



Finding Finance

June 8, 2021

Diversity in the financial services industry is an ongoing challenge, but it's not due to a lack of talent; it's due to a lack of exposure, education, and opportunity. But two nonprofits are hoping to change that. Join William Blair's Hugo Scott-Gall for a conversation with Bevon Joseph, co-founder of the Greenwood Project, and Katherine Jollon Colsher, CEO of Girls Who Invest, which seek to connect women, Black, and Latinx students with careers in financial services.

Comments are edited excerpts from our podcast, which you can listen to in full below.

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Let's set the scene. Could you talk about your organizations?

Katherine: Girls Who Invest just celebrated its sixth birthday. Our vision is for 30% of the world's investable capital to be managed by women by 2030. We focus exclusively on the investment management industry, seeking to make the talent pipeline or representative of women and women of color.

Bevon: My wife and I started the Greenwood Project in 2016. Our mission is to introduce primarily Black and Latinx students from underserved communities to careers in financial services, from investment banking to operations, trading, human resources, and legal. There is no lack of talent; just a lack of opportunity and exposure.

Bevon, tell me about your journey. What inspired you to found your organization?

Bevon: I grew up in Trinidad, Tobago, and moved to the New York area after high school. I landed on the trading floor at Chase in Manhattan, fixing computers. People were yelling and screaming, and I had no idea what was going on around me. But I became obsessed with learning about the markets, and found some folks who were willing to mentor me, and I really fell in love with the industry.

I noticed almost from day one that not many people looked like me. I had a 20-year career and ended up as a CTO at a hedge fund. And over the years I managed a lot of interns, and they all seemed to be connected to somebody at the firm. I realized you need to have a certain level of social capital to even know that these opportunities exist, and if you're not privy to that network, it's very unlikely that you will end up in a career in financial services.

Greenwood Project exists to be the organization I wish I had when I was 20 years old. We want to help kids avoid the challenges I faced on my way to where I am today.

Katherine, how about you?

Katherine: I went to a liberal arts college and studied topics that I loved but didn't have a long-term career path. I majored in English and minored in history and French. When someone at my school suggested I be a math major, I said, "Why would I do that?" Girls Who Invest exists to encourage people from all backgrounds, geographies, and ethnicities to take math. It would have changed my career path.

But you ultimately found your way to finance.

Katherine: Yes, but on the philanthropic side at Goldman Sachs. I used to joke that I didn't earn Goldman's money; I gave it away. One thing I had there was mentorship and sponsorship. That was a privilege not everybody has, and I believe in its importance.

How does finance make itself more attractive and available, when a lot of people don't even know that it's an option?

Katherine: We want to attract people who aren't cultured and pedigreed since birth to come into the industry, but to do so we need to meet them where they are, and we need to speak about it plainly so they can see it's compelling.

First, we need to communicate that you can explore a lot of interests. You can be in research, or fixed income, or infrastructure; you can be on the buy side or sell side. No one's having that conversation at the dinner table.

I also think the flexibility needs to be discussed. It's a work-hard industry, but you get to a point in your career where people don't really mind if you're leaving to pick your kids up from school.

I think you're both talking about mentorship and someone thinking, "I want to be like them," or "The fact that they're doing that means I think I could do it too." How important is that?

Bevon: It's critical. It's the secret sauce for Greenwood Project. When I have conversations with folks at financial institutions, I tell them, "Don't assume that everybody knows who you are or wants to work for you."

A lot of our students don't go to career fairs. They might not have heard of Goldman Sachs or William Blair. "You can't be what you can't see," is what we say. So we take them to visit a different company every day for six weeks during the summer. We show them people who look like themselves.

We also give every student a funded brokerage account at the end of the summer. When they come work for us for 6 or 10 weeks during the summer, they often become the highest income earner in the family. Our program is more than just an internship; it teaches students that they can start building generational wealth starting with themselves.

Why are women more underrepresented in asset management than in other professional service industries, like law?

Katherine: I think people grow up hearing you should be a lawyer or a doctor. There are TV shows around those fields, and industries cater toys to them. You don't get an investment professional toy when you're six.

But we've seen a big shift. Five years ago people would say, "We don't know where to find women to recruit." We partner with more than 105 investment management firms, and no one says that anymore. There are clearly enough women in the talent pipeline. At the same time, there is heightened awareness around welcoming female talent to the industry.

I do think that the dialogue with women to invite them into the finance industry hasn't been systematically happening. It happens on a specific number of campuses that have been feeder systems for the finance industry for as long as it has been around. We want the women there to get jobs, but we also want to find additional women.

Bevon: Recruiting at select schools has gone on for generations. We need to upend all that and disrupt the way diversity recruiting is done in the industry.

Katherine: I would add that the pace at which the industry recruits and what's expected of you to be a strong candidate is an incredibly high bar and very hard to navigate if you're not familiar with finance. As you're approaching your first full-time summer job before your junior year, you're also expected to be accepting an offer for the summer before your senior year—if you even know how to navigate all of that.

What are some easy steps employers can take to change this?

Bevon: We at Greenwood Project are a support system for students after they're hired. We describe Greenwood not as a program but a family. Young people, especially Black and Latinx, tend to learn really well when they're learning together and from people who look like them.

But the industry has to do something different to look different. The No. 1 question our students have is, "How do I be myself at work in an environment where I don't see many people who look like me?"

Retention is also a big problem. We find the talent, train them, and bring them to your doorstep, but it's your job as

a firm to keep them there. Employee resource groups should be well funded and really involved. In fact, I believe they should have a seat on the board.

Employers should also provide a roadmap to Black and Latinx employees so they can see themselves rising at the firm. And they also have to be involved in the things that are important to the firm as far as ROI is concerned, because the folks who are involved in high-profile initiatives get the attention, recognition, and mentorship.

Katherine: The other thing the industry should consider is not making students feel like they have to make career decisions for the next five years. Offer them an internship for the summer and ask for a decision about a job at the end of it. It doesn't seem unreasonable to say, "It's April; we'd love to know in August if you'd like to come join our firm next year."

Bevon: To add to what Katherine is saying, when you make a student an offer, have some of your employees available to work with that student leading up to the start date. Those employees can say, for example, "Let's touch base every so often. I can help you understand what I went through, what to expect. You can even come into the office or virtually drop in to see what I do every day." It really helps because a lot of students are intimidated.

I'm hearing that it's about partnering for months if not years versus viewing your organization as a helpful recruitment aid.

Bevon: Yes, because the issue that we're addressing is generational. It's a lack of opportunity; it's a deficit in education and exposure. That doesn't get solved in one internship. It might take four or five years for a young person to get up to speed and compete at the level you want them to compete at.

I tell firms students aren't going to knock it out of the park in three months. The process works; it just takes time. So if you really want to help Greenwood Project and Girls Who Invest, take the long view and partner with us for five years, not one year.

Katherine: It can also be very rewarding to help an intern shape her career. But that requires a shift in mindset. The person overseeing the intern has to be a resource for that individual as opposed to thinking, "Wow, there's a lot of work this summer. I need this person to hit the ground running and take work off my plate because I want to go on my August vacation." These partnerships are life experiences that can teach us all a lot about our own lives.

Bevon: To Katherine's point, it's not always about who ends up at your firm. It's about the ripple effect an internship can have on these young people and their families and their communities. The average starting salary of our full-time students is \$60,000 to \$65,000. Nobody in their family has ever made that money before. Nobody in their family is investing. When I talk to firms, I say, "Let me tell you about the impact you will have."

Can you talk a bit about COVID-19 and 2020 more broadly? How has it changed your students' expectations?

Katherine: Generation Z is not convinced that an in-office culture will ever be 100% necessary. They missed a year of in-person school; their graduation celebrations were cars driving down their streets honking their horns. This is a population of people who will say, "If I could work remotely in high school and in my first internship, I can do XYZ remotely." They've changed the mindset around the workplace and the world needs to recognize that.

Bevon: Tons of firms came to us in the wake of the George Floyd and Black Lives Matter situations. Firms want to

do good and do well at the same time. They just haven't been able to reach this population.

Our namesake is the Greenwood Community in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was known as the Black Wall Street, and 2021 is the centennial of a race massacre there. We want to educate our kids in the spirit of that community. A lot of people have never heard that story, and what we're doing really means so much more to our students when they understand why we're doing it, and that they're part of something that's bigger than them.

Both of your organizations have been really successful. But in five years' time what would you want to say you did?

Katherine: Currently, 515 alumni have gone through our summer intensive program, which is four weeks of education plus a six-week paid internship. This summer's class is 176 women. In five years' time, I'd like to see these women having approached the fork in the road multiple times over—for example, do you go to business school or not?—and proven that they will stay in the industry. I'm confident that people are going to be calling us up and saying, "Did you know so-and-so was a Girls Who Invest scholar?"

Bevon: We run our high school program exclusively in Chicago right now, but we've been invited to replicate it in multiple cities, so we're excited to do that. But for me, personally, it's all about the ripple effect. At the end of the summer these students are talking about their experiences with their parents for the very first time, and their parents want to get involved and start investing.

It's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life, but it's the most rewarding because kids will call me on a weekly basis and say, "Bevon, I just got an offer from Piper Sandler, I'm moving to New York." I'll ask, "Did you tell your parents about this?" And the kid will say, "No, I called you first."

When you get that call, trust me, you can't pay me enough to do this job, because you get to see the impact of your work in real time. I can never go back to a so-called 9-to-5 job anymore because these young people, their lives are being changed, and their families' and communities' lives are being changed.

Greenwood Project

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Girls Who Invest

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