



Developing a Sense of Self—and Community—With STEM

John Stacker, an InspireSTL scholar and sophomore at the University of Tulsa, envisions a better, brighter future for the St. Louis region; a day when his hometown is a thriving hub for the technology industry.

Today, John is actively working to ensure his vision becomes a reality; that the tech scene in St. Louis not only blossoms, but also pushes the region forward and helps unite people through their differences.

"I have a lot of pride in my city. I know St. Louis also has a lot of issues – social and economic. But I also know there's so much opportunity to help solve those issues through the tech innovation scene."

81 percent of Wyman's Teen Outreach, Teen Leadership and InspireSTL program participants in the St. Louis region are African American. But yet, only six percent of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) workforce is African American. And, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, STEM occupations are projected to increase by over 1

million jobs between 2012 and 2022. John sees the opportunities beyond these statistics, for himself and for the St. Louis region.

As an active member of the Aspen Institute Young Leaders Fellowship, a regional leadership program designed to inform and empower the next generation, John is focused on learning about and eventually creating social-venture opportunities that can revamp the tech-education scene in St. Louis.

Together with his cohorts in the program, John aims to increase not just the STEM focus in area schools, but also the retention rate of students and professionals in the region.

Ultimately, John wants to attract more people and tech companies – both the startups, as well as the tech

giants such as Google and Apple – to invest in the region, and its people.

But John hasn't always carried this passion and skills for STEM.

Just four years ago, he struggled with such courses and couldn't envision his future, not to mention how he could be a solution to any of the region's issues. John attributes much of his academic success to his time in Wyman's InspireSTL program. According to data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), only nine percent of eighth graders in the City of St. Louis public schools are proficient in math. And further, only 17 percent of eighth graders are proficient in science. That's why InspireSTL scholars like John spend thousands of hours with their coaches working to increase their grades and effectively prepare for

Developing a Sense of Self, continued

the academic rigors of high school, and beyond.

As a freshman at St. Louis University High School, one of the region's top college prep high schools, John found himself struggling with his courses.

"I was behind in my classes – and my grades were really suffering – I had reached a point where my parents and teachers were concerned that school was no longer helping me, but instead hurting my chances for the future. I didn't know what to do to turn it around."

John attributes much of his academic success to his time in Wyman's InspireSTL program.

John confided in his InspireSTL coach and shared his ongoing frustrations and struggles. Although John felt he might give up on high school, his Wyman coach believed in him and helped him map a road to success.

Together with his coach, John began attending tutoring sessions with InspireSTL. Through intentional and one-on-one mentoring sessions,

John's grades increased and he also began to develop a passion for the field of science and technology.

"One of my favorite memories from InspireSTL was during a tutoring session with my coach. He was telling me about college –telling me to step up my act. He also encouraged me to acknowledge just how far I had come. That's when it clicked for me – not just how far I had come, but that my coach had been there every step of the way for

me too. To have someone care that much – I knew I couldn't let him down, and I didn't want to let myself down either."

By the summer between John's junior and senior years of high school, he increased his grades and received a paid internship with Exegy, a data solutions firm located in Webster Groves, Mo. He will begin his third summer internship with the firm this May.

Today, John attends the University of Tulsa where he studies computer science with a minor in political science. John is the first in his immediate family to attend college.

"I see the impact that going to college has on my family. My parents both dropped out of college and now I'm doing something they weren't able to finish. And to see my mom – she is so happy with what I've done so far – it makes me feel proud about what I have accomplished and it inspires me to keep going."

Ultimately, John is pursuing a career that combines his computer science and political science passions. He would like to work in cyber security for the U.S. government and has his sights set on moving back to St. Louis after college, to continue to ignite economic development for the region through the tech industry, hopefully with a career at the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA) west headquarters in St. Louis.

ABOUT INSPIRESTL

InspireSTL provides scholars from the City of St. Louis with rigorous academic preparation to help them emerge as next-generation leaders. The program begins the summer after seventh grade, lasts through college, and includes securing financial aid, tutoring, coaching, ACT prep, and providing financial resources to fill gaps.

ABOUT WYMAN

Wyman has been dedicated to serving youth from disadvantaged circumstances for more than a century. Wyman empowers teens, equips adults and strengthens systems. Wyman's engaging, empowering and experiential programs and services help teens build skills, develop a sense of self and connections to their world. As a result, teens achieve educational success, develop healthy behaviors and relationships, and exhibit life and leadership skills. From thousands of teens in St. Louis—to tens of thousands nationally—Wyman programs and services make a difference in the lives of today's teens and tomorrow's leaders.

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