

I AM STEM

Kendra Gardiner

"FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO TRY."

Kendra Gardiner, director of product strategy at University Hospitals Ventures and former chief performance officer at JumpStart, grew up poor in a small rural town where access to opportunities were limited. Despite her circumstances she managed to launch a business and earn a degree in chemical engineering. She is committed to helping others find their pathways to success.

How Did You Get to Where You Are Today?

I was the first of my family to complete a 4-year degree. And that was a really interesting time for me because I didn't have a network of professionals and my Mom could not have prepared me for what to expect. My parents never put together a budget, so they didn't really understand what we were embarking on. And actually, when I went to college, my father had already passed so I really was left only with my mom as a single mom who had another child to care for at that time.

College Didn't Work Out At First

My first year of college didn't really work out for a couple of reasons. I didn't have a network of people to call and ask for assistance or anyone checking in on me to push me either. And, to be honest my choice of college was poor and in hindsight was driven by scholarship considerations versus fit for where I was trying to go (or get away from) in life. While college didn't work out, I never gave up on my life goals.

My Goals Were to Get Out of My Small Hometown and No Longer be Poor

By luck, I had an amazing teacher in high school who exposed me to the idea of becoming an engineer - mostly because I was really good at math and science. I remember immediately asking my teacher how much money an engineer made and when she confirmed it was good money - I said sign me up. Thanks to her, I spent the Summer before my high school sophomore year at an engineering camp for minorities 4 hours from my home. And then the next two Summers at medical school camps 2 hours from home. These camps not only allowed me to experience science in a new way, it exposed me to new people and places which only made me want to work harder towards my goals.

Relates to Challenges

While I was lucky to have a teacher who believed in me, struggles were always present. I faced many hard life realities at a young age - starting with my father's sudden death when I was 12 and watching my grandmother die of lung cancer when I was 17. With a single mom, I was left playing the role of Mom to my siblings. And school was challenging as well given we were bussed to the neighboring town where we were seen as outsiders. Unlike most of my friends, I had to work full time to pay for my own clothes, food and camps - there were many days I recall not having money to eat.

I realized that my life experiences port really well to my understanding of the challenges that we're trying to solve. I know I don't show up like most people think when they meet me. Most think I came from a really cushy home and upbringing. They also think I grew up in Chicago when I say I'm from Illinois. And my life was none of that. As a result there's a deep passion for me in this work.

Supporting the Next Generation of Professionals

There is a deep passion in this work for me. I believe we all should challenge ourselves to support the next generation of professionals - disproportionately focusing our efforts on those young people who have the grit but also need inspiration, exposure, mentorship and access to a network of people who can guide them on their journey and open doors when possible.



The NeoSTEM Ecosystem is a collaboration of organizations throughout Northeast Ohio who partner to improve STEM educational opportunities for all students. Formed in 2014, the NeoSTEM Ecosystem's goals are to improve meaningful STEM learning opportunities for all students in the Northeast Ohio region. As one of 94 ecosystems operating as a part of the STEM Learning Ecosystems Community of Practice, the NeoSTEM Ecosystem holds regular virtual and in-person meetings to learn about what community educational needs are and to develop solutions for those needs. For more information, please contact us at info@neostem.org.

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