpetuate the Opportunity Divide in the first place. It is also giving those most often affected by those systems and barriers, a hand up – not a handout. ■



Hassan Charles is the Executive Director of Year Up Greater Philadelphia & Wilmington. Prior to joining Year Up, Charles served as the Executive Director of Partnerships, Communications and Community Engagement at Baltimore City Public Schools, where his most cherished feat was

successfully activating and engaging families and students in district priorities and decision-making. Charles began his career in Newark, DE working in Marketing and Operations at MBNA. Charles is a graduate of the University of Virginia and is a passionate advocate for economic and social justice.