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# SOFT SKILLS *lead to* ROCK STARS

JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT  
FILLS IN THE GAPS THAT THE  
TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM  
LEAVES BEHIND

BY DREW LIMSKY  
PORTRAIT BY BRETT HUFZIGER

“I am a social person,” says high school senior Huguette St Hubert, with her characteristic directness. She recalls feeling “emotionally drained” when the COVID-19 pandemic hit and it became clear to her that her social network, other than her family, was threatening to dry up along with the educational camaraderie she so prizes.

Born in Haiti and now 18, St Hubert emigrated to the United States at 13 to live with her father—and for the educational opportunities—in Fort Lauderdale. She graduated Lauderdale Lakes Middle School without a hitch, but it’s safe to say that St Hubert’s senior year at Fort Lauderdale’s Stranahan High School required some adjustments. Ironically, the most “normal” thing about the last year has revolved around what is arguably the most stressful aspect of

a typical senior year: the age-old question of which college to choose. (She has narrowed it down to FAU and NSU).

But for St Hubert, Junior Achievement of South Florida—which empowers students through work readiness, entrepreneurship and financial literacy—has proven to be a life raft, both before and during the pandemic. The physical facility—at least pre-COVID—was a hub of activity, a smart simulation of a central business district: “It gives students a glimpse into the business world,” explains Keith Koenig, a longtime sponsor of Junior Achievement and the owner and CEO of City Furniture (his son Andrew serves as president). “There are about 20 different businesses that are \$50,000-per-year sponsors, and that’s important founda-

tion funding. We each have a physical presence, a storefront, so students can role-play as bankers—or working for a furniture company.”

Before the pandemic struck, St Hubert had been making real headway in the development of her soft skills, a term that includes everything from leadership to teamwork to communication—basically, social and emotional intelligence. “Employers are reporting a huge gap in soft skills,” says Laurie Sallarulo, president and CEO of Junior Achievement of South Florida. That’s where the organization’s Career Bound program comes in—the curriculum is skills-based (activities involving conflict resolution, for example); includes

## JUNIOR ACHIEVER

Huguette St Hubert in the hall of stores

an industry day, in which time is spent learning about a particular sector; and culminates with the placement of a student in a paid summer job.

Sallarulo believes that investing in young people to help tackle skills shortages could at once help the region recover from the economic impacts of COVID; protect the economy from future pandemics and other disruptions; and combat intractable youth unemployment. “Job-creation and training programs must address the immediate aftermath of the pandemic—and the systemic, long-term challenges faced by young people, especially young people of color,” she says. Interviewing, networking, writing resumes and cover letters—those crucial first-impression tasks—can help turn an academically strong student such as St Hubert (who aspires to becoming a pediatrician) into a rock-star talent. ▶





It was Junior Achievement that introduced St Hubert to the utility of soft skills, when she attended a presentation run by the organization. “In school we use soft skills all day, but we didn’t have a name for them,” St Hubert says. Junior Achievement provided that awareness—and even the pandemic couldn’t completely halt her soft skills education, which continued online. “My parents saw growth in my confidence and the way I spoke about my career path,” she says.

Steven Geller, the mayor of Broward County and an avid booster of Junior Achievement, is acutely aware of the lost year of socialization. “There has been long-term disruption in 2020 and 2021 and possibly even into 2022,” he says. “Students may have attended their senior year in person, but if they missed their junior year and half of their sophomore year, they don’t just come back in and hit the ground running. They’ve missed the sports teams, the debate team, the journalism class, the marching band. All those activities are developmental for future success. So I’m antic-

**MAIN STREET**

Each sponsor business has a storefront presence in Junior Achievement’s Coconut Creek facility.

ipating problems and we need help from the school system, the Boys and Girls Clubs, and I’m particularly looking for help from J.A.” Geller has put his money where his mouth is—he has been able to obtain funding for Junior Achievement through the county commission.

As for St Hubert, as she concludes her high school education, it’s clear that she has mastered the soft art of relationship-building. “As a BRACE Cadet, I do career advising,” she says. “In one-on-one sessions, I help my peers become college- and career-ready, and the students I’ve worked with have already applied to at least three Florida colleges.” BRACE Cadets, though still in high school, are bona fide leaders: They implement special projects in their schools to help equip their peers for college and careers and, in general, to succeed in life after high school.

Despite the pandemic, St Hubert has learned a crucial lesson: Sending the elevator back down to help others is the ultimate soft skill that results in solid achievements. ♦

## Not Every Student is College-Bound— And Why That’s a Good Thing

To **Broward County Mayor Steven Geller**, a local hero who earned his bachelor’s and law degree at Florida State University, Junior Achievement fills in societal gaps in numerous areas. He says that the first thing important to recognize is that not every high school student belongs on the college track. But that doesn’t mean that such students must forgo the resources of Junior Achievement—or their dreams of high earning.

“I’ve organized an 80-member working group—there are a lot of different organizations focused on creating high-paying jobs here in Broward County,” Geller says. “We’re focusing particularly on what I would call mid-skill jobs—jobs that require more than a high school education but less than a four-year college degree.” This is the universe of general contractors, subcontractors, associate builders and contractors, labor unions, public school systems and vocational training schools.

“Aircraft engine mechanics, construction trade jobs, welders, electricians, HVAC, medical technology—these are high-paid jobs that are mostly not outsourceable,” Geller adds. “They’re the kind of jobs that helped build this country: good, solid middle-class jobs. A career does not necessarily mean going to college and earning a four-year degree. I know vastly successful people who started out as electricians, plumbers and mechanics, set up their own shops and now have scores of people working for them.”

Geller says qualified help remains in short supply in South Florida: one, because it’s difficult to find workers who can pass drug and criminal background checks; and two, because top workers seize opportunities to strike out on their own and earn more. “If you’re a union electrician, plumber, HVAC or mechanic, heavy equipment operator, and you’re willing to work 50 hours a week, if you’re not earning \$100,000 a year, you’re pretty close to it.”

Overlapping the mid-skills world is the population of underserved communities, including veterans’ groups, returning prisoners and those belonging to the six lowest-income zip codes in Broward.

“Junior Achievement is enthusiastic and completely color-blind in terms of trying to help everybody,” Geller says. “And it’s been a real strong partner in working with us because they have great ties to schools. And it goes beyond trade jobs to medical technicians, respiratory therapists, physical therapists and electronics. The median age of electricians, plumbers, AC mechanics in Florida is in their 50s. Where are we going to get the next generation from? Junior Achievement is concerned with achievements, not just with the title.” —D.L.