



During Black History Month, Starbucks partners share what inspires them to keep going

By Michael Ko · January 29, 2021 · 11 min read

SHARE



in





This Black History Month, Starbucks is proud to elevate the voices of our Black partners, who share how they've been motivated by family, faith and entrepreneurship.

During this past year, amidst truly divisive times, we've seen passion and action for change. On a day-to-day basis – and for the long term – how do we stay positive and keep moving forward together? This Black History Month, Starbucks is proud to elevate the voices of three of our Black partners, who share how they've been inspired by family, faith and entrepreneurship.

- *Akeisha, Illinois: Parenting in the midst of change*
- *Tammy, Alabama: 'My pain truly had a purpose'*
- *Orville, Brooklyn, New York: 'We can still conquer our dreams'*

Read on to learn their stories.



Akeisha, Illinois: Parenting in the midst of change



Akeisha and her daughters at a Breonna Taylor memorial in Illinois.

Photos by Taylor Glascock

Raising kids in the best of times is hard enough. But how does that job change when you have to add the extra demands of working in retail during a global pandemic? When you have four daughters who are Black and becoming more and more aware of the divisive world around them? When you're married to a police officer during a landmark year of social tension and unrest?

How do you keep going as a parent?

Akeisha, 44, a Starbucks district manager in Illinois, contemplates the emotional, exhausting roller coaster that she and her family have been on this past year. And there's only one conclusion she can reach.

"I don't have a choice; I have a family," Akeisha says. "I have four children that I brought into this world that I'm responsible to take care of. If I give up or if I don't keep going, I let them down and that's not an option."

Born and raised in Illinois, Akeisha has been with Starbucks for 25 years, working her way up from the part-time barista job she started one summer during college to managing six different stores. She's been a district manager for five years and hopes to move into a regional director role someday.

Growing up, "I didn't even know what a scone or a biscotti was, and I definitely didn't drink coffee," Akeisha says. "Starbucks was my introduction to that world of coffee and pastries."

As a child, Akeisha attended six elementary schools and three high schools

because of family instability, living with her father, then her grandmother before moving in with her Aunt Conni, who eventually adopted her. She didn't meet her birth mother until she was 12.

Moving in with her aunt "was where my entire life changed," Akeisha says. Her aunt was an Army veteran who became a social worker, earned a master's degree while going to night school and eventually became a police officer.

Her aunt was no nonsense and demanded hard work, accountability to rules and good grades. Akeisha remembers her daily chores: wash the dishes, sweep and mop the floors before going to bed. No days off.

But her aunt also lived in a neighborhood where Akeisha experienced more diversity, different cultures and new ideas. That's when she decided to make a choice. "That's when I decided I can do something," Akeisha recalls. "I don't have to let my circumstances from my past take over my future. That's when I decided to go at this thing called life and be productive."



She started working in retail, usually two jobs at a time, until she joined Starbucks and moved into leadership roles. She got married and had four daughters, now ages 16 to 5. She endured difficult pregnancies, including the loss of her first girl, who was born premature.

“Diving into motherhood, it definitely softened my shell,” Akeisha says. “I’ll cry at the drop of a dime now. Before, I was really militant, you have to follow the rules. I’m a lot more empathetic to people and their situations because I’ve had to deal with a lot in life.”

Parenting this year has not been easy. Tension has come in many forms, especially after the shooting of Breonna Taylor in Louisville in March. Her two oldest girls, along with their swim team, created a memorial to Taylor, but it was vandalized three different times. They went back and fixed it, but each time, “it was heartbreaking,” Akeisha says. “It brings the reality to them, that racism is real, that some people hate other people because of the color of their skin.”

There’s also the reality that their father is a career police officer, who’s been in law enforcement for almost 30 years. Akeisha met her husband about 20 years ago, when she was working part-time at a restaurant. He’d come in during his breaks to get water and watch some television. One day, he wrote his number on the back of a bar napkin and asked her on a date.

“There’s always been that respect around law enforcement, and understanding what they do daily, that they risk their lives every day they step out, to serve and protect, and I always saw that,” Akeisha says. “My husband is a Black male who wears the blue uniform. What’s been happening over the past year has been shocking.”

It’s meant complex dinner-table discussions about police training, whether or not the kids can participate in a Black Lives Matter march, how to respond to generalizations on social media about

police officers, sifting through which viral incidents might be justified and which ones probably weren't, and above all in her household, an emphasis on personal accountability.

"We really try to enforce with our girls, it starts with the individual and with what choices you make, and that can make or break you," Akeisha says.

"We talk about who you decide to associate yourselves with, how do you stay out of trouble, how do you not put yourself in situations, what do you do if you're in a car and you're pulled over. Personal accountability, that's the thing we stress the most.



"Everyone has a choice," she says. "I could have made a choice to use my upbringing as an excuse to not succeed. I could've went down the wrong path but I chose not to do that. I do have a brother, 18 months younger than me, who is in prison. He chose the opposite way."

At this point, Akeisha's parenting philosophy is to focus on the positives. She'll continue to try and expose her girls to different cultures through travel when she can again, continue to encourage them to engage civically and continue to nurture them in their interests, whether it's medicine or competitive swimming.

“It’s time to teach them, to make sure they’re involved,” she says. “There are better days to come if we continue to work together and love each other. We will make a difference.”



Tammy, Alabama: ‘My pain truly had a purpose’



Tammy, manager of a Starbucks Community Store in Alabama, reflects on her childhood while visiting the middle school and high school she went to growing up. It was the first time she had been back since graduating. Tammy, born in 1964, was bused to the all-white schools, an experience she described as "overwhelming."

Photos by Tamika Moore

When Tammy was 12 years old, she moved from an all-Black school to an all-white school. It was the mid-1970s in Alabama. Schools were desegregating and she was one of the Black students suddenly being bused across the city into a white community.

"It was traumatic. It was horrible," Tammy recalls. "We stayed and we endured, but just even thinking about it brings back so many emotions. The signs – 'We don't want you.' 'Go back to where you came from.' I would go into the restroom and all the white girls would walk out as if I was poison.

"You become an introvert. I became a master at being invisible around people, not having an opinion, a world of silence. You learn to love not being noticed."

After high school, she joined the military, following one of her older brothers into the Navy, hoping a change of scenery would help. She became an aviation mechanic, fixing helicopters and making sure aircraft were safe prior to takeoff. "I was 110 pounds soaking wet," she says. "The toolbox weighed more than I did. It was a sight to see: a toothpick carrying this huge toolbox, climbing up a helicopter to work on the blades.

"I thought once I got in the military, it'll be different. But there was a lot of the same. Rejection, racism, and not only that, a lot of men were angry

because females were getting their jobs and moving in on what they thought was their territory.

“I was Black and female,” she says, “and I didn’t ask for either one of them.”

How do you keep going when there’s pain in your past? What can you rely on when you feel empty and alone? For Tammy, 55, the manager of a Starbucks Community Store in Alabama, the answer then and now – in the midst of another turbulent time of racial reckoning – is her Christian faith.

When she was in her late 20s, a neighbor mentored her and “literally loved me into the Kingdom. She loved me and accepted me for who I was, what I’ve been through.”

Tammy says it was the start of a transformation that helped her break down years of distrust and suspicion.

“It wasn’t always successful,” she says. “I was mad. It hurt. It was painful. It wasn’t always victory, victory. There were struggles. But when people say things now, I’m not so quick to take that as hurt. I’m just going to love people.”

Over the years, her faith has led her to seek out others who are hurting. A licensed minister for the last 15 years, Tammy has worked in jail ministries and with women leaving abusive relationships. If someone was hungry, she’d feed them. If someone needed shoes, she’d buy them a pair.

“When you understand hurt people, it makes you less cynical,” she says, “which gives you the ability to say, ‘Hey, you don’t have to walk through life alone.’ ”



Tammy opens a bag of gifts from Rynicka, right, a store employee. One of the gifts included a Starbucks ceramic tumbler she saw Tammy eyeing. Tammy mentors single mothers like Rynicka. Rynicka says Tammy taught her to never give up and always be optimistic.

At Starbucks, Tammy manages the Community Store located a short drive from where she was born and just a few blocks from where she raised her two children as a single parent. The Starbucks Community Store initiative aims to open stores in underserved neighborhoods, providing local jobs and career pathways and contracts for diverse vendors, as well as a dedicated meeting space for local community organizations and programs. [Starbucks currently has 17 community stores](#), with a

commitment to open 100 by 2025.

Tammy has worked in restaurants for more than 20 years, starting as a bookkeeper and then as a store manager and trainer for various chains in Alabama. Three years ago, someone she'd trained at a previous job told her about the Community Store opportunity. While doing her research, she found the Starbucks mission – to inspire and nurture the human spirit – aligned with her personal principles. The job became another chance to put her faith into practice.

“I come here to serve my partners (employees),” she says. “I am an intentional listener. I build confidence and trust. I speak truth to them in love. I make each of the partners feel like their strength is a gift to the team.

“Everybody has a gift that they bring to the table and if we all put our gifts together, we'll be magical.”

Her son, Cavanaugh, is also a Starbucks store manager in Alabama. The past year – full of so much social unrest – has revealed to Tammy that she's “still got some growing to do.” The death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, especially, incited inside her a “level of rage” she didn't realize she was capable of. She contrasts those feelings with how she dealt with some of the experiences of her youth, when her family counseled her to stay quiet and not fight back.



“Your grandparents just barely got out of being slaves themselves,” she says. “Your great-grandparents were the slaves. In your household, you’re taught, ‘Just do whatever they say.’

“This year has been a year of discovery for me,” she says. “To know that anger was inside of me, I didn’t want to become what I hate. It’s time to go back in and see what else is in there, what else am I holding in, what else have I not confronted? You’ve made some progress over the years, but you haven’t arrived. You need to love more, you need to understand more, you need to be empathetic more, you need to be more inclusive. This year has revealed to me, you got a lot more work to do.”

And she’s glad that she has something she can rely on.

“My faith, it gives you an energy that makes you keep going,” she says. “The pain of my life has caused me to be a person of compassion, inspiration, empathy, sprinkled with encouragement. My pain truly had a purpose. It made me passionate about walking alongside the hurting and keeping them inspired through the healing process, encouraging them, that we never have to walk alone! I take this passion with me everywhere I go.”



Orville, New York: ‘We can still conquer our dreams’



Orville is the co-founder of Conquest Empire and a Starbucks team member.

Photos by Clay Williams

About 10 years ago, Orville started to invest in himself – changing habits, working hard, surrounding himself with good people. Up to that point, he relied on his family and pursued the definitions of success others laid out before him.

“I came to the realization that I wanted a foundation that I could one day call my own,” says Orville, 30, a Starbucks barista in New York.

The result, years in the making, is [Conquest Empire](#), a motivational lifestyle brand started recently by Orville and his friend, that operates with the ethos: “Failure is not an option.” They design and sell clothing, identify and hype up-and-coming musical talent, and before COVID-19, organized neighborhood community gatherings, like inviting people from different circles to watch the latest Floyd Mayweather fight.

The goal?

“As young Black people, as entrepreneurs, we can band together,” Orville says. “I’m trying to bring as many people together as possible. It’s a motivational thing. We want them to strive. We’re trying to build conquerors. We want to show people that you can put your mind into something different, not just the streets.”



Chasing his dreams wasn't always easy for Orville, who was born in Guyana

and arrived in New York City when he was 5 years old. He moved between his aunt, mother and grandmother, who'd come to the U.S. first in the 1970s, working in home health care and establishing a base for her six children to follow.

“My grandmother worked very hard to support all of us,” he says.

Despite feeling cared for by his family, Orville remembers struggling with the idea of success growing up, wondering what that actually meant for someone who looks like him: a young Black man with long dreadlocks.

“In neighborhoods I’ve been in, there’s a lack of information. I didn’t realize the resources we lacked until I got out, until I started opening my mind to bigger and better things,” Orville says. “In the neighborhoods I came from, making it was playing basketball, rapping or selling drugs. There wasn’t a lot of growth in those neighborhoods, just a lot of stagnation.

“Success wasn’t something that was easy to come by. People didn’t have a good idea of what success was. People’s idea of success was what they saw on television or heard in songs.”

He remembers one moment of empowerment during high school, when a community mentorship program called the [All Stars Project](#) came into his old neighborhood in Queens, and helped kids set up, produce and star in their own talent show.

“Sing, cook, dance, whatever,” Orville remembers. “Anything to build that self-confidence, to get that exposure. All those things were lacking in the

community. Even that one program, I'm really thankful for. It was a beautiful experience."

Around his Starbucks store, Orville is known as "Big O" or the "Honorable O," says his manager. She's been impressed by his positive attitude, persistence and genuine smile, attributes that helped him secure toy donations from local businesses for a holiday drive.

Orville says he knew from a young age he could relate to different kinds of people. Being from Guyana, which is part of South America but also identifies culturally with the Caribbean, helps him move comfortably through different cultures – Black, Latino and Caribbean.

He often thinks of home and the way people would come together over food. One of his favorite meals is a signature Guyanese dish called Pepperpot – a meaty, spicy stew with gravy, usually prepared during the holidays, full of beef or oxtails or cow foot, eaten with rice or bread. Everyone's recipe is a little different.

Orville, who recently proposed to his fiancée and has a 2-year old son, says working at Starbucks is helping him expand his ideas of success and what that might mean for his own brand. He's learning about best business practices, and taking note of all "the little things," like how Starbucks encourages volunteerism, takes care of its customers and facilitates resource drives over the holidays.

"Everybody has demons and struggles they fight every day," Orville says. "If you have the strength to carry on in a positive manner, then in due time,

you will reach what your definition of success is. It's about progress and it's a process. Maybe you got to dust yourself off and try again. There's success in that.

"I'm going to continue to show my fellow Black people in this time we can still make a path for future generations. We all can achieve our dreams. We can still conquer our dreams. It might not be easy, but be patient, keep going. You're going to get places."





MORE LIKE THIS



PEOPLE

Offering to serve: Starbucks joins effort to help speed COVID-19 vaccination delivery

The coffee company is using its expertise in serving customers quickly and efficiently to support Washington State Gov. Jay Inslee's goal of safely and equitably tripling the number of shots given per day for all Washington residents.



STARBUCKS.COM

CAREER CENTER

RESERVE

AT HOME



USA: [English](#)

CANADA: [English](#) | [Français](#)

EMEA: [English](#)

LATIN AMERICA: [Español](#) | [Português](#)

ASIA: [English](#)

[PRIVACY POLICY](#)

[TERMS & CONDITIONS](#)

© 2021 Starbucks Corporation. All rights reserved.