

TECH CONNECT

SHERRELL DORSEY CREATES AN ECOSYSTEM FOR BLACK TECHNOLOGY WORKERS AND ENTREPRENEURS IN CHARLOTTE.

BY SHANNON CUTHRELL



Experiments are a recurring theme in the life of Sherrell Dorsey, a Charlotte entrepreneur who started two businesses to provide visibility for other black innovators in the region. In spring 2016, two years after moving to the Queen City from Bridgeport, Conn., Dorsey launched The Plug, a daily newsletter covering entrepreneurs, communities and economic trends involving people of color. The publication is run by a team of six freelance journalists and one managing editor and also produces a database of black-owned coworking spaces in the U.S.

Later that year, Dorsey's idea expanded into a physical undertaking: BLKTECHCLT, a local event space and network of more than 2,000 tech professionals and entrepreneurs. Dorsey and a team of six independent contractors offer weekly workshops teaching coding and business development and connecting tech workers to jobs with local partners. Annual membership costs \$149, and non-members can pay a small fee to attend individual workshops. Last summer, BLKTECHCLT partnered with the city of Charlotte to

run a coding bootcamp for 24 high-school students who ultimately landed internships at local companies.

Dorsey says her goal is to provide the visibility that black innovators have earned but haven't received. Mainstream media often overlooks stories of thriving black entrepreneurs and technologists, she says.

Often signing her newsletters, "Yours in hustle," Dorsey is a self-defined hustle junkie. Growing up in Seattle, she learned to code as a teenager and spent summers interning at Microsoft Corp. She earned an undergraduate degree from New York City's Fashion Institute of Technology and later worked in the beauty industry, doing freelance writing and web development on the side. Last year, she commuted to New York while completing a master's degree in data journalism at Columbia University.

BUSINESS NORTH CAROLINA spoke with Dorsey about her startup journey, mission, fundraising experience and future plans. Comments were edited for brevity.

▶ WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO START THE PLUG?

Being a tech-news junkie and staying on top of innovation trends, I was frustrated that all the tech newsletters I subscribed to were covering the same five to six tech billionaires, mostly white guys.

This wasn't representative of my experience interacting with women and people of color building incredible things. But these people rarely made the headlines. You would think they didn't even exist. If you're digesting a certain sort of narrative, you start to believe that's the only narrative that exists.

I started an experiment where I would aggregate five online news stories covering the work of people of color and women. It really started to catch on. After about a year, I started getting approached by advertisers who wanted to support what I was doing.

▶ WHERE DID YOU GET THE IDEA FOR BLKTECHCLT?

I wanted to meet other people in Charlotte and share my work. At tech events, I was always one of few women and people of color. This didn't make sense to me because Charlotte has a majority

population of people of color, many with STEM degrees. I thought, “Where the hell is everyone?”

I started a meetup group to bring together black techies to talk about our work. We planned it in three weeks, figuring only 30 people would show up. Over 125 people RSVP'd. We had a turnout of entrepreneurs, private-equity investors and students from all over the region.

We had people write on a board answering: “What would you like to see in Charlotte in the future?” They wrote about mentorship, access to capital, training on how to raise money. ... We thought: Let's start building these conversations on how to support black tech entrepreneurs locally.

It was an experiment that turned into an accidental business. Out of an observation, we ended up developing a community that other people could benefit from.

▶ **WHAT ARE SOME FUNDRAISING LESSONS YOU'VE LEARNED?**

It's difficult raising money when you're a person of color, even [moreso for] a woman. People want you to work twice as hard for half the price. Everyone wanted to be adjacent to our work with support. But for me, support and investment are two very different things.

We need to continue to ask for our worth and only spend time with people who value our work as investment. I'd like to shoutout AvidXchange, who came to us in the early stages. They were the first major tech company to write a check to support us. Even now, they continue to prioritize our work as a pipeline of recruitment.

▶ **WHAT'S ON TAP FOR THE FUTURE?**

BLKTECHCLT is continuing to be a consultant for tech companies facing the challenge around hiring diverse candidates for the job. We recently launched a career website. There's still steady growth, but we really need to amplify the effort of marketing to tech companies.

At The Plug, we've been adding more journalists to work on original stories. We'll be raising money in the next six months so we can cover more beat areas that have gone unexplored and bring some rigor to tech reporting and research. ■

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Things are happening in Chatham Park

In 2018 we celebrated the opening of Penguin Place (above lower left); the first mix of retail and office space to open in Chatham Park.

Additionally, UNC Health System now occupies 25,000+ sf (above lower right) and an additional 16,000 sf is currently occupied by retail and office tenants. The Jim and Betsy Bryan Hospice Home is open, our solar farm is completely operational and the full access interchange off Highway 64 is complete.

Here's what to expect in 2019

This year will see more available commercial sites and our first residential homesites. Construction will begin on Thales Academy, Chatham Park's first school. Mosaic (top), a soon-to-be premiere entertainment and lifestyle destination, will start construction. PLUS new roadways will open including Chatham Park Way - connecting Chatham Park to Hwy 64 and eastern Pittsboro improvements to 15/501.



Follow our progress at [ChathamPark.com](https://www.ChathamPark.com)