

'Chicago can be that city that opens doors for all its young people'

LINK Unlimited Scholars CEO Jonathan Swain talks about his organization's work to advance the lives of young Black students in partnership with some top firms

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Chicago Comes Back is a weekly series on ChicagoBusiness.com providing leadership insights to help your business move forward, written by leadership consultants Emily Drake and Todd Connor. Drake and Connor facilitate Crain's Leadership Academy. Drake is a licensed therapist, owner of the Collective Academy and a leadership coach. Connor is the founder of Bunker Labs and the Collective Academy and is also a leadership consultant.

As we explore how Chicago Comes Back each week, we wanted to turn our attention to partnerships and investments being made in initiatives and communities across the city, to build back differently and better. While there is a renewed sense of awareness for many people and groups, organizations like LINK Unlimited Scholars have been doing work to advance equity for Black youth for decades. We connected with President and CEO Jonathan Swain, himself an alumnus of LINK Unlimited, to talk about how he sees opportunity in this moment.

TODD CONNOR: Jonathan, thanks for spending time with us. You are a lifelong South Sider and have been working to advance the lives of young Black students with a proven model that propels them to college and beyond. **You've also just announced some major investments through your partnerships with Kirkland & Ellis and Mesirow to double the size of next year's class.** What's your sense of the opportunity now for LINK?

JONATHAN SWAIN: The question "Why LINK?" is really a question of opportunity. The kids we serve are awesome. And they're no different than any kid anywhere else in the world. Except, in many cases, when it comes to access to opportunity, either because of their zip code or the limits on them socioeconomically. So, what LINK tries to do is to match the talent and potential of our young people to as wide an array of opportunities as possible through college and beyond. It's not just about these young kids. It's also about their families, and us as a society.

TC: When we connected with Carl Davis, vice president and head of diversity and inclusion, as well as corporate recruitment, at Mesirow, he



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framed their investment in your organization less in charitable terms and instead that LINK is "a strategic partner in Mesirow's ongoing work to advance diversity, equity and inclusion not only at the firm and within our industry, but also in terms of creating equitable opportunities for youth in our communities."

Joi Bourgeois, global director of diversity and inclusion at Kirkland & Ellis, said partnering with LINK is about "developing and sponsoring the next generation of diverse leaders within our law firm, the legal profession and our wider communities, (which) is a strategic priority for Kirkland." Jonathan, is this a tipping point moment in terms of how companies are stepping up to do work in the communities? That this conversation has moved from simply being about charitable giving toward a more strategic view of investment?

JS: A lot of support that's going into programs like ours that are serving the African American community are a direct response to the death of George Floyd, and what I've noticed in terms of a lot of corporate support since that time is that a lot of folks are looking to find ways to have a deeper impact and do deeper dives with organizations on the ground to really make sustainable change. We are seeing that with companies and partners recognizing an opportunity right here in our city for talent. I think it's important for us in the city to recognize the boundaries of our neighborhoods are lines that we have drawn.

They are arbitrary. It does not mean we can't cross them. We're a city of neighborhoods and that's really great that we have a love for our neighborhoods. But I think we have to recognize that we're really one city and to really appreciate the totality of the city that we live in.

EMILY DRAKE: You are both a product of this work and are now leading this work. How do you think about success? And what's your vision, not just for LINK, but for kids and our city as well?

JS: I think there's a couple of ways we measure success. One measure is kids graduating high school, being accepted to college and finishing college in four years. That's the baseline of success that we'll see ultimately in eight years or so when this initial partnership is at its fruition. But beyond that, hopefully, what the young people will find is a broader perspective of folks who are willing to advocate for them. And not necessarily just in those particular firms, because everyone's not going to be a lawyer or financial professional. But people who are willing to advocate for them when it comes to opportunity and resources. Think about all of our lives. We can all point to someone who opened a door for us. It can be any type of person, but someone opened a door for us. And every one of us can open a door. Chicago can be that city that opens doors and gives special consideration for all of its young people.