

JUAN A. MCGRUDER, PH.D., CFRE

SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT & CHIEF DEVELOPMENT OFFICER

JUNIOR ACHIEVEMENT OF GEORGIA

Written by Keatley Scroggins

Juan McGruder appears to be the type of person who should be walking the halls of a white-shoe law firm or Atlanta City Hall. He is gregarious, clever, and doesn't know a stranger, qualities that are befitting for a lawyer, politician, and in his case, a professional fundraiser.

Juan's story starts with a humble beginning in academia. With an undergraduate degree from Clark College (now Clark Atlanta University) in Atlanta, two masters degrees, and a PhD in higher education administration from Vanderbilt University, it's his tenacity, resilience, and commitment to giving back that ultimately carried him from being denied admission to college as a senior in high school to his current position as Senior Vice President and Chief Development Officer of Junior Achievement of Georgia.

As a high school student, Juan was solidly in the bottom half of his class, so it was no surprise that he was not admitted to Clark College on his first application. However, with most of his friends successfully completing their first semester of college, Juan's mother saw his sadness and suggested he write a letter to tell the school how he felt. With neither mother nor son familiar with application procedures, they didn't have the terminology to call it a letter of appeal. But Juan listened to his mother, and wrote to Clark College, promising that if he was accepted, he would be a good student and an even better alumnus.

Challenge accepted. Juan was admitted to Clark College as a first-generation college student. "The promise was real, and I wanted to live up to it from day one," Juan explained. "Going from being a student as a teen to being invited back as the special assistant to the president, then giving a keynote address, and ultimately a few years ago being awarded the distinguished alumnus award, it's all been a huge honor. In a lot of ways, I'm still working on fulfilling that promise, but I take it seriously every day."

In fact, Juan takes his commitments seriously at all times. On the day of this interview, he was uncommonly and uncharacteristically dressed casually, perhaps subconsciously taking a breather after a professionally taxing year in which he exceeded fundraising goals for Junior Achievement while also serving as President of Midtown Atlanta Rotary Club.

Our conversation was convivial as we discussed wide-ranging topics like his passion for historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and his interest in Romanesque and gothic architecture. But Juan was clear on the advice he wanted to give to development professionals and on his view of the importance of the AADO, African American Development Officers Network.

Juan initially imagined himself working as a criminal lawyer after college, but slowly began to see higher education as a pathway to a fulfilling career during his time at Clark College. “I think the linchpin was that while I was at HBCUs I saw one of the challenges that they had was not academics, it was resources. They just didn’t have the kind of resources that some other universities had,” Juan said. “I realized that, if an institution or an organization doesn’t have the resources they need, it’s hard to meet their mission. It’s hard to exceed their mission. It’s hard to make the kind of impact that’s necessary. And that’s how I got into higher education. I wanted to learn how to gather resources at HBCUs and that’s how I discovered development.”

His path to a career in development contrasts the experiences of new professionals in the field. With credentialing, degrees and certificates available in fundraising and development now, young professionals can take it seriously as a profession from the start. “You don’t have to fall into development like most of us did,” Juan explained. “It can be an intentional pathway to a profession, a career.”

Perhaps because of his winding road to ultimately finding his fit as a development professional, Juan makes time to meet with and mentor young professionals. His schedule is often packed with meeting after meeting, but he makes time for younger professionals. “I am committed to helping young professionals in this space of development and fundraising, particularly African Americans,” he said. “I want to help them find pathways to making an impact in the profession and finding good, strong livelihoods.”

“I never say no to meeting with a younger professional because I know how important it is, and many of them are African Americans just entering the work of development and fundraising and trying to understand it,” he said. “And that is why AADO is so very vital. It fills a void as more African Americans become aware of development not as a job but literally as a profession they can pursue.”

Juan calls AADO a “disrupter” to the industry, even if members just see it as serving a need. “We are disrupting the way in which people view the definition of philanthropy. It has always been defined in this very traditional way, with the majority culture participating in philanthropy,” Juan stated. “As we diversify philanthropy then the context of the definition broadens even more because various cultures and races give it a different lens in which to view it through. Money is not always the end all, be all.”

In fact, Juan believes that end-all, be-all might be in finding a way to connect philanthropy (whether financial or not) and one’s work to a deeply held passion. He suggests experienced career professionals ask themselves some tough questions as they consider their future: “Is this work that I truly enjoy? Is it work that’s making an impact that touches my soul?” Juan suggests finding environments or organizations that strike that inner passion, and then, he said, “You can actually enjoy what you do, and you can contribute more, and we need more people in the profession with that ethic of caring.”

Beyond finding a cause for which we can be passionate, Juan also advocates for focusing on

relationships for building a successful career in philanthropy. He reminds us that people give to people: “The most important characteristic for people in the development profession is having authenticity, and really, that only comes from building strong relationships.” Juan clarifies that authenticity is the key ingredient when networking: “If you do it in an authentic way, you become trusted, and then, people will seek you rather than you seeking them. The opportunities will come to you more so than you looking for them, and then you will be in control of your career.”

And that is advice we would all be wise to take from Juan, who successfully transitioned from a career in higher education to his current position as the Senior Vice President and CDO of Junior Achievement. He says that the work he’s doing at Junior Achievement is rewarding, but also challenging, as he adopts to thinking about education in the K-12 space. And once again, he credits relationships as the key. “The genius of Junior Achievement has been that they connect the needs of the corporate world with the educational arena. Between the two worlds, education and corporate, each is missing what the other needs. The role of Junior Achievement is to come in and be the relationship builder between the two.”

As his success continues, Juan remains committed to challenging his AADO colleagues to give back to those coming into the profession now. “That’s important to me, because this is how we’re going to propel more people into development,” he said. “And we’re going to need that because philanthropy is going to grow with more African Americans and people of color contributing and engaging, and they’re going to want and need to have trusted relationships with people who look like them.”