

‘We can change entire communities and cities’: This AWS exec wants to bring tech opportunity to a predominantly Black city in the Deep South

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Levi Sumagaysay



The Value Gap is a MarketWatch Q&A series with business leaders, academics, policymakers and activists on how to reduce racial and social inequalities.

Nashlie Sephus found success in the tech industry in a place that doesn't typically offer many options for Black tech workers like her: the Deep South. Now she wants to help others do the same.

The applied scientist, who focuses on ensuring accuracy and fairness in artificial intelligence for Amazon Web Services, bought a 12-acre property with seven buildings in her hometown of Jackson, Miss., last fall. Her vision: to create a tech hub that includes housing, retail and entertainment to try to help lift up the predominantly Black city in the poorest state in the nation.

Mississippi's median household income in 2019 was \$45,792 and its poverty rate was 19.7%, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. The median annual income for computer and information technology occupations was \$88,240 in May 2019, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"I've always been an advocate of [taking] the secret sauce that I was allowed and exposing others to it," said Sephus, who has a Ph.D. in electrical and computer engineering from Georgia Tech.

The Jackson Tech District isn't her only project aiming to do that. Sephus, the former chief technology officer of the Atlanta-based startup Partpic (which Amazon [AMZN](#), [-2.28%](#) bought in 2016), founded The Bean Path in Jackson two years ago. The nonprofit offers technical advice, tech hours at libraries, youth coding programs, scholarships, grants and more to members of the community.

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She also recently co-founded KITT Labs, a co-development space and incubator for Black people in tech, in Atlanta. (KITT stands for Knowledge Information Technology Tools.)

Sephus recently spoke with MarketWatch for the latest installment of [The Value Gap](#). The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

MarketWatch: You are highly accomplished and educated, but not everyone who comes from where you come from will have the same opportunities. What can a tech career mean to people who look like you?

'There's a quote, "a rising tide lifts all boats." If you can get more people access to tech, they can create apps, build startups. They can influence the youth around them.'

Sephus: Tech is a big part of our everyday lives. If you don't know how to use it or can't take advantage, you miss out. Some people in the Black community have no access to technical experts or resources and end up falling behind. They stay near the poverty line, on the lower rung of the economy.

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Especially because of COVID, everyone had to adapt to online platforms. Some people might be intimidated by or have no access to technology.

There's a quote, "a rising tide lifts all boats." If you can get more people access to tech, they can create apps, build startups. They can influence the youth around them.

If we can expose [others to] what we do in tech, we can change entire communities and cities. Hopefully that bleeds over into changing the economic outlook of the entire state.

MarketWatch: The Jackson Tech District will have many parts. Which part are you most excited about?

Sephus: The most exciting part of the project is the maker space. Fifty percent of the people I talk to in Jackson are not privy to what these are and what you can do with them.

We're working on a partnership with local public schools [for students] to be able to come to the maker space. And Innovate Mississippi is a group that helps business owners. They're not tech experts, so we can partner with them as tech experts.

I think there's some brilliant people there, but they don't have the opportunity. Like me — I had to leave the state to get the training I got. Hopefully we'll be able to provide opportunities to strengthen the tech community and build a new ecosystem together.

The second thing I'm most excited about is the 17,000-square-foot barn in the middle of the city. This is the building that initially interested me because I thought about events like tech fairs, robotic competitions, startup weekends, weddings. It can be like a backyard for the community. We'll be making sure we provide a safe environment.

MarketWatch: Are there other tech hubs you look to for inspiration for the Jackson Tech Hub?

'In Jackson and in Memphis, you have a lot of "forgotten" people. They understand the problems they deal with every day. When you empower those people, they can come up with ideas, write them down [and create startups].'

Sephus: I interned at IBM IBM, +0.72% at Research Triangle Park [in North Carolina]. They've been able to take Fortune 500 companies and really develop that area.

There are a lot of big companies in Atlanta, and also a bunch of startups. Our startup Partpic was based there. We had to explain ourselves back then. Now it's almost like, if you don't have a startup, what are you doing?

There are also budding tech spaces in New Orleans, Birmingham and Nashville.

In Jackson and in Memphis, you have a lot of "forgotten" people. They understand the problems they deal with every day. When you empower those people, they can come up with ideas, write them down [and create startups]. Incubators can help.

MarketWatch: How is the pandemic affecting your plans?

Sephus: There are two interesting things about the timing: Creating the event center, the construction supply — some of that has been on hold. We won't be able to host events like we meant to. That'll be in the next phase.

But in some ways the pandemic has actually helped. I started my journey to purchase the land over two years ago. I started looking at properties in November 2018. There have been lots of challenges. I don't look like the normal developer and I have to work with banks, etc. I'm not the traditional person to do these things.

After everything that happened in 2020 — the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the focus on the glaring gap for opportunities in our communities — with that interest, I've had so many people reach out. International. From different types of backgrounds. From Amazon.

There's a saying that "God's timing is the best timing." It's actually perfect timing.

MarketWatch: Speaking of the effects of the pandemic, do you think the shift to the masses working remotely will help with spreading out U.S. tech hubs beyond where they are now?

Sephus: I'm in Atlanta, but the majority of my team is in California and Seattle. I was on a plane sometimes every other week. I would visit Mississippi. It was a lot of traveling, a lot of time at the airport.

When we were first acquired by Amazon, we were asked to move to Palo Alto or Seattle. We fought to stay in Atlanta. We wanted to build this community here. We were adamant about that, and that's one battle we won.

Now it's almost like a complete 180 on the opinions on that. I actually know a few people from Amazon who are working from Mississippi, which has a much lower cost of living.

[In Jackson], with our planned innovation center, which will have a co-working space and labs, we want to show people they can work from anywhere. Any type of equipment you need, we can have that for you.

[In Atlanta], the KITT Labs is for the Black STEM community. It's to strengthen and provide resources for them. Black engineers, developers and designers have a passion for giving back; we can empower them to do that. It just helps everybody, really.