

ACCELERATORS IN EDUCATION

Good evening,

I have been invited here to share my story. Many of you may wonder – why I, or my story, matters for this occasion and I hope to answer that question for you in the next few minutes.

My name is Jeaneen Hooks and once upon a time ago....I was part of the beginning of the Columbus Collegiate Academy, now known as United Schools Network.

One sunny, summer afternoon at the Juneteenth Festival, my feisty 5th grader ran up to me exclaiming, “Mom! Come and meet a lady that says she can get me into an Ivy League College like Harvard!!”



Let’s unpack that one, life-changing moment....for both of us.

- 1) I had no idea my kid wanted to go to an Ivy League school?!?
- 2) A stranger at a booth connected with his untapped ambition.
- 3) His excitement compelled me to at least find out what was going on...

I talked to the representative, and she certainly had a way to connect with people. I liked her and my kid was literally giddy – with the imaginings of 10 year old holding a degree from a prestigious college or university.

After a more formal introduction to CCA with Andy – my 5th grader was enrolled, and I too became a member of the CCA staff. My son and I were excited about the vision, the visionary, and the mission of the school. We could not wait to be part of such a dynamic program.

As the planning for the inaugural school year unfolded, I recall one clear purpose, which was to be an advocate for the underserved middle school youth of Columbus City Schools and to change the trajectory of their lives by delivering the education they deserved and needed to compete in our community and in the world. This reminds me of a quote – ***“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world – In fact, it is the only thing that ever has.”***

We lived and breathed this common goal. It shaped the culture of the tiny but mighty CCA team. Because of that one mission – we are all here today celebrating the success of United Schools Network.

And I am proud to say that Braxton and I are part of the success story.

Fast forward from 5th grade to today. My son, Braxton, is a graduate of North Carolina A&T, graduating summa cum laude with a degree in marketing, and he is a successful Category Account Manager for 3M, managing the Lowe's national account. He has received numerous awards and is part of the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and in this, he contributes hundreds of hours of community service. He is an emerging entrepreneur. He is married to a beautiful woman and they just celebrated their 1st wedding anniversary. I attribute a good deal of his success as a scholar and a man to his time at CCA/USN. At a pivotal time of his life, he gained a quality education that increased his academic acumen and his confidence, he learned about organizational structure, and how to overcome barriers and challenges. Braxton and many others that came through the doors of the school and into the arms of the staff will never be the same and that is exactly what we set out to do.

I too was positively impacted by having the experience that only comes once in a lifetime which was to be part of a team that is so committed to a mission. We worked tirelessly to bring the vision to life and support the kids and families that subscribed to USN. I vividly recall one volunteer that helped the front office during enrollment and orientation and after a few hours of work – they exclaimed, **“This is God's work!”** They saw the need and experienced the response of USN and were amazed. This speaks to the culture of USN.

Another quote comes to mind: **“Organizational culture is the sum of values and rituals which serve as ‘glue’ to integrate the members of the organization.”** — Richard Perrin

Culture is a carrier of meaning. In this view, culture is about “the story” in which people in the organization are embedded, and the values and rituals that reinforce that narrative. Many of you may not know about all that goes behind the scenes to make this school network so powerful – trust me when I say it is rigorous, intentional, structured, and strategic. The level of effort that goes into designing a school year translates into student success is exceptional. It would not be possible to execute unless the culture of the system supports it.

One notion that I have in my office is: **Culture eats strategy for breakfast.** Meaning if your people are not embedded and bought in – your strategy will be useless.

USN's mission and culture are one in the same – transforming lives through the power of education. My family has certainly been a beneficiary of USN's work and I will always use my voice to be an advocate for the work they do.

Thank you.