

From Short Order Cook to Software Engineer



By Beverly M. Riddick, RTWBC

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'AT CODEIT WE JUST DON'T CODE. WE CHANGE LIVES'

'I think of it as an analogy: it's like pushing a boulder up an incline but when you get to the top, the boulder rolls back and crushes you every time; but, see, the incline is finite, you can either push it over the top or you can let it roll back and crush you. Just try; push yourself.'

Rannell Robertson

Tackling Poverty While Filling The Skills Gap

Rannell Robertson, 24 years old, was a short order cook when he learned about CODEIT, a coding bootcamp for young adults who reside in New Jersey public housing. CODEIT, a 501c3 nonprofit, is the brainchild of Da'shone Hughey, a socially conscious entrepreneur and CODEIT executive director, who in one year, launched the effort in the community space at the Harrison Street Houses, part of the Hoboken Public Housing Authority.

"We're excited about what we're doing," says Hughey. "100% of CODEIT graduates are either hired or move on to college." The program not only addresses the skills gap employers face, but also, Hughey argues, tackles the social issues of poverty and welfare.

Hughey explains it like this: "The U.S. government spends \$7B per year on government assistance programs such as Section 8 and welfare [typically on long term unemployed

people] to offset the cost of poverty. Yet, there are all these jobs available" (5.9M according to the BLS in November 2017).

Consequently, Hughey targets the CODEIT recruiting strategy at Hoboken public housing residents who experience unemployment at disproportionate levels.

Hughey elaborates that through CODEIT, "we can train people and get them off of government assistance. We [can] help corporate America, the government, and, more importantly, our clients."

Designed To Impact

CODEIT has run two 16-week CODEIT pilot programs to date. In the first pilot CODEIT took in students without a high school diploma and saw remarkable results. The students – who had no prior technical training – not only graduated from the program, but they obtained their G.E.D and enrolled in college following completion.

In order to maximize success, CODEIT deliberately keeps class sizes small. Each cohort starts with a maximum of ten students, male and female, with the expectation that five or six will graduate; they expect to see some attrition as software engineering is a study of science and not everyone will be suited to the field.

"CODEIT is a STEM program and we target people who have typically been left out of advanced and rigorous studies and we expect them to perform at a high level," explains Hughey. "At some point we may expand to 15 students in a class but we will never go beyond that."

Hughey describes other programs as a numbers game: 25 students in a class but ultimately only two or three will complete the program with a thorough understanding of the curriculum. CODEIT, on the other hand, strives for a 3:1 teacher-student ratio because in a smaller class 'they can't hide from learning.' The program is designed to ensure that students 'know their stuff' and exit the program with the ability to actually create something.

University professors and professional coders teach the curriculum on assigned laptops including Python, Django, Flask, Ajax and others. Recruiting more coding teachers of color is a challenge but an objective that Hughey continues to pursue because they serve as role models to the mostly Black and Latino students.

CODEIT is funded by community block grants funneled through state and local offices. Participating employers receive a \$10k credit upon hiring CODEIT graduates.



Rannell Robertson Capstone Project

Presentation

Success In Short Order

A graduate of the second pilot cohort in December 2017, Rannell says the coding bootcamp piqued his interest in programming, which stemmed from childhood. Though he had obtained a trade school certificate in computer networking after graduating high school, he was never able to find employment. Worried that he was wasting his life as a short order cook and have nothing to show for it, he jumped at the chance to enroll with CODEIT.

Rannell describes himself as intelligent, driven and self motivated. He believes he developed these characteristics at a young age: the moment he discovered that he and his mother were being evicted from their home, he decided to take his future into his own hands. Hughey, Rannell's number one cheerleader, describes him as being both serious and unique. 'He arrived early and stayed late. Other students looked at him as a role model.'

Beyond The Bootcamp

CODEIT doesn't simply stop at teaching excellence in coding, but ensures that students are marketable to employers and ultimately hired. CODEIT provides resume writing, interview prep and workplace attire through a partnership with Dress for Success.

As he approached graduation in December 2017, Rannell interviewed at a NJ software company through the CODEIT career development service. Rannell did his homework and received an offer after his first and only interview.

Hughey is much more than the executive director. For him, the work is personal. He markets the program, recruits candidates, and chases down absentee students by knocking on doors and talking to building residents. He demands excellence and achievement from every student to prepare them for the outside world.

'It's not an easy program and we are constantly refining the curriculum. The next class will have to learn data scientific modeling, coding and analysis in addition to the existing curriculum. You have to graduate from the program, we don't just let you out of the program.'

'Similar programs cost \$17,000- \$20,000 and are very selective with program admission – they often test candidates for technical aptitude. CODEIT's philosophy is that you can

measure someone's IQ, but you can't measure the size of their heart. 'How bad do you want it?' That's CODEIT's main requirement. Do you want to win?'

Ready To Work Business Collaborative, founded by a collective of Fortune 500 companies, is committed to working cooperatively to develop hiring best practices that target the long-term unemployed, under-employed, people with disabilities, military veterans, and Opportunity Youth. The RTWBC accomplishes this mission through collaboration, thought-leadership, and services that support employers who desire to serve these talent pools better.