

Blacks must be part of Miami's tech evolution

By FELECIA HATCHER

info@FeleciaHatcher.com

When I played basketball in high school, my coach Ms. Johnson would always tell the team, "We are only as strong as our weakest player, so it's important that everyone is comfortable with the ball."

As I translate that to the work we are doing with Code Fever, I have realized that we can't build a thriving start-up ecosystem in Miami without making sure everyone has an understanding and the access to technical training to take advantage of and contribute to that ecosystem.

The conversation about tech diversity and inclusion is not a new one, but it has garnered a new spotlight recently since Google, Facebook, Twitter and others have released their diversity numbers.

The numbers show women, blacks and Hispanics are, sadly, underrepresented, blacks in the low single digits. However, it doesn't do anyone justice to just release diversity numbers if no organizations are putting together outreach programs that either educate people on the exact steps they need to take to qualify for those jobs or create a direct pipeline to employment, through training, not just for youth but also adults.

South Florida's black community is in a state of emergency. Most of our youth, regardless of economic standing, have a mindset shaped by materialism and the consumption of technology, with a total disregard to understanding tech, becoming technology producers and being community change agents. As we talk about the digital divide, we don't have the big access to technology issues like we did five years ago — black residents index high in the use of mobile technology use and consumption. We also rank highest on social-media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram.

The digital divide is now on the tech-creation side.

When residents of our most disadvantaged areas in South Florida can see themselves and opportunities within the tech scene here, we all win. Diversity and inclusion issues won't be solved overnight, but we must first acknowledge that there is a sector of the community that is being left out and take a public stance on increasing the number of blacks in the pipeline. There must be the willingness to say, "We don't know how to fix the problem, but we will make it a top line priority."

There are several organizations that already are spearheading such initiatives: Urgent Inc's FACES's Summer Coding Program teaches students to build apps that merge public-art spaces with technology; The Miami-Dade Economic Advocacy Trust funds Black Girls

Code's Miami chapter and sponsors membership for Black YPN Start-up founders to have a presence at Lab Miami; AyanDace Production's new video series highlights Innovative Black Start-Up founders, and our organization, Code Fever, recently has been given the opportunity, through a Knight Foundation grant, to expand our work fostering youth tech entrepreneurship through in-school and summer camps. We also host panel discussions on tech inclusion and diversity in partnership with the Carrie P. Meek Entrepreneurial Education Center, an outreach center of Miami Dade College, which is also introducing a new Lean Manufacturing and Creative Entrepreneurship Studio this fall.

As we aim to duplicate the start-up culture of Silicon Valley and attract tech companies and investors to Miami, we are at risk of duplicating its diversity issues. But we have an opportunity in Miami to showcase to the rest of the world that true innovation comes with a commitment to diversity and by including the black community when we talk about innovative entrepreneurship, tech and fundable businesses we will truly build smarter and vertically integrated cities.

Felecia Hatcher is a co-founder of Code Fever and the "Chief Popsicle" and owner of Feverish Ice Cream.