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SPECIAL ED TEACHER PROVES THAT HIGH SCHOOL
KIDS WITH AUTISM CAN ACE COMPUTER CODING

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hile working on her master's degree at Touro's Graduate School of Technology (GST), Khalilah Summers made a decision. This is a woman who doesn't simply decide something. She drives that decision at high speed, and everyone better get on board or get out of the way.

Summers told her principal at The Brooklyn Transition Center, which provides specialized instructional support to special needs high school students, that she wanted to teach her students—most on the autism spectrum—how to code. While attending Touro's GST, she realized she no longer wanted to teach social studies. She wanted to prepare her special needs high schoolers for 21st-century jobs.

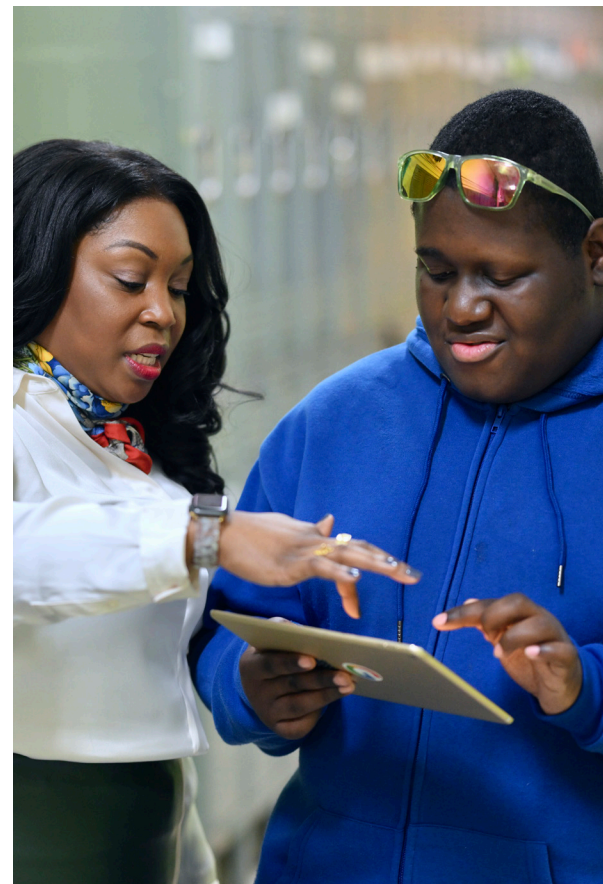
"The school has great labs to teach the kids all sorts of work skills, like operating a hydroponics lab, taking food orders, cleaning or working at a drugstore, but I wanted to reach higher for their futures," says Summers, who graduated in June 2022 while teaching full time. "I knew these kids could learn coding concepts, how to create apps, robotic and virtual reality fundamentals."

The principal said to go for it and off Summers went, vroom, vroom.

She raised money through grants and found and charmed donors. With resources in hand, Summers filled the lab with computers, 16 robots, 20 Oculus Quest 2 and much more. "Coding and other computer work can be repetitive and that melds perfectly with students on the autism spectrum because they can really hone in on coding concepts and they thrive on repetitive tasks," she says. "You should see what they can do! I'm filled with pride at their accomplishments and their joy. I've had some kids come in on their lunch break because they love what they're doing so much, they want to do it all day."



It was Touro that gave Summers the confidence, the education and the guidance that helped realize her life's ambition. "I already had an undergraduate degree and a master's degree in teaching from other schools," explains the married mother of four, who worked for JPMorgan for many years before deciding to become a special education teacher. "The minute I walked into Touro, I had two thoughts: I knew I was in the right place, and I wished I'd gotten all of my degrees from Touro. The classes were relevant, not a lot of fluff.. it's geared toward working and succeeding in the real world," continues Summers, who got her GST degree in instructional technology. "They treated students as adults and that's how we saw ourselves, partners and equals."



Summers, an only child, was reared by her nurse mother in New York City. Still, says Summers, her father was “an amazing dad, who was hellbent on my getting an excellent education.”

Though she was an A student, Summers suffered with ADHD that wasn’t diagnosed until she was an adult. Two of her children also struggle with ADHD, so their mother, the teacher, has learned what works best for her own kids, as well as her other 62 children—her special needs students. “I learned this at Touro and as a parent: Everyone can learn,” she says. “I just have to figure out ways and strategies to teach each of my students so they can reach their unique potential.”

Khalilah Summers uses technology to reach her special needs students