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Alumni Spotlight: Michael Woods Gives Back to Lindenwood Through Philanthropy Organization

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Michael Woods and Neal Richardson first met at Transformation Christian Church, off Page Boulevard in St. Louis, in the mid-2000s.

The two stayed in touch and, eventually, forged a lifelong friendship. That bond they shared led them to a life-changing experience later on. In 2016, the two friends co-founded Dream Builders 4 Equity, a non-profit 501c, that works to develop economically sustainable and socially engaged communities by growing equity for youth, businesses, residents, and real estate.

Through this philanthropy, Dream Builders 4 Equity is attacking vacant homes in North St. Louis city by employing local minority youth (ages 18–24) and contractors to do large-scale, community-led development projects—putting money and equity back in the pockets of people within the community while creating workforce development and scaling minority-owned contracting businesses.

The company’s vision is a “world in which all communities have the courage to dream, the skills to build, and the resources to own their future.”

“Their efforts can turn into money,” said Woods, a 2010 Lindenwood University alumnus and is now the president/CEO of the company. “It’s proving to them ownership is a somewhat a key to freedom.”

Minority youth working within the program get hands-on experience that, Woods says, will help them in the future. Not only are they making a difference in their respective communities, but they are getting paid for their work, while gaining exposure to real estate from the legal side, the agent side, banking principles, insight from investors, as well as construction experience.

“They’re learning and being exposed to those things,” Woods said.

Moreover, profits from each house that is sold or restored go back to Woods’ employees, who then can use those funds for post-secondary education.

Currently, Dream Builders 4 Equity is working on a 50-property development project that includes rehabbing and building homes for seniors.

“It’s not just about us getting people to live in the community, but repairing houses within the community,” Woods said.

Minority youth working for the nonprofit also have the opportunity to write in their own journals, chronicling all of their experiences during each project. Woods and his team then compile all of the journals and craft them into a book. Each employee gets their own copy, and then there is a book signing they can attend.

“Every dollar that comes through that door goes to our students,” Woods said.

Additionally, Dream Builders 4 Equity also has a retail store, where it sells clothes, all types of apparel, as well as books. The store also houses a screen-printing machine and an art studio, where people can create their own projects and then sell them.

Woods’ company also employs fun and games. Dream Builders 4 Equity runs a student-led chess program. High school – and college-aged students visit six different area elementary schools and teach kids how to play chess.

Woods, who graduated with a BA in psychology, credits his time at Lindenwood to helping him get to where he is today.

“The biggest thing I took away from Lindenwood is the tenacity it takes to be able to complete something and seeing things through,” Woods said. “At the time I was attending LU, I was working a full-time job, just purchased my own property and published my first book. ... I loved that it was testing my mental fortitude. ... Definitely being a psychology major, but understanding human behavior is so important in the work that I do.”

The most important thing to Woods is making an impact on kids’ lives, as well as watching them evolve – personally and professionally.

“It feels amazing,” he said. “The impact is affecting so many people, myself included. I saw me and Neal grow tremendously through this experience. We’ve seen our first group of young people go off and graduate college ... it’s extremely rewarding and satisfying to see so many different people winning and benefiting from the presence of our organization.”