

CHANGEMAKER Spotlight

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Richard Roberts III

The executive director and founder of Young Men and Women in Charge is instilling underserved young adults with confidence.

BY LUCY DANZIGER

Over the course of Richard Roberts III's career as an engineer, he often felt disappointed by the dearth of women and people of color in his workplaces. He was inspired by this experience to found Young Men and Women in Charge, an organization to train underserved youth in STEM skills.

"We don't just teach math and science, we build confidence," Roberts said.

Q What inspired you to found Young Men and Women in Charge?

As a young engineering student, and later in workplaces, I was the only person who looked like me. I know about the inequities that people of color and women experience. So, I thought, why can't I break down barriers and help people get to where they want to be? And that includes helping them get scholarships and careers with financial opportunities.

Q: What model did you use when creating YMWIC?

We are partnering with the school districts. That gives us access to the faculty, the kids, the parents, and the other organizations in the community.

The second part of the model engages the universities. They are very interested in seeing more people of color and women entering [STEM] fields. They allow us to bring our kids onto campus and the professors get involved with the kids.

The third very important part of this model are the corporations. They get their employees involved, meet our scholars, and become financial supporters.

Q: How do you identify prospects and find people to come to the program?

Word of mouth as well as school district and community recruitment events.

Q: What is the biggest challenge you face, and how do you overcome it?

I think the biggest challenge is resources. We are always looking for qualified volunteers, qualified staff. The second challenge is making sure we are able to fulfill the many needs of our scholars, since more and more students want to be in the program.

Q: How does someone benefit from the program?

The main benefit is confidence. They gain the attitude: "I can do this!" Once these scholars have confidence, then they can build the competence to pursue a career in the sciences or in any field they choose. They may not end up in a STEM job, but acquiring confidence guarantees they will be successful at whatever they end up doing.

Q: When someone donates to YMWIC, what does the money help you do, specifically?

Everything is expensive, especially transportation — that's a killer. We received a donated van four years ago. And we do the best to maintain it, but we could use another one. Some of the small things add up, like school supplies.

Q: Can you explain the day-to-day operations and what a typical day looks like?

The formal curriculum includes three categories: hands-on STEM topics, academic and career readiness, and essential skills. Examples of hands-on STEM skills include coding, electronics, biology, and chemistry. Examples of academic and career readiness

include SAT prep, math and science remediation, college tours, job shadowing, and summer internships. Examples of essential skills are personal branding, cyberbullying awareness, and financial literacy.

Q: What impact are you having on the lives of the scholars you work with?

We get letters from former scholars all the time telling us how YMWIC changed their lives. One scholar wrote to tell us that before she joined our she speaks to crowds all the time. She was on the Mathcounts team.

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— RICHARD ROBERTS III,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & FOUNDER, YOUNG MEN
AND WOMEN IN CHARGE FOUNDATION, INC.

Q: What's been your biggest win to date?

When a former or current scholar gets a job!

Q: What do you wish people understood about the community you serve?

We have to help people become empathetic and understand that there are inequities. This person is no different from that person. We just have to give them opportunities.

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PHILLY QUICK ROUND

Favorite place to eat:
The Capital Grille.

Favorite place to relax:
On the golf course.

Favorite Philly sports team?
The Eagles. Go Birds!

You don't know Philly until you've...
taken a stroll on West River Drive (Martin Luther King Jr. Drive). Or, taken that stroll down Kelly Drive.

Why I love Philly and want to give back:
This community helped me get to where I am. And that's why I am back in the community, giving back.