

# DESTINED FOR SUCCESS



## A unique real-world internship introduces disadvantaged and underserved students to the power of real estate ownership

By REBECCA L. RHOADES

**A**s a freshman majoring in finance at Arizona State University, Tolleson native Alexis Barber didn't know much about commercial real estate. So when she was presented with the chance to participate in a unique internship that merges both fields, training students not just about real estate but also about how to build wealth through it, she jumped at the opportunity.

The eight-week virtual program, known as Project Destined, provides real-world internships for historically disenfranchised people, including women and people of color. Students work with executives in the commercial real estate industry, with a focus on the multifamily sector, researching deals, evaluating properties, learning marketing and strategy analyses, and developing valuation and deal financing.

"During the pandemic, I was reading a lot of finance books and had started getting interested in real estate," Barber

recalls. "After going through the program, I learned that there's so much more to it, and it interested me even more."

Founded in 2016, Project Destined is the brainchild of Washington, D.C.-based former investment banker Cedric Bobo. "I'm from Mississippi, and I had a great-grandfather who bought hundreds of acres of land and built a series of agricultural businesses. I wanted to be an owner just like him, but I had no idea how to do it," Bobo says. "That's what bonds me to students like Alexis. We have the desire to be owners in our neighborhood and the conviction that we have the skills to do it, but we have no clear path."

A stint at Harvard Business School, a year abroad studying at Oxford University and jobs at investment firm Salomon Brothers and private equity company The Carlyle Group opened Bobo's eyes to using investor funds to finance building purchases, and he began his foray into real estate by buying tiny apartments in London.

After leaving The Carlyle Group, Bobo and his wife continued to invest, "because we had seen how to produce wealth and impact neighborhoods," he says. It was during this time that Bobo began questioning why schools, which often emphasize STEM classes as the pathway to a better future, don't teach students how to become owners through real estate.

It was during a business trip to Detroit that Bobo got the idea to start Project Destined. "There was

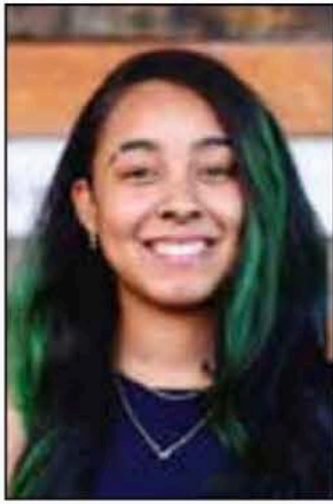
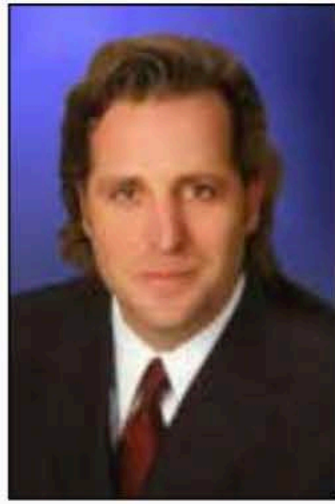
a lot of capital in Detroit going into development, much like there is in Phoenix today," he says. "There was also a huge diverse population in Detroit, with very few diverse owners."

Bobo partnered with the mayor's office and selected 15 high school students to put through the program. The students were paid a stipend to learn about real estate; in return, they would analyze live deals, apply their learnings to the deal and pitch it to Bobo and his wife. The couple ended up purchasing two of the buildings.

The program was a success and garnered plenty of media attention. Bobo soon began expanding Project Destined to such cities as Memphis and Miami. Today, more than 500 students nationwide have participated in the program, which is now offered in numerous states and even some international markets. "The goal is to have a global community in which students are simultaneously learning how to become owners and then getting jobs in the real estate field," he says.

"The first piece of being successful is knowing you deserve to be successful," Bobo continues. "We tell our students, 'You're going to be successful at Project Destined, and we're going to teach you how to become an owner.' We're trying to train with a mentality around ownership. And the same mentality that supports buying a home can support buying a 10-unit building. And a 10-unit building is not different than a 100-unit building. But it all



**Alexis Barber****Joe Blackburn****Cedric Bobo****Gary Linhart****Stanton Shafer**

starts with the mindset of, ‘I deserve to become an owner.’”

Gary Linhart, owner of WestHawk Capital, brought Project Destined to the attention of ULI Arizona after first hearing about it during an industry Zoom call. “ULI has a significant equity, diversity and inclusion initiative, and here was this organization that was taking action to help people in underserved communities or demographics get into the commercial real estate industry,” he recalls. “Cedric and his team were cracking the code on how to diversify the industry, so it made sense for us to collaborate with ULI to facilitate the program in Arizona.”

The cost to participate is \$25,000 per team; a ULI Arizona team was created in the fall and a second ULI team will participate in the spring. Teams can be sponsored by a single firm or, as was the case in Phoenix, multiple ULI members.

Each team comprises 10 students — eight students and two student program managers who have already been through the internship — and four to six mentors. The students are given a live deal to analyze, and every two weeks they must present their project in “Shark Tank”-style competitions against other teams around the country and defend their decisions — “This is how we’re making it better.” “This is why you should invest in our project.”

Joe Blackburn, president and CEO of Everest Holdings, worked with Linhart on developing Arizona’s first Project Destined team. “Cedric has been able to bring industry veterans in major markets across the country together with kids who are still in school. There are real relationships and real jobs coming out of this program. The students are getting hired as interns and then, ultimately, as full-time employees

by companies that previously hadn’t been able to tap into this kind of talent.”

Linhart adds, “The goal is to eventually have a lot of future owners and investors from minority and underserved communities.”

The Arizona team, which comprised students from Arizona State University

and one student from the University of Arizona, worked on a deal for an 18-unit apartment complex located across the street from Grand Canyon University and valued in the \$2 million to \$4 million range.

“The most interesting thing was to see the amount of progress that was made from beginning to end just in terms of the students’ understanding of the vernacular and some of the basic mathematic concepts,” Linhart says. “Project Destined is a really good format for giving someone exposure to the business to see if they’re genuinely interested. In most cases, people are pretty excited about it and want to continue.”

Stanton Shafer, COO of Holualoa, served as a mentor for the 2021 Arizona team. “Project Destined is a wonderful program that’s very well-organized and thought-out,” he says. “I was impressed by how well the students grasped the concepts, and they put together a presentation that was really amazing.”

Barber particularly enjoyed creating the value-add plan. “I liked doing the research, looking at the property and deciding what we wanted to upgrade to make it more beneficial for college students, and how we would market the completed development,” she says.

Following the completion of her internship, Barber was hired on by Project Destined as a regional production director. She now helps market to and acquire new interns.

“It’s great that I got hired onto the team. Cedric has so many connections that he’s able to help if I decide that I want to work another internship in commercial real estate,” Barber notes. “Project Destined has definitely given me a leg up in the industry and opened a lot of doors.” ■■■

## Donor Spotlight

The following ULI and community members helped sponsor the first ULI Arizona Project Destined team. Some donations may have come through charitable foundations and trusts.

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