

News

100 Black Men, General Motors Encourage Young People to Pursue STEM Careers

By *Brelaun Douglas*
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In an effort to boost minority participation in science and technology, 100 Black Men of America recently hosted a panel discussion with representatives from General Motors to encourage young minorities to think outside the box when it comes to their career paths.

This summer, 100 Black Men of America, an organization dedicated to educating and empowering African American youth, held their annual conference in Atlanta, Ga., that focused on topics like civic engagement and managing money. The event also included a panel discussion titled, "Bringing STEM Education to Life," a workshop geared towards getting youth interested in science, technology, engineering and math fields, commonly known as "STEM."

Panel members included Sherwin Prior, managing director for General Motors Ventures; Tobin Williams, executive director of human resources and corporate staff for General Motors; and Aaron Richardson, senior manager for IT development for General Motors who discussed how STEM was involved in something young boys often love: cars.

"[Technology] is absolutely essential. Over 33 years, the company that I work for [has become] a very different company," said Williams. "Thirty-three years ago it was primarily a manufacturing company. Three years ago it was primarily a finance company and today it's pretty much a software company. We are continuously looking for individuals who have the capability in software. There is a blending in terms of the software skill capability between engineering and computer science."

Prior agreed, stating that STEM is all about "thinkers and problem solvers" and that the panelists were some of the people who drive the technology behind cars.

The panelists also talked about the challenges that the young people may face in an industry or career path where most people don't look like them.

In 2012-2013, Black males accounted for just 8.7 percent of the people who earned degrees in STEM fields, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

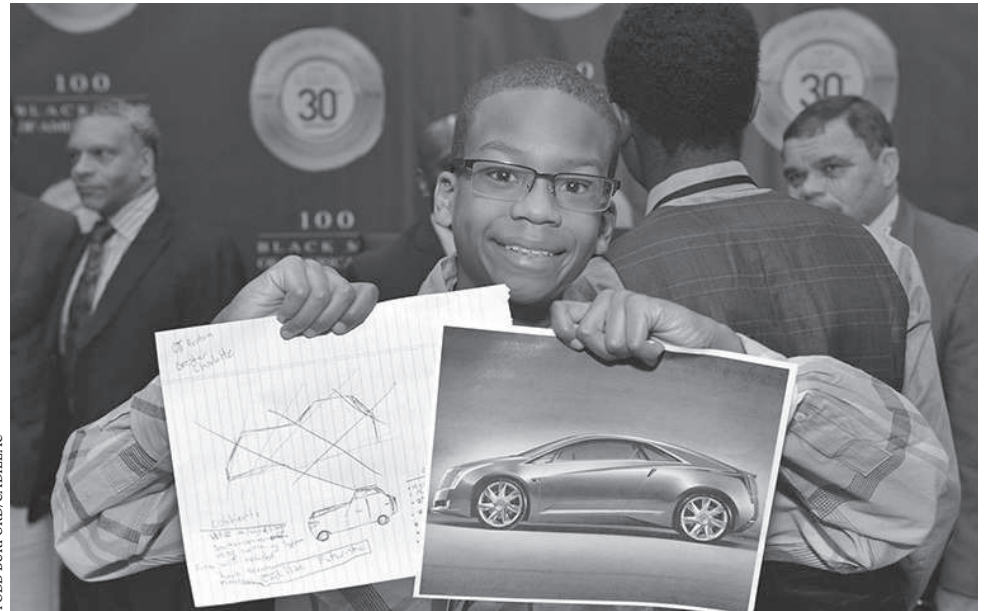
"Opportunities are rarely convenient," said Richardson. "They're often disguised in something that seems like, 'Oh, I got to do this,' or 'I can't do this, I can't do that.' It's always disguised in challenge. So I challenge you to think about that as you think about how you want to continue your learning in the STEM area to think about the sacrifices that you have to make that will ultimately lead to significant benefits in the long term."

Prior also told the youth not to be discouraged by the lack of diversity in STEM fields.

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"It's about changing the narrative," he said. "Don't believe that African Americans aren't doing phenomenal fantastic things. They just aren't talked about in the media like they should be."

After the discussion, participants lined up to ask the panelists questions about how the technology in the cars worked and about the science and engineering that goes into building the



A young participant shares his art work during a workshop titled "Bringing STEM Education to Life," at the 30th Anniversary 100 Black Men Convention in Atlanta, Georgia.

cars. Questions included things such as what is the future of jobs for workers when more and more jobs are becoming automated, how safe the vehicle is and what the future of the technologic capabilities of the car looked like.

Participants were then invited to draw their own cars and decide what type of technology, old or new, the cars would include. The young men designed everything from cars that could hover and drive themselves to cars that could be unlocked with a fingerprint rather than a key.

The crowd was populated with young, Black boys, mainly middle and high school-aged, from across the nation including 13-year-old Noel Towson, who finds the 100 Black Men beneficial to him.

Towson, along with five other young men from the South Bend, Ind., chapter, came to the conference with his chaperone Eldridge Lewis Chism Jr., who is also a 100 Black Men member. Chism has been involved with the organization for years and found the conference and panel beneficial because it gave the young men "new thoughts and new ideals and hopefully provide[d] them an opportunity."

"My mom took me to the '100 Black Men' the first time," said Towson. "I liked what they taught us, the life lessons and how to better prepare ourselves for the future, so I just stuck with it."

Brelaun Douglas is a 2016 NNPA "Discover The Unexpected" (DTU) journalism fellow at the Atlanta Voice. The DTU journalism fellowship program is sponsored by Chevrolet. Check out more stories by the fellows by following the hashtag #DiscoverTheUnexpected on Twitter and Instagram. Learn more about the program at nnpa.org/dtu.

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