

What a Year!



From Henry Rock <contact_point@citystartuplabs.com>
To <sjohnston@tuesdayforumcharlotte.org>
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What a Year!

I don't know about you, but my crystal ball has had a big crack in it. Who on planet earth knew what was in store for us this year - I sure didn't. And as with any calamity, not only are we left to wonder why and what if and when, but with all of the devastation left in a disaster's wake - there are plenty of slivers of silver.

The toll has been enormous and while it isn't necessary to catalog the count here, what is important to pay attention to is the weight of the toll. Being present to that feeling may trigger the empathy that all of us need right about now. Loss, sickness, eviction, closure, uncertainty and plain-old fear make up a lot of that weight.

And yet, a silver lining is there simmering away to remind us that just as sure as we are human, we will experience the ups and downs and undulations of this world.



So, I'd like to share with you the silver-lining that City Startup Labs experienced this year.

But let me first set the table – you may recall that CSL is now emphasizing working with *returning citizens* (formerly incarcerated persons) through its ReEntry

Entrepreneurship Program (REEP). And through REEP, we've come to understand that no longer is it enough to have returning citizens working in menial, dead-end jobs, that offer no real



prospects for self-sufficiency, career development and wealth-creation. Instead, what is needed is 21st Century workforce development for this population, one that marries on-trend skills training, along with entrepreneurship. We call it – LEARN/EARN/BUILD. With this model, participants can receive accelerated training, an opportunity to apprentice and then build either a job for themselves as solopreneurs, if ambitious enough - a scalable venture, or a new career with 2nd chance employers. We see this model as a direct counterpoint to getting a job with no future, for folks for whom getting even a dead-end job can be next to impossible.

Prior to COVID-19, we imagined returning citizens playing an important role at the vanguard of addressing the City's digital divide - a gap that has only been exacerbated during the pandemic.

With some agility, we were able to shift from entrepreneurial to workforce programming. And then in July came the glimmer of a silver lining, when the United Way of the Central Carolinas awarded CSL with CARES ACT funding to support an effort to design and develop training for the deployment of returning citizens as digital navigators

(troubleshooters and basic helpdesk



support). With added CARES funding from the City of Charlotte as part of the Workforce Partner Support Grants program, CSL has been able to train and pay a cohort of justice-involved persons in these navigator roles. They are working in a customer service/support

function with three area projects: the Mecklenburg County Library's [MeckTech project](#), which won the [Urban Library Council's 2020 Digital Citizenship Top Innovator Award](#), [E2D's](#) distribution of computers to families with school-age children, and with the County's Reentry Services residences. We are also partnering with [Digital Charlotte's](#) effort to stand up a citywide Digital Navigators program.

Another project that CSL engaged returning citizens in is with [Access Charlotte](#), where public wifi is being installed in locations and communities throughout the city. We have several technicians who are working as installers with [Open Broadband](#) on this wireless internet initiative.

In the Fall, we also piloted an Entrepreneurs Bootcamp for adult men in the Mecklenburg County Jail and are on tap to conduct several of these sessions in 2021.

More glimmers of the silver lining came with a capacity-building grant from the Reemprise Fund, through the Foundation of the Carolinas. Their support has been helpful in allowing CSL to renew its [Board of Directors](#) for 2021, as well as pursue the implementation of specific elements of our strategic plan.

And yet another glimmer has been the announcement that City Startup Labs was one of eight African American led entrepreneurial support organizations throughout North Carolina, to receive the [NC Idea Foundation's Elevate Black Entrepreneurship in North Carolina Award](#).



Yes, 2020 has tried us all in many ways and going into 2021 the challenges will continue, but as this bad dream recedes, other glimmers of silver will be exposed and they will allow us to see the blessing that is the human spirit.

What a year indeed!

Be well and stay safe during the Holidays



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Our mailing address is:
City Startup Labs (CSL)
9319 Robert D. Snyder Rd.
PORTAL Building - Suite 252
Charlotte, NC 28223

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