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# The Beacon

How **Junior Achievement of South Florida** lit up the life and dreams of a **Stranahan High School** senior

Junior Achievement gave 17-year-old Jayden Bonhomme something that school could not. And that's the point. This is a story of burgeoning self-esteem, validation, and an epiphany that his varied interests could lead to a viable career path.

Through its Youth Employment program, which is part of JA Career Bound, the organization helps teenagers prepare for the workforce. They learn interviewing skills, presentation skills, collaboration, conflict resolution, networking, how different companies in varied sectors function—in short, the real world. “Research says that students graduate from high school knowing only about five to eight jobs,” says Laurie Sallarulo,

president and CEO of JA of South Florida. The program serves to remedy that. For Bonhomme, JA—and Career Bound, in particular—made him envision a future as a health care administrator.

“I became acquainted with Junior Achievement in high school during my freshman year,” Bonhomme recalls.

“I remember everyone was getting dressed up for mock interviews, and I thought, I want to be a part of that.” The first time Bonhomme walked into JA's Town Square, for a field trip during his sophomore year, he noted the breadth of the organization's reach—various colleges, Broward Health, the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood, the FBI and the military were all represented.

During his junior year, Bonhomme was invited to become part of Junior Achievement by virtue of his first “professional” interview, which was conducted via Zoom. He still remembers the yellow pocket square he wore with his suit. (“I was prepared,” he says.)

Through Junior Achievement, he was able to interact with students he'd never met, even though they attended the same high school, and every time he finished a JA meeting, he would talk excitedly to his mother about which companies had participated and what had been said.

“That's what inspired me to do public administration,” he says. “When people talk about the medical field, they mostly refer to doctors and nurses, but JA taught me that there's a corporate business side, and that sparked my interest.”

Bonhomme rose to the level of ambassador—becoming a mentor for younger students—in his senior year. If the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated virtual-only interactions, “now I get to experience the live-action of it all.” His JA journey culminated in Ultimate Night Out—a men's night intended to build camaraderie—when he delivered a riveting speech in front of 200 people. “I got to speak my truth,” he says.

## THE GIFT

Junior Achievement changed Jayden Bonhomme's life

*Research says that students graduate from high school knowing only about five to eight jobs.*

LAURIE SALLARULO

PRESIDENT AND CEO OF JA OF SOUTH FLORIDA





*At the end of the day, [Jayden's internship] was as good of an experience for my team as it was for him. The more you give, the more you get. Giving back has always been the philosophy of our company.*

BILL FEINBERG

PRESIDENT OF ALLIED KITCHEN & BATH

He shared the ways in which JA helped him stay on track during COVID, which ravaged his extended family, and to push beyond limits and challenges.

If his eventual course of study lights up his left brain, a JA-facilitated summer internship in 2021 at Allied Kitchen & Bath nourished his creative side. "I chose Allied because I'm very interested in interior design," Bonhomme says, and he's quick to enthuse about YouTube videos of home and hotel tours. "I learned a lot. I don't think that many people know that Versace and Ferrari make tiles. That was very eye-opening to me." Even the design of drawers intrigued him. In time, Bonhomme became comfortable with customer service.

Bill Feinberg, president of Allied Kitchen & Bath and Allied Decorative Hardware & Plumbing, who has been involved with JA in one way or another for years, is candid about Bonhomme's growth. "He did not speak when he came to us," he recalls. "He was shy and introverted, and by the time he finished, it was like, wow."

For his part, Bonhomme admires Feinberg's hands-on approach—and his infectious enthusiasm: "Bill knows

every part of his business. You can see the passion in his eyes when he would pick up a piece of stone and tell us where it came from."

Feinberg says that "every department took him under its wing," and that Bonhomme became fluent in the showroom's product lines amid heavy store traffic, and even began dressing like a designer. Feinberg says the experience of having him around and watching his transformation was mutually valuable: "At the end of the day, it was as good of an experience for my team as it was for him. The more you give, the more you get. Giving back has always been the philosophy of our company." He says that his team came to understand "that you can change this kid's life forever.

"When he spoke at Ultimate Night Out last year, he spoke so eloquently," Feinberg continues. "My team was with me, and we were all in shock. He got up there and talked about his internship, and he told the story of his life and his experience. He really came out of his shell."

(Sallarulo remembers the night well: "You would have never known that this was the same kid. I know that JA made a major difference in his life.")

Bonhomme can imagine one day merging his aspirations in health care with his aesthetic leanings, perhaps finding ways to reduce stress in hospitals through design. Does he envision one day occupying a corner suite in a hospital setting, as a CEO, chief operating officer or chief financial officer?

"I could see that for my future," he says. "Especially for people in my community—I'm of Haitian descent—I feel like we don't have many people interacting with us or explaining to us what's happening in health care." He says the mishandling of COVID-19 is a prime example. "I feel that if I'm a part of the health care industry," he says, "I can open many doors for many people like me—to be able to inform and help people in my community."

As his remarks suggest, Jayden is animated by the values of diversity, opportunity and inclusion—and his JA experience has only heightened that sensibility. "When you walk into JA," he says, "you see many different cultures and faces. There's a plethora of people from different paths of life and walks of life, and they all get together to make it work and make beautiful things happen." ♦