

City Startup Labs – Beyond the Escape Room: Discovering True Impact



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***“If they don’t give you
a **seat at the table**,
bring a folding chair.”***

- Shirley Chisholm



Join us in commemorating a decade of transformative impact as City Startup Labs embarks on its REEP cohort journey at Central Piedmont Community College. From innovative problem-solving in escape rooms to honoring the indelible legacy of Women's History Month, we pay homage to our roots, celebrate our achievements, and shine a spotlight on the inspiring women who have shaped our journey towards social justice and entrepreneurship.

HONORING WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH AND A LEGACY OF ADVOCACY

In celebration of Women's History Month, I really didn't have to dig any further than in my own back yard.

I have often reflected on how it is that I came to this work – the business of City Startup Labs. In part, it was due to the connections with Black media entrepreneurs - some known, others more obscure. And, of course, it had something to do with my association with the Black Power movement back in the day. But then it dawned on me that a formidable connection directly back to my ancestors, who had been slaves, all the way forward to the people that we touch today, is **my Great Grandmother Ella Barksdale Brown**.



While I'm lucky to have remembered her, I didn't really know just how amazing a woman she was until well into my adulthood. My true discovery about Ella started with this photo (below), one that my maternal grandmother, Marcia (Ella's first born) shared with me. You see, Ella Barksdale was in the first graduating class in 1887 of The Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary, which went on to become Spelman Seminary (now Spelman College).



She was born to former slaves, Jefferson Barksdale and Julia Lamar Barksdale in Milledgeville, Georgia on June 22, 1871. She married John Marcus Brown (1872-1952) in 1898. John had been a student at Tuskegee Institute, also in the 1880's. Before they moved to Jersey City, New Jersey in 1901, John operated a broom factory in Macon, GA. John went on to work as a porter for the Pullman Company. Both John and Ella were early supporters of the union, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, when it was founded in 1925 by A. Phillip Randolph.

While in Jersey City, Ella went on to become an educator, where she spoke to many schools and community organizations on the subject of Negro history, including lectures entitled *Negro Folklore and Music*, *Negro Industry*, and *Negro Education*, and she's credited with introducing the study of Negro history to Jersey City public schools. Ella was also a journalist who wrote for several newspapers including The Jersey City Journal, The New York Age, The Chicago Defender and The New York Amsterdam News. In the column that she wrote for the Journal, she advanced health news provided by the American Red Cross and Jersey City Woman's Club during the global influenza pandemic that ravaged Hudson County between 1918-1920. She also used her journalism career to advocate for an end to lynchings, which were a constant terror to Black people during the late 19th and 20th Centuries.

She is also credited with persuading the New Jersey Federation to designate March 5th as Crispus Attucks Day in New Jersey. At the December 7, 1918, meeting of the Federation of Colored Organizations, she proposed that a statue be erected to honor black heroes of WWI and "stand as a silent plea for justice to the Negro." Through her work with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Circle for Negro War Relief, the New Jersey Civil Rights Bureau and the National Association of Colored Women, she interacted with important national civil rights leaders including, Mary Talbert, W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Paul Robeson and James Weldon Johnson. Robeson became a life-long friend of the family.

From 1916, Ella was an active member of the New Jersey Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (NJFCWC) which became a branch of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Its mottos were "Lifting as We Climb" and "Work and Serve the Hour" which aligned with their focus on *uplifting the race*. It was through her affiliation with these organizations that she became an ardent suffragist and who ended up becoming the first woman appointed to the Hudson County Board of Electors.

The pioneer, activist, suffragist, journalist, and educator Ella Barksdale Brown passed away at the age of 95 in 1966. Her [papers](#) are at Yale

University's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.



HERE'S TO ANOTHER DECADE OF BOUNDLESS POSSIBILITIES.



City Startup Labs' 1st Class - 2014 Pitch Event

All throughout the year, we will continue to acknowledge and celebrate our **10th anniversary** – a decade of unwavering commitment to the development of the capacity and talent of young Black men, millennials and returning citizens as a new class of entrepreneurs and value-added employees.

While it would be easy to quantify our impact with the usual metrics – *classes held, completion rates, hours of consultation, businesses incubated, and workforce primed* – but the real value is with the people we touch. The pride resonating within families, the meaningful contributions to households and communities, and the triumph of newfound independence – these are the ripples of change that transcend statistics. We remain humbled, having journeyed alongside every participant as they strove to make their dreams a reality.



Ever get the feeling you're trapped in a problem with no escape? Us too. That's why our inaugural REEP cohort at our new hub nestled at Central Piedmont Community College, kicked things off at a local escape room - Exit Strategy – a mind-bending metaphor for the entrepreneurial journey. Just like escape room puzzles, starting a new business requires resourcefulness, out-of-the-box thinking, and a relentless pursuit of problem-solving. While challenged in finding their own escapes, all the participants rose to the challenge, proving that success often hides in the most unexpected places.

The escape room, like entrepreneurship, compels us to navigate an array of obstacles in search of solutions, while activating ingenuity, teamwork, and resourcefulness. Their pursuit of unlocking solutions from the unlikeliest of possibilities was a great way of getting the ball rolling for this latest REEP Class.



With gratitude,

Henry Rock



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