

LCLD Alumni Spotlight: A Q&A with Kevin Gooch Chairman of the 100 Black Men of Atlanta Inc.



Kevin Gooch is a Partner with Holland & Knight LLP and handles a wide array of corporate transactions. Over the course of his career, he has developed an in-depth expertise in representing financial institutions, corporate borrowers, and private equity funds in complex finance and restructuring transactions as well as representing emerging growth companies in corporate governance and venture capital transactions. Kevin has received seven “40 Under 40” Awards from organizations like the American Bar Association and Atlanta Business Chronicle. He has participated in Leadership Atlanta, Leadership Georgia and many other leadership development programs. He was recently recognized as one of Atlanta’s “500 Most Powerful Leaders”. Kevin currently serves as the Chairman of the Board of the 100 Black Men of Atlanta, Inc. [100 BMOA], a 35 year old mentoring organization focused on mentoring vulnerable youth in the Atlanta area, and we asked Kevin to tell us about his role and how he got involved with this organization.

What is the 100 BMOA and its mission?

The mission of the 100 Black Men of Atlanta is to improve the quality of life by supporting and enhancing educational and economic opportunities particularly for African-American youth in the Atlanta community. The 100 Black Men of Atlanta is a collection of African American men that came together to make a difference in the Atlanta area by providing hope and inspiration to vulnerable communities. “If not us, then who?”

The organization has provided more than \$1,000,000 of tuition assistance to deserving young people in its illustrious history. In addition to tuition assistance, the organization provides mentoring and character development programming to help young people, men and women, navigate their academic journey through high school and college. More recently, the organization has taken it a step further with a focus on helping young people in the Collegiate 100 to develop the skills necessary to be successful in the workplace and arrange for internship opportunities through its Career Pipeline Program. Another aspect of the programming provided by the organization is its nationally-acclaimed 100 Robotics Alliance, which is a partnership with First Robotics and Dr. Lonnie Johnson (the NASA Scientist that invented the Super Soaker), designed to expose young people to careers in STEM through robotics competitions.

How did you get involved with this organization, and what was your path to Chairman of the Board?

I became a member of the first class of the Emerging 100 of Atlanta. It is a young professionals auxiliary of the 100 Black Men of Atlanta, Inc. After serving the Emerging 100 of Atlanta for 2 years, I decided to pursue a leadership position and won the election to be the President of the Emerging 100 of Atlanta. When I took over the organization, it had \$500 in the bank and several disgruntled members. After serving at the helm for 2 years with my executive board, the organization grew exponentially in number and financially. We re-centered the organization around our mission of helping young people and doubled-down on our relationship with students at BEST Academy High School. My last official act was the Emerging Leaders Awards, created on my watch, where we awarded \$30,000 in scholarships to deserving high school and college students in the

Atlanta area. This event brought the total tuition assistance provided by the Emerging 100 of Atlanta during my 2 year term to nearly \$50,000 (from \$500 in the bank when I took over). After the 100 Black Men of Atlanta saw the success that we had with the Emerging 100 of Atlanta, they invited me to join the 100 Black Men of Atlanta. I took on a role as a member of the board of directors. Eventually, I was asked to run for Chairman of the Board of the 100 Black Men of Atlanta to breathe new life and fresh perspective to an organization that had existed for roughly 30 years at the time.

What are some of the initiatives/programs of the organization? How does the organization serve the needs of its community?

At our core, we are a mentoring organization. “What they see is what they’ll be”. We look to inspire our young people to think outside of the limitations of their direct life experience to strive for greatness that they haven’t imagined yet in life. We provide supplemental learning in math and English through our Saturday school, along with character development and life skills training to our students. Our goal is to assist them in navigating life’s challenges as they matriculate through high school and then provide them tuition assistance to get into the college of their choice. While in college, we continue to support them along their academic journey as well as work with them on career readiness, so they’ll be ready for their careers after graduation. Our Career Pipeline program takes students through a rigorous 10-week training program to develop and enhance the soft skills that employer are seeking in their future workforce. Our ultimate goal is to connect students that have gone through our Career Pipeline program with internship opportunities that pave a path to well-paid, full-time employment.

The final piece of our core programming is our 100 Robotics Alliance. We have partnered with First Robotics and Dr. Lonnie Johnson (the NASA Scientist that invented the Super Soaker) to expose youth to careers in STEM through robotics competitions. To quote the founder of First Robotics, “many people think we are using young people to build robots, but we are really using robots to build young people.” Our program introduce them to the nuts and bolts of robotics, but we also encourage presentation skills, analytical skills, conflict resolution, team work and many other skills that will benefit them in the long-run. Once the pandemic hit and shutdown our in-person activities, we took all of our programming virtual where we actually had more participation than our in-person programming. In addition to all of our virtual mentoring sessions, Saturday schools, college tours, robotics sessions and other community programming around social justice and mental health, we shifted some of our dollars to supporting the community through food drives and clothing drives as a result of the incredible need in the communities that we serve. It’s been a busy couple of years.

What has been the most challenging aspect of your role so far?

The most challenging aspects of my role has been fundraising during a pandemic and sharing the story of all of the great work that we do in the community. The pandemic caused our organization to cancel three of our four fundraisers in 2020. As a result, we had to tighten our belts to continue delivering on our promise to our young people in more efficient ways. Our leadership, team and members really got innovative and creative to actually deliver more programming and services to the communities that we serve without having to cut any team members in 2020. I tip my cap to every member of our team in the office as well as our leadership, board of directors and members for being so fluid and flexible during a very challenging time. We do still need help and support of individuals to continue delivering our services to our young people and, ultimately, expanding those services to connect with more people in vulnerable communities. The other challenge is that people’s attention can be more fragmented today, so it can be a challenge connecting

with people to effectively and consistently tell our story. Our goal is to do a better job telling our story to connect with individual donors that want to support the work of the 100 Black Men of Atlanta (as well as other chapters across the country).

What has been the most rewarding aspect of your role so far?

Changing lives. We really and truly change lives. Time and time again, I've been greeted by families in tears thanking our organization for the work that we do in the community. We've had young people tell us directly that they would not be where they are without our work and guidance. To see a young person that we worked with in high school to overcome immense challenges that would have brought adults to their knees like the death of a parent, yet make it to graduate from law school, is a feeling that is hard to match. When we provide the tuition-assistance to allow a young person to realize the dream of attending their college of choice, it makes all of the work worth it. When we receive a text message or email from a student thanking us for being their when they suffered the death of a sibling or we connected them with an internship opportunity or we opened their eyes to a career path they never knew existed, it's a feeling that is unparalleled.

During my two years as Chairman of this organization, will have provided more than \$325,000 in tuition assistance in addition to more than \$1,000,000 that has gone back into the community through programming and other initiatives. When you add those dollars to the sweat, equity, and time spent in the community by our members and supporters mentoring young people and sharing social capital and advice, we are making transformational change in our community, which is incredibly rewarding.

If someone would like to get involved with the organization, how can they do so?

You may visit [our website](#) to support our work with young people and mission. The best way to get involved is to find a chapter in your local community. There are nearly 100 chapters of the 100 Black Men across this nation. Once you find a chapter, connect with them on social media to find ways to plug in. If you can't locate your chapter on social media, please don't hesitate to just call the chapter or call the national office of 100 Black Men of America to find a way to get engaged. Our community needs us now, more than ever. Your presence is too important to sit on the sidelines. We would be happy to help you get engaged in the Atlanta chapter or connect you with other chapters.

What advice do you have for others who would like to take leadership roles in similar organizations?

Do it. Go lead. Let's be honest, leadership is tough. I truly believe that it's the willingness to fail publicly without any cover. It takes guts and courage, but it is well worth it. When you have the power to create generational change, it's worth the headache and stress. We all grow to be better people by leading. Most importantly, we all have the opportunity to help and grow other leaders when we're willing to lead. The folks reading this article are talented beyond measure. The world needs to benefit from those talents outside of your place of employment. We all have the power to make a difference in this community that we share as inhabitants of this planet that we call Earth. Use that power! If it seems daunting or you're concerned about the impact that you can make, just focus on the difference in your sphere of influence. If we all do that, we will, collectively, make this world a better place. In closing, "service is the rent that we pay for being. It is the very purpose of life, and not something you do in your spare time." - Marian Wright Edelman