We had known each other since our time at Cass Technical High School, and once we reconnected, we both saw the same issues with young people today: They were simply unprepared for the jobs of the future. So how could we fix that? We started with an idea to form a nonprofit organization called Motor City STEAM geared toward Black and brown youths to expose them to the STEAM fields of science, technology, engineering, the arts, and math.
Once the organization was established, we quickly realized that corporations would not fund our ideas simply because of our good intentions. We needed some other method to bring in a steady stream of income. Thus was born The Lab Drawer™ — a monthly subscription box designed for middle school students containing a STEM and Art activity to expose them to STEAM and get them excited about it.

PIVOTING TO PIT

The Vision

In March 2020, COVID-19 shut down the world. We were unsure of what this would mean for our company and the work we set out to do. The Lab Drawer, which started in 2018, had failed to pick up the STEAM we hoped, but COVID-19 would soon change that. The work we started with Motor City STEAM Foundation, small media coverage, and the STEAM excellence award from General Motors built our resumes and slowly put us on the radar in the STEM community, especially in Detroit.
Positive Impact

All things work together for good, they say. What's next for us? Alecia Gabriel, Ph.D., grew up in Jefferson City, Missouri, and Deirdre Roberson, M.S., grew up in Detroit, and here we are. We've been funded by major corporations and global organizations. We've had a positive impact on 15,000 students across the globe. Growing is what's next. From here, that is all we have left to do.
A Chance to Succeed

When educators could not figure out how to engage students and STEM studies over ZOOM and parents were not prepared either, the emails came pouring in. At this point, we were unprepared for the influx all at once, but we decided to meet the moment: We went from sending out 50 STEAM boxes a month to sending out 1,000 and teaching over 10 hours monthly. We executed with precision, and during a global pandemic, STEAM boxes were leaving our facility and arriving at the homes of students all over the U.S. in two to three days.
WHAT I LEARNED

We received a partnership, and in order to get the contract the STEAM boxes all had to be funded upfront by our company, The Lab Drawer, and would be reimbursed 30 days after we started production. Well, 30 days came and went, and then 45 days, and we had depleted all our resources. The client brushed it off when we asked for payment. On the advice of a mentor, we immediately stopped production and let the client know that payment was due. We were met with condescending words and disrespect of our credentials. It was at this moment that we realized that for us as Black women scientists, excellence and precision would never be enough for some people.

Grounding. For us, it is everything. It has kept us sensible in the midst of our business exploding during the pandemic. It has kept our lives outside of entrepreneurship balanced. For us, this grounding is always our focal point. Without grounding, we believe it would be impossible for us to stay focused. We believe Black and brown students also need access to adequate STEAM education. And when Black and brown students win, all students win.

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