



ATHENA
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ATHENA NextGen Celebrates Black History Month

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In this special edition of the ATHENA NextGen newsletter, we're proud to celebrate Black History Month and feature three alumnae who are opening doors for the next generation of women. Hope Newsome, Vanessa Brundidge, and Laine Powell each lead by example in their respective industries and share their passion for paying it forward through leadership roles on several community boards in Central Florida.

Recently, I had a chance to catch up with these women and learn about the key principles that help guide their success. They also discuss how they have drawn inspiration from others and put it into practice.

Hope Newsome - Building Relationships

Hope Newsome is Managing Partner of Virtus LLP. The all-female legal team at Virtus focuses on federal securities laws and provides solutions to financial institutions, businesses and governmental entities.

Hope credits building relationships as the ATHENA principle that lies at the heart of her leadership journey. She says, "Every professional accomplishment or step that I have taken has had a direct correlation to someone with whom I've developed a long-standing and intimate relationship. I am so thankful for the advocates in my life and for those that I advocate."

Hope's celebrity crush is Mellody Hobson, President and CEO of Ariel Investments Trust in Chicago. Hobson is a powerhouse executive in the financial services industry. She also juggles numerous responsibilities as a mom, wife and philanthropist. Hope remarked, "One of my favorite things that I've learned from Mellody can be found in her Ted Talk titled, Color Brave."

Hope participated in the inaugural class of ATHENA NextGen in 2014. When it was time to expand the ATHENA Orlando Board, Hope was one of the first people I tapped to help us grow strategically. She joined the Board of Directors in 2016 as Secretary and General Counsel and served for nearly six years.

The skills she honed in ATHENA NextGen will continue to serve her well as she makes the leap into serving on the boards of two of Orlando's prominent organizations. She is Chair-Elect of the African American Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, and Vice Chair of the Heart of Florida United Way Board of Directors.

When I asked Hope about the best piece of advice she has ever received, she replied, "don't be afraid to say that you do not know something." She added, "So many people believe it is a sign of weakness. I believe it is a sign of strength. In being vulnerable, you demonstrate strength, and in being open, you gain more knowledge."

In March, Hope will be recognized as one of the 2023 Women Who Mean Business honorees by the *Orlando Business Journal*. You can bet that we'll be there cheering her on!

Vanessa Brundidge - Fostering Collaboration

Vanessa Brundidge is Vice President, Retail Marketing Manager at Synovus Bank. In her role, Vanessa has the privilege of leading and developing a team of bankers who are focused on helping clients achieve their financial goals. Additionally, she serves as a business development officer which presents her with opportunities to engage with business owners and provide solutions to help minimize fraud and improve efficiencies.

I first met Vanessa when she joined the ATHENA NextGen cohort in 2017. As a longtime leader in the financial services industry, Vanessa says, "It is important to build a team based on trust, support, and respect. Recognizing each team member's qualities and contributions is crucial in fostering collaboration. Healthy and productive relationships between leaders and employees set the tone within the business unit. After completing the ATHENA NextGen program, I elevated my focus on this principle. I have been intentional about observing how my teammates engage, and I believe this action has led to lower turnover."

She is passionate about education and her community. Synovus encourages Vanessa's involvement in programs and organizations that are important to her. She remarked, "I enjoy supporting the American Heart Association of Greater Orlando and serving as a mentor with the Valencia College Horizon Scholars Program. I also enjoy delivering the Synovus financial literacy program, Raise the Banner."

Early in her career, Vanessa received the best piece of advice from one of her mentors. She says, "I was mentored by a highly respected leader in the financial services industry who told me to remember to 'be present' at work, in meetings, and when interacting with teammates and clients. That advice helped me to lean into conversations. My colleagues appreciated it when simple matters, as well as critical points, were reviewed in follow-up meetings and conversations."

Perhaps my favorite part of catching up with Vanessa was hearing about her celebrity crush—Denzel Washington. I mean come on, who doesn't love Denzel?

Vanessa commented, "In several interviews, Denzel Washington has shared some of his early life experiences. The most memorable one was when his mother sent him to boarding school following his parents' divorce. That decision changed his life because he would not have survived in the direction he was going, surrounded by young men who served in prison. Denzel has spoken fondly of the time he spent at the Boys Club. As a result, he's been a spokesperson for Boys & Girls Clubs of America for years. He is the epitome of one rising from humble beginnings and soaring to success."

Vanessa has given back to her community by serving in a number of leadership roles. She currently serves on the Board of Trustees of Florida Executive Women and is involved in the University of Central Florida Town & Gown Council. She is a Breakfast of Champions Honoree and has volunteered as a mentor for the Valencia College Horizon Scholars Program for five years. In 2022, she earned Seven Star Performance Recognition from Synovus.

Dr. Laine Powell - Celebrate

Dr. Laine Powell is the Founder and Executive Director of Tech Sassy Girlz, a non-profit organization dedicated to inspiring underrepresented girls in middle and high school to engage in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Laine created the organization in 2012 to address the critical shortage of women and minorities being represented in high-tech STEM careers. She firmly believes that leveraging technology is an opportunity for girls to be content creators and makers. With a mission to empower middle and high school-age girls to pursue future careers in STEM, Tech Sassy Girlz is igniting the movement to develop and support the next generation of female STEM professionals.

Laine participated in the ATHENA NextGen program in 2019. The leadership principles she learned had more of an impact than she could have ever imagined. Having graduated from NextGen just months before COVID shut down the world, Laine discovered that celebrating successes, big or small, helps to navigate challenging times.

Reflecting upon the last few years, Laine commented, “The pandemic taught us that life is unpredictable. Things can change in a split second. When the pandemic hit, like other companies across the globe, we had to figure out how to best support our students and pivot our programs to a virtual format. We had to quickly develop alternatives to provide STEM instruction outside of the face-to-face modality. It was no easy feat, but we were persistent, driven, and intentional. As a result, Tech Sassy Girlz supported more students during the pandemic than throughout our 10-year company history.”

Laine went on to say, “From that experience (among others), I learned to celebrate all wins, even the small ones. I’ve also encouraged my team to celebrate, and to give themselves grace when things don’t go as planned. Celebrating keeps me grounded and grateful for the many blessings that have been bestowed upon me.”

Female leaders use their voices to break glass ceilings, overcome what appear to be insurmountable obstacles, and change the status quo for women everywhere. Just look at the measures taken to advance movements such as #MeToo, Lean In, and Black Lives Matter. Women have used their voices masterfully to be heard in historically male-dominated environments.

It’s a concept that is quite familiar to Laine as she advocates for girls to break into STEM—fields that have been under-represented by females for far too long. Laine is changing the narrative in today’s economy.

She says, “The best piece of advice I’ve received is to use my voice. I do that by advocating fiercely on behalf of girls in underserved communities. I want to ensure they have access and opportunities regardless of their zip codes.”

When I asked Laine about her celebrity crush, she shared one of her favorite quotes by First Lady Michelle Obama which is, “if there’s one thing I’ve learned in life, it’s the power of using your voice.”

The students enrolled in Tech Sassy Girlz are inspired by the First Lady’s authenticity. Laine added, “Mrs. Obama personifies grace, fearlessness, and advocacy. Her passion for advancing initiatives for girls and women is remarkable.”

Laine carries that shared vision forward as a role model for the young women she mentors. She recently completed a doctoral degree in instructional technology and distance education from Nova Southeastern University.

Among her awards and accolades, Laine has been recognized as one of the 2023 Women of the Year by Orange Appeal magazine, by the Heart of Florida United Way as a 2022 Change Maker, one of Onyx Magazine’s 2022 Women on the Move, and received the 2021 WTS International Rosa Parks Diversity Leadership award.