

Torres Hughes

YMA Coordinator

Manufacturing Renaissance

In 2012, just a few weeks before graduating high school, Torres Hughes did something that few teenagers get to do. He got to speak on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. about the value of manufacturing.

While a student at Austin Polytechnical Academy High School in Chicago, Hughes spoke to policymakers about the importance of manufacturing programs for teens. Little did he know, but in the evening of the day that he spoke on Capitol Hill, he would meet his first employer in manufacturing: Steven Kersten, president of Chicago-based WaterSaver Faucet Co.

“He told me that if college didn’t work for me when I graduated, I can come and work for him,” recalled Hughes. A week before graduation, Hughes did not feel ready for college nor did his parents have the funds to send him, so he gave Kersten a call. “I told him that I would like to work for his company,” Hughes said, “and he hired me.” A week later, right out of high school, Hughes was working in manufacturing.

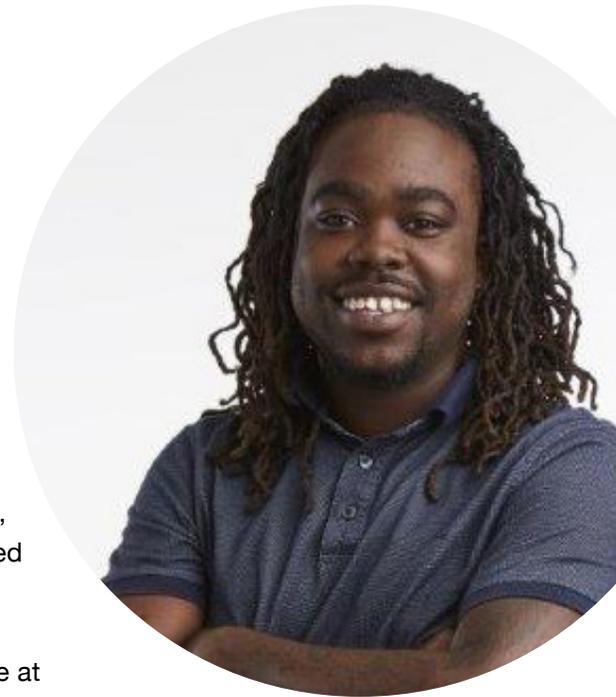
Despite his assertiveness in taking the opportunity, the first couple of months were not easy for the new employee. “I kind of got frustrated, it was very new,” recalled Hughes. “Getting up at six o’clock in the morning, working a full week, was kind of fresh for me, and so I quit.” Hughes spent the next several months contemplating whether he made a huge mistake. That’s when he turned to his mentor Bill Vogel, a staff member at Manufacturing Renaissance (MR), where Hughes had received training, shadowing opportunities, factory field trips, and advice since his sophomore year of high school. Vogel’s advice to Hughes: just ask for your job back.

Hughes did as his mentor advised, and to his surprise, Kersten re-hired him.

During his time at WaterSaver Faucet Co., Hughes worked as an assembler and a machine operator, but his time at the company was cut short six months later by a series of layoffs. With his first experiences in the industry under his belt, Hughes found another job at Freedman Seating Company just four months later, where he was exposed to a lot more of what manufacturing had to offer. “I started out as a machine operator on a press brake machine, then gradually learned more and went onto more advanced machines,” said Hughes. “A couple years later, I was offered a job to be a quality inspector.”

At Freedman, Hughes benefited from strong relationships with older coworkers who encouraged him and took him under their wings. Some of those relationships are still intact today.

As much as he was learning from the different departments at the company, he always had a passion to work in the community. Since he was six years old, he saw himself as a person who would give back to the place that raised him. He began to see motivating youth to join manufacturing as a way to do that. He turned to MR to see if he could volunteer with them, but shockingly they were not interested in him being a



volunteer. They wanted to offer him a paying job, which Hughes gleefully accepted.

“I could not have planned that myself. Sometimes the best journeys are the ones that just happen. It makes me more grateful,” Hughes said. “The program coordinator position kind of just fell in my lap. So I’m very appreciative of that.”

At MR, Hughes uses the twists and turns of his experiences to show youth what is possible. He is a walking advertisement for MR and the industry as a whole. “When I speak with youth, I let them know that I come from the same background that they come from. I grew up in Austin, on the West Side of Chicago, and I’ve been here all my life,” said Hughes. “The same things that they see, on a day-to-day basis, I see it too.” He sees his role at MR as being more than just a program coordinator. He is an inspirational figure in the community and a life changer.

The universal advice that Hughes gives to youth about joining programs like MR: “Take this opportunity to gain a skill, because the skills are going to pay the bills.”