

VOYAGE DENVER'S INSPIRING PEOPLE FEATURE



Today we'd like to introduce you to Dedrick Sims.

Dedrick, let's start with your story. We'd love to hear how you got started and how the journey has been so far.

I started in education as a substitute teacher when I completed my military service as an Army officer. Before my military service, while in college, I used to tutor upperclassmen in a variety of subjects. Teaching was something that always came natural to me. I really enjoyed seeing people "get it." After I completed my military service, I moved to Mobile, Alabama, to start by graduate program. While in school, I started teaching Biology, Anatomy & Physiology, and Chemistry at Williamson High School. I served students in the classroom for seven years before I took a one-year hiatus to work for Aventis Pharmaceuticals in some of the rural parts Alabama. After becoming disgusted with how some of the physicians were taking advantage of the lack of education and access to quality healthcare of people of color in those rural areas, I vowed that I would go back to the education field and work relentlessly to educate young people of color on how they learn, how to access information, and how to think critically and reflectively about socio-political issues in their communities.

I eventually moved into roles that carried more responsibility (administrative) and gave me opportunities for greater impact with not only students and their families, but also my fellow educators. At their request, I started to work with other educators on increasing their capacity to work with students of color, particularly young men and boys of color. So much so that I started my first consulting group, Zen Educational Consulting, to work with other schools and their staff on equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives. It was during this time

that I wrote my first two books, *Hardwired by Nature: What We As Educators Underestimate About Our Minority Students* and *The Dedrick Sims Reader*. Our *Hardwired by Nature: School/Program Design Through an Equity Lens* is foundationally based on that book. Over the years, I have been able to expand the content and create seven comprehensive workshops that focus on equity and inclusion. We currently conduct these workshops around the country and have impacted thousands of educators and other professionals working with students of color, with an emphasis on young men and boys of color.

Eventually, my frustration with the lack of urgency and sometimes ingenious efforts of traditional education, towards the improvement of education access and outcomes for students of color led me to move to Denver and start my own charter school for young men. The school, the Sims-Fayola International Academy, was approved in the fall of 2011 and opened in the fall of 2012 with 125 young men. Unfortunately, the school closed in 2015 due to a number of complex issues. However, because of the success and challenges of the Sims-Fayola International Academy effort, I have been able to assist other aspiring charter groups around the county to navigate the charter school development process as well as leaders of traditional schools in restructuring the learning experiences they were providing for the students they served, to include one in my hometown of Pine Bluff, AR. This now makes up the School Support pillar of the Sims-Fayola Foundation. We are currently working on charter school projects in Michigan and Texas.

The vision of the Sims-Fayola Foundation was always an intention of mine, but with a different mission than it has now. The original vision of the Sims-Fayola Foundation was to serve as a fundraising and research entity for the Sims-Fayola International Academies, but after the closing of the first school, I decided to take what were the best parts of the school and share this knowledge and experience to other educators who wanted to improve their capacity to work with young men and boys of color through our foundation programs. This eventually led us being asked by professionals outside of education, who work with students of color, to seek our support in their work. As of August 2019, our foundation has impacted over 10,000 young men and boys of color, delivered equity workshops to over 2,500 educators, mentors, non-profit leaders, law enforcement and school resource officers, and parents.

Great, so let's dig a little deeper into the story – has it been an easy path overall and if not, what were the challenges you've had to overcome?

I had the unfortunate experience of having a school I started close. That was heart-wrenching to watch because of how it impacted the young men, families, and teachers who believed in our mission. I was told long ago by a very wise mentor that “when you shoot for large goals like you have Dedrick, you will undoubtedly experience failures and shortfalls. But with big goals comes big risks. You have to learn to push through the setbacks and challenges and stay true to your moral compass.” That turned out to be very true. The school closure is just one of the biggest challenges I've had, but there have definitely been many smaller ones that have really tested my resolve to ensure equitable learning experiences and access to students of color, particularly young men and boys of color.

Sims-Fayola Foundation – what should we know? What do you guys do best? What sets you apart from the competition?

I founded the Sims-Fayola Foundation (SFF) in 2014. Recognizing the complex challenges facing young men and boys of color, SFF aims to fill a significant need in many urban areas focusing initially on Metro Denver: developing a comprehensive strategy to change young men and boys of color's life trajectories and address barriers inhibiting their success. SFF's early stages focused on developing vision and strategy, developing and delivering programming in schools, and developing and providing equity workshops for educators and advocates working with young men and boys of color grounded in the foundation's three pillars: Building Awareness, Building Capacity, and School Design and Support. In our brief history, we have established a diverse board of directors, formalized collaborative relationships with numerous significant community partners, developed and implemented evidence-informed programming, held educational and community-building events, and leveraged website and social media tools to promote our initiatives and raise awareness. Some of our community partnerships and supporters have been with Operation Hope, Denver Center of Performing Arts, Denver Foundation, Rose Community Foundation, U.S. Bank, The University of Colorado at Denver, Caldwell Bank, the City and County of Denver's My Brothers Keepers Initiative, KPMG, Denver Science and Nature Museum, and the Black Child Development Institute among others. SFF's work is shared across three pillars that support its mission and vision: Building Awareness, Building Capacity, and School Design. The overarching goal of our Building Capacity programs is to build capacity in young

men and boys of color to make their futures look like their dreams and to build the capacity of those who work with them to create learning environments that are designed through an equity lens that are also considerate of their natural strengths, gifting, culture, and brilliance. Additionally, the SFF serves as a thought partner with school districts to help them address challenges and provide solutions for working with students of color in general.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROGRAMS

The Boys are Talking Forum – Our annual Boys Are Talking Forum is designed to give these young men a voice for planners to consider when designing initiatives. The Forum provides a platform for the young men to share and describe the impact of the initiatives that have helped them reach their goals and achieve success, as well as those structures that have hindered them. Empowered Ambition Youth Development Program (EAYD) – Over 22 modules, the overarching goal of our EAYD Program is to assist young men and boys of color, in grades 4-12, increase their capacity to be better stewards of their choices, careers, and ultimately their lives, while developing into positive, culturally aware, and emotionally healthy role models.

STARS Mentoring Program – The Sims-Fayola Foundation partners with FRIENDS FIRST to offer our young men the peer-to-peer mentoring through the STARS Mentoring Program. This year-long program offers students a coordinated mentoring program that creates the opportunity for relationships to be built with positive role models.

Sims-Fayola Foundation Equity Academy – The Sims-Fayola Foundation Equity Academy (SFFEA) is designed to increase the capacity of educators and advocates to deliver a quality learning experience for students of color and building authentic relationships through an equity lens by engaging them in the deep soul-searching work of understanding their own racial and equity disposition.

Working with Boys of Color Workshop Series – During these capacity-building workshops, participants focus on increasing their understanding of working with young men and boys of color.

Hardwired by Nature: School Design Through an Equity Lens – This hard-hitting and highly active and engaging workshop is designed to increase educators'

awareness of achievement, fairness and opportunities (“Educational Equity”) in the learning experiences of students of color. During this workshop, educators take a deeper look at systemic inequalities, traditional educator dispositions about students of color, and community systems that impact the educational outcomes of students of color.

Connecting with Your Sons Parent Workshop Series – Connecting with your sons is a series of workshops that help parents learn more about the uniqueness of their boys.

What makes us unique is our hyper-focus on improving the life outcomes of young men and boys of color, by not only working directly with the young men but anyone who works with them as well.

What moment in your career do you look back most fondly on?

Just as there have been many struggles, I also have many proud moments. The starting of the Sims-Fayola International Academy, helping others to start a school, the writing of three books, the founding and success of the Sims-Fayola Foundation, being able to provide scholarships to young men for the past three years, and continuing to be a “go-to” guide for a multitude of educators and non-educators around the country to name a few. I’d also like to add that I’m super proud of my newest book, “Hey Man, We Just Talkin’: Daily Conversations With Young Men,” being released June 15th. This is an AMAZING book written directly to young men. It’s like a mentor in a book! HEY MAN, We Just Talkin’ is a daily reader written for young men from 10-21 years old. This daily reader contains 21 passages of encouraging words that are designed to not only encourage, but to also challenge their assumptions about their maleness and what being a man is all about. It covers topics such as education, love, money, responsibility, grit, relationships, respect, faith, death, and many other topics from the male perspective.

The passages also includes reactions from other men on the topics and how the topic has played out in their lives as men. It’s meant to be a quick read that could be used to start the day, be a mid-day encourager, or a way to end the day in reflection and growth. This book can be used by schools, mentors, parents, or groups that focus on young men as a supplement to the work you are already doing. It can also be given as a gift to a young man. This book is not meant to diminish the role of hard-working and self-sacrificing women by any means. It’s

simply meant to highlight, for young men, the important role they should and eventually play in the lives of their families and their communities as men. However, the proudest kind of moment is always seeing a young man we have engaged with go on to do great things at all levels of his life and contribute some of that success to the impact I or my organization had.