

Alyson Powell Key

The following interview is conducted as part of the Georgia Institute of Technology's Everyday Georgia interview project. Today is July 20. First the interview is taking place in Vine City. The interviewer is Alyson Powell Key. The interviewee is Bashel Lewis. Um, he is a student and community activist. Thank you for participating in this project. No problem. Of course. Okay. The first question is, can you talk about where you were born and where you grew up?

Bashel Lewis

Yeah, so I was born here in Vine City in English Avenue community. Um, so Dr. Martin Luther King literally stayed down the street and I went to the first ever African American high school in Georgia, which is Booker T Washington High School and I'm a fourth generation resident. So my great grandmother, my grandmother and mother all attended the same high school as we.

Alyson Powell Key

And can you please talk about your education and career experiences?

Bashel Lewis

Yeah. So, um, I went to Bethune Elementary School, um, and then I went to Kennedy Middle and then went to Booker T. Washington High School. And my family pretty much did the same exact thing, but when I got to high school I kind of started to notice the lack of resources and the disadvantage that I was at. And so from that I kind of used my obstacles as a way to advocate for others and myself. So I noticed that we're trying to build community and I'm not just my baby sister is now going to high school. So I'm advocating not just for myself but for like my success of generations. So, um, yeah, should I follow up question to talk,

Alyson Powell Key

Just go more into more into depth in that.

Bashel Lewis

Got that. Okay. So, um, so there's a lot of development happening right now and with development comes change and let's just be real displacement. And so, um, can be middle school is now closed down and within middle school is now closed down causing brown middle school to be over capacitated. So a lot of students are in one classroom and as you know, like that's not a productive learning environment, especially when you have little resources. And so, um, that really gets to me a lot because I think that it was already hard for me even in like a 13 to 1 student to teacher ratio to learn. So for students to be an almost 20 to 1, I can almost like see the struggle and so, um, I would go to a lot of the community meetings and a lot of the board meetings and advocate as a student saying, hey, we should not close this early college

program down because students need early access to college and letting them know that it's okay to go. Um, and I think that from that point in my life at high school and advocating, people started to take me seriously because they saw that I wasn't just like getting prompted from another adult, like I was doing this because I want it to. So yeah.

Alyson Powell Key

Alright. Um, let's talk about your interests or hobbies.

Bashel Lewis

So some of my interests. Um, so let's see. Well first I'm a personal lifestyle blogger, so I have a fashion blog. I was the first person in my family to leave the country and own a passport last year. So at the age of 19 I was able to study in London and then I traveled to six different countries and so I created that blog so that people from my community could see that, like, this is something that you can do because I did it too and if you need help, like this could be your portal to helping you. So I currently attend college in California at Pitzer College and um, that's provided me with a lot of opportunities, but outside of personal lifestyle blogging, um, I'm a part of the West Side Atlanta Land Trust, which is a grassroots organization whose main mission is to use the communities power for self-determination. So we want to create a permanently affordable housing for the, um, indigenous residents that were here before all of the newly developed home.

Alyson Powell Key

Okay. Um, can you talk about a significant person or event which influenced who you are today?

Bashel Lewis

A significant person or influenced who I am today. Wow. Wow. Wow. I think a significant moment in my life was when I, um, so we have something called Mr. and Mrs. Washington at my high school and um, my grandmother wants to get my grandmother and my mother all went to this high school so I know one in my family had ever like run for Mr. Washington or Ms. Washington and so I decided to do and I was super nervous because I'm, I'm queer and I'm black and I'm not like the, just what people are used to like the popular kid in high school. So, um, my family supported me through running for that because it's not just a title, it's like you're respected amongst the entire community. So I was invited to like events with the mayor. I was invited to dinners with some of the college students at the time. And so, um, I ran for it and I won. So that was very significant because then I think people started to see me like as, I don't know, like a community leader and an activist because that's what I want to be in. That's, that's who I am. It is Bashel, right.

Alyson Powell Key

So what are your plans after school, after college, graduate?

Bashel Lewis Um, so right now I'm interning with the Nielsen Company. I don't know how familiar you are with the Nielsen Company. So we're a data analytics company. I'm in, I'm working on their Coca Cola account. Um, so I'm actually working at the Coca Cola headquarters. My dreams are to work in brand management or um

Alyson Powell Key hmm.

Bashel Lewis Or as a social media influencer really. So, and I know that's like so saturated now, but I definitely want to do that and still be a community leader and still come back and mentor people and be here and make sure that this affluent African American neighborhood, well, once it was affluent can still thrive. Like with or without me.

Alyson Powell Key What do you think that looks like? What do you think a thriving community looks like?

Bashel Lewis Well, I'm going to be specific and say a thriving African American African American neighborhood looks like. Yeah, I think that it's where people are in affordable housing. Um, there are resources here. So we are known to have a food desert, like you have to walk a certain amount of miles just to get food and sometimes the food isn't as affordable and you have to carry back the groceries because. So I think that, uh, an accessible community, I think that's very important, so accessible in the fact like physically and also resource wise, I think that um, people being able to have opportunities as far as like jobs and also like financial literacy because that's important. Um, and I think that education, like having our schools back in our district and kids not having to go across town just to attend a school. Right. Yeah. So I think that's what, that's the start of it. I know there's so many more factors in it.

Alyson Powell Key Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Well that kind of transitioned more into the Georgia Tech related related questions. Um, can you talk about how you initially became involved with Georgia Tech?

Bashel Lewis Yes. So I became involved with Georgia Tech because with the Westside Atlanta Land Trust, we want it to find a way to track all the houses in the city and the English Avenue community in their conditions because the city said that. So in the English Avenue invited the community, let's just say, because I don't know the accurate number there, 7,000 houses. The city said, well, only 2000 are vacant and abandoned or empty. And we said, no, it's not. No, I want to say something else, but I don't know how filtered I can be, but no, it's definitely not. So um, we

partnered with Georgia Tech to find a way that the community can take action and hold the city accountable for what they're getting paid to do. Right. So, um, Georgia Tech helped us develop, um, develop an APP. I'm on Arc GIS, so we also work with their mapping people and it was an app and we can go in and we would literally in the summer we had 13 interns from ages 16 to 20. And we went to every single house in Vine City and English Avenue and put in this house is vacant, this house is abandoned, this house is fire damaged. And then we can take a picture like if a stop sign was broken or the fire hydrant was broken and it would go straight to the city and then we can say, hey, we put in a report on this date, you still haven't followed up what's going on. So that was one moment where I felt like Georgia Tech helped me as a, as a younger person, get the instant gratification of activism because I know that generation z and millennials we're all about now now. But Georgia Tech really helped bridge that gap. So I'm very appreciative for that.

Alyson Powell Key

Do you have any sense of how many houses you were able to track?

Bashel Lewis

Are we tracked all, all of us in English Avenue. So I want to say I am so not getting an accurate count, but probably 7,000. So yeah, I'm. Amanda will probably be able to tell you. So yeah, we tracked all of them and we didn't just track houses, we tracked a lot to track parks because we want to update a map because keep in mind people are getting paid to do this right. And they're in their cars through their window just saying, oh that's fake, but we are in the community so we can walk up to the house and say, excuse me, you know, how are you. And then also we will also report like if something was wrong with the house, so the elderly person is living in and we would say, oh, what needs to like, what needs to work in your house? And we would write it down in the notes. So I think that the city could have done a better job at partnering with us or something like that.

Alyson Powell Key

Do you know if the city has utilized any of the information that you have been able to provide, you and Georgia Tech have been able to provide?

Bashel Lewis

No, I don't think they've used any other information besides our reports. When we say something it's like broken up. So yeah.

Alyson Powell Key

Um, what is. Talk more about what does it mean to give back to your community and you know, talk more about that.

Bashel Lewis

Yes. What it means to give more back to my community. So in the words of my grandmother, she would, when I got to California, um, I was talking on the phone with her and she would always say, you need to humble yourself, Sarah, because you forgot where you came from. So I literally would keep that in mind. Everything that I'm doing, I'm like, okay, this is great. I'm traveling the world. This is great. I'm getting recognized for this. This is great. But you need to humble yourself and remember where you came from. Vine City. Um, so I think that's, that's what giving back to my community means to me, it's like always remembering what made me who I am. Because while I was in it, I did feel a lot of things depressed. I felt inside. I felt like I wasn't value but stepping away and looking at the forest from the sky, it was like, wow, this is what made me who I am and this is what value I add to this community. Right. So I think that's why it's so important to me.

Alyson Powell Key

Okay. Um, are there any other experiences that you'd like to share? Any other experiences? Um, any particular, like personally or just your community work, anything like that?

Bashel Lewis

I think that, um, I know that for me working at like as a young person and being here it, it can get very disheartening sometimes. I think that I'm 20 years old now and I'm talking like I'm 30 but I'm 20. So, um, you know, I always say that the youth makes up 25 percent of the nation right now, but we're 100 percent of the future, 100 percent of the future. So when I'm advocating on Twitter, when I'm in the community going to meetings and people like take me as a joke or they don't take me as serious, it frustrates me because I'm like, wow, like when are they going to recognize it? Like I'm the future and this is what I want, like you can't think about the future when you're on your death bed, like you have to think about it now. And so it really frustrates me. And um, I think that my experiences, I think if anybody can take something from this is to like listen to the young people what they want and teach them at a young age that it's okay to vocalize your voice because in school they will always be like a facial, sit down, you're talking too much. But it's like, no, like I have something to say, please do not mute me. My, my emotions are valid, my thoughts are valid, like call me out if I'm wrong. But like I think that's so important and I wish that there were better ways to connect the community with the EU, then people to reach back out because even being 20, I'm trying my best to mentor people and tell them about the scholarship that I got or even start a scholarship. So I think that's like one thing, one thing

Alyson Powell Key

That's all the questions I have. Thank you very much. No, thank you for participating in the everyday Georgia interview project and sharing your story with us.

Bashel Lewis

Of course. Thank you so much.