Corey Andrew Powell:

Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of Motivational Mondays. I'm Corey Powell, your host. Our podcast is presented by the National Society of Leadership and Success, where we are now impacting over 2 million members nationwide. So today I'm also thrilled to welcome a true innovator and advocate for equity and technology, Tamar Huggins. Tamar is a Canadian tech entrepreneur, educator and trailblazer who's revolutionized how we think about tech, education and ai. Now, she's the founder of TechSpark, which is transforming the educational landscape with culturally relevant AI tools that promote inclusivity, challenge bias, and empower students. Her groundbreaking SparkPlug platform is redefining how organizations and schools integrate AI while safeguarding against systemic inequities. Tamar, welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Tamar Huggins:

Hi, Corey. Thank you for having me.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Yes.

Tamar Huggins:

And thank you to your audience for being here.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Well, you are very welcome. It's our pleasure. And it's funny, we're laughing off camera guys because, you know, we are both like in this whole tech world, and we're having like tech issues, <laugh>, we're having tech issues, but we've resolved them and here we are. And so we're gonna have a, a really great conversation. What I love about this conversation, uh, Tamar, is that we all have these talks about AI from a standpoint of some people are for it, some people are against it, they're afraid of it. But you have a whole other take on AI in the space of DEI and, uh, and, and, and, and equity. But your journey into tech and entrepreneurship. Can you share a little bit about, uh, how your father's passion actually for computers inspired your early interest?

Tamar Huggins:

Yes. Uh, thank you so much. So my father, uh, like many of our parents here in in the greater Toronto area are, uh, immigrants of the Caribbean. And so my father immigrated here, uh, from St. Kit's, which is where he's from originally. And he came here as a tradesman. So he was a carpenter. So he is very, very good with his hands. Um, in the nineties when I was a little girl, I remember seeing him just tinkering and building computers from scratch. I mean, he essentially is a self-taught engineer. I mean, he didn't go to school for it. He did take some night classes, um, to learn about, um, you know, wiring and whatnot. But everything was self-taught. He spent a lot of time reading. He spent a lot of time watching, you know, videos and just taking things in and really focused his efforts on building computers. So all of my computers that I've ever had until I went to college were all made by my father.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Wow.

Tamar Huggins:

And it was something that while I didn't participate in the building of the computers, it was something that I feel like subconsciously I picked up on that one. Um, I could do anything I put my mind to. I don't necessarily have to have the educational background, uh, to do certain things. And, you know, if it's something that I'm really passionate about, I can enjoy it while still, um, being of service to, to others as well.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Hmm. I love that because, you know, computers, as you know, they can be very intimidating, right?

Tamar Huggins:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Just the whole process of how they work and, and, and there seems to be like a perception that only like the most elevated people can really master computer, let alone computer building. So that is fascinating that he was like so, so self-taught in that way. And also it speaks to like children seeing positivity things around them, and they can kind of pick up, you know, on them. And it led you to become a tech entrepreneur. And so, uh, and you pioneering like what we would call the black tech ecosystem.

Tamar Huggins:

Yes. Right? Yes, absolutely. Mm-hmm

Corey Andrew Powell:

<affirmative>. Yes. Yes. And so in 2012, you created Driven D-R-I-V-E-N, which was Canada's first tech accelerator for, um, people of color and black people, people of color, bipoc as we call 'em. And, um, and so what challenges did you face in that sort of trying to establish this presence in this world where we don't really always see ourselves represented?

Tamar Huggins:

Yeah. So I'll actually connect this to the story about my dad. So when I realized that I could do anything, I actually went to school for creative advertising. So a lot of people think that I have an engineering background and I do not. Um, I also was self-taught. I learned how to code in high school. It was something that my best friend and I would do. We would sneak away into the library when everyone was, when everyone was playing dominoes and cards in the cafeteria. We were in the library coding, hacking Black planet and making our own pieces <laugh>, right? Like, that was, that was fun for us. And I ended up going to Centennial College, uh, studying creative advertising and, um, working at one of the top ad agencies in Toronto. And, um, you know, working with Nike Canada was a huge blessing because it really pushed us to think innovative for every single campaign. Um, so when we think about, you know, the challenges, like I've always seen in this industry, just in business as a general, as a general, um, whole, we always see black folks being so amazing at their craft, whether it's, you know, building computers from scratch, whether it's cooking, whether it's, um, sewing, you know, fashion, whatever the case may be. But when it came to the business side, that's where we were seeing that lack, um, of acumen was, was really lacking. So how to actually take the idea from just an idea to a business that generates revenue and profit, right? Um, so the challenges that I had just starting that company, that accelerator, was really just around external challenges, I would feel, because I knew that I had a passion for helping others with business because I saw the challenges. Um, even though I was working in the ad agency, like I had my own, you know, my little side hustle on the side, right? So I had my, you know, my little PR company, and I was working with clients, and I was always seeing, again, they were really great at what they did, but when it came to translating it into business, there was always this, this gap.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

So that was the, the problem that I saw. And then there wasn't really a solution in Toronto at the time to really focus on giving black entrepreneurs or women entrepreneurs who are in tech the opportunity to learn to have access to mentorship and capital. So I created Driven, um, I did have, you know, a lot of backlash. There was a lot of pushback, um, you know, from the other communities, um, who, you know, accused me of reverse racism and, and said that, you know, they should be able to go to my accelerator if they want, if they choose. And that they, they just couldn't understand, um, why we needed to have an accelerator specifically for, um, black founders, newcomer founders and women. Um, so there was a lot of challenge there, but then again, because I knew that what I was doing, um, was much deeper, I knew that it was connected to like my sole purpose mm-hmm <affirmative>. So I was able to push through that. And again, just leaning on my, you know, my advertising background just around customer discovery and asking the right questions, validating assumptions, and ensuring that we're creating a solution that the customer actually wants. In this case, entrepreneurs, I was able to build an amazing program that, you know, we went on to, um, raise $1.1 million, and, uh, our startups collectively on their own raised over 20 million. So I would say that it was, it was quite successful.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Yeah. That's fascinating. And I'm also fascinated by the fact that, I mean, in many ways, Canada is like, you know, the, uh, like a parallel universe, America <laugh>, because Yes. Um, you know, we speak English mostly and you know mm-hmm <affirmative>. They're right next door. We can like, I could like walk there basically if I'm in New York. Yes. Yes. Um, but when it comes to the specifics you're talking about now with DEI and being a black person, a person of color mm-hmm <affirmative>. I'm also fascinated by the same conversations happening. You just mentioned the reverse racism, and this is a whole other rabbit hole. I have to have you back on for a whole other discussion, because we can go down that road. But it is amazing to me that people don't get that the reason why Driven exists affirmative action exists is because it's trying to counterbalance the deep disparity that has been done.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Right. Um, and it's fascinating that people will then accuse you of like, well, you're discriminating against other people. And when you really dissect these programs like yours in affirmative action, all they're really doing is making sure that major organizations or people who are hiring managers, et cetera, and as many cases know that there are talented people of other communities there.

Tamar Huggins:

Yes.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Who may not have access to getting to those organizations. It's not as if there's untalented people who are just getting by 'cause they're black. That's the, that's the, the, that's the, that's what's being perpetuated. Like their skin color is what's gotten them ahead. But that's a myth. So are you, so are you kind of seeing that's a similar sort of challenge with that myth in Canada?

Tamar Huggins:

Oh, absolutely. And even though, you know, we're neighbors, our, our cultures are, are still very different But I would still say that the challenges that, uh, black folks face here in Canada are very similar. Although, I will say in the States, it is a little bit more intense. Um, just in terms of, just like historically, um, our history here as black folks in Canada is, is quite different. Yeah. When we think about systemic racism, especially when it comes to business, um, there are a lot of challenges here. But one of the great things that I've noticed in the United States is that you guys are about your bag. Okay. <laugh>. And that's something that I wish we had here in Canada. I really wish that we would take more risks. I really wish that we would, you know, see the, the gems and the talents that's here and really support them because a lot of entrepreneurs, especially in tech, have left Canada and moved to the states because it's easier to raise money, it's easier to connect with customers, it's easier to make money. Uh, whereas here in Canada it's, it's, it's not the same. So we definitely see, you know, the, in, in the grand scheme of things, same type of problem, but there can be some nuances here that are different from the us Yeah. Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Yeah. Well, I think it's a trade off, right? I think, um, when I look at a system, a country like, um, Canada, and it has better, well, I wouldn't say better, but just a very different healthcare system that's more Yes. Thoughtful in the respect mm-hmm <affirmative>. Of like, it's a community based sort of idea about making society better versus in America where it's very sort of, you're in a silo and it's like your health insurance and you're not trying to maybe pay into a system that'll help everybody in that regard. We do go for the bag, but it's at the expense of like, it's almost that like a me, me, me versus how can society be better? So I wish there was like a happy medium, and then, you know, we figured that out. We'd have like the multimillion dollar question, I guess figured out, but

Tamar Huggins:

Right. And that individualism is something that's very unique to the western world. Um, other parts of the world, they really do focus on group economics and, and collective development. And that's actually a thought process that we bring into education, which I know we'll get into a little bit later, but it's really looking at how we all learn traditionally.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

So as Africans, how we, how we learned, how we passed information down, how we received information, um, it was all through like storytelling. It was through music, it was through dance, you know, there were so many different ways that we came together and shared information for the betterment of the next generation. Um, that is really lost on, on the Western society. Uh, but when we think about culturally relevant, culturally responsive pedagogy, it's really about bringing in more of that collective mindset.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

Um, into education in terms of how we are able to identify that everyone is, is unique and learns in different ways, but once we really understand how they learn, we can tailor how we teach those students. So a lot of times people think students are disengaged because maybe they lack the intellect when really it's, they're disengaged because the material is boring and it doesn't resonate with them. It doesn't resonate with how they learn. Right. It doesn't match their lived experiences.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

To be able to do that as an educator, it takes a lot of time and effort to really drill down and understand the community in which your students are coming from, and then making sure that your classroom and your curriculum is reflective of that.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm. Yeah. It's almost like the idea that, um, well, in America, for example, America today mm-hmm. Is very diverse and looks very, very different than it did of course, like 50 years ago or a hundred years ago. Mm-hmm. So you can't have your same systems in place that don't take that into account. Right? Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Um, education, since we're on that topic, very often we hear conversations about how the college entrance exams, for example, may definitely be difficult for some groups because they're referencing things that are not really even relevant or even knowledgeable or known to the groups taking the test. And so there's a already like a, there's already like strikes against them when they're taking this test that should be universal. So we see that a lot in education. So with create with, uh, your, your tech spark company, how do you address that sort of dynamic?

Tamar Huggins:

So when it comes to testing specifically

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Tamar Huggins:

So I would say, again, it really starts with that customer discovery.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

Or consumer discovery, right. User discovery, right. You really have to take the time to ask the right questions. And before you do that, you have to ensure that you're creating, um, questions that are un unbiased so that you're able to get, uh, the responses that you need to then take that next step.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

So again, like I said, it takes a lot of effort and time to be able to do that. But we work with Psychometricians as well, um, who are able to assist us with creating, you know, the types of like, assessment questions that we would need, um, that are unbiased, that will really draw out the information that we require in order to build products or services for students.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

That's the first step. And then we go into the communities and we ask questions, we ask the students about their life.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Hmm.

Tamar Huggins:

We ask them about, you know, their classes and what they like, what they don't like, and how they would make it better if, if they could, um, what it is that they want to see. You know, we created the first tech entrepreneurship course here in Toronto, um, and it lives in several high schools across the greater Toronto area.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Hmm.

Tamar Huggins:

And it's been so successful since 2018. And the reason why is because we spoke to the students. We spoke to students who were taking, um, that the current entrepreneurship course that was not tech-based. We talked to students who graduated and we talked to students who could potentially take, um, the entrepreneurship course, and they may have been on a, a business track. And we asked them those same questions. Um, we really, really dug deep into the customer discovery. And then our amazing team of educators and doctors were able to then take the existing curriculum, look at what was working, um, look at what wasn't working, connect with industry experts and redesign the curriculum to match the students and what it is they want, and making sure that we are giving them the skills that they need to succeed in the future. Because the current program was really just teaching them how to build a business plan for a fictional business <laugh>. Right. And we wanted them to build a business that had a tech component, um, that could generate real income, because for a lot of these young people who were coming from underserved communities, I mean, that is a real way for them to, uh, earn some funds that they can use either towards themselves or mm-hmm <affirmative>. Um, even to support their, their home if they, if they choose to. But I mean, we see it on YouTube all the time on Instagram. Like, there are students, young people out here making hundreds of thousands of dollars doing things that they want to do. Why can't we do that in our community?

Corey Andrew Powell:

Yeah. I love that. That's great. And of course, we don't have often those people, those guides in our communities to teach us that. And it's very similar to, uh, I'm big on really advocating for financial literacy in the African American community specifically, but black communities in general, where we may not have had the economic, uh, prosperity to have people in our proximity who could give us all that great knowledge about, I mean, I was like 30 years old with like the worst credit you can imagine. 'cause I had just not had serious conversations about what was an A PR. I just knew I would go to a store, put the credit card down, and walk out with the stuff. Right. And the Bill <laugh> bill would come, and I'd be like, well, I just, you know, right. I'll pay that. And next thing you know, you know, so it took me like a good, like 10 or something years, like, to dig myself outta this hole. But it really stemmed from, it stemmed from, like, we didn't have those conversations. So this is really important work you're doing to the underserved communities who don't have those role models in place. Yeah.

Tamar Huggins:

And mentorship is a huge piece of the work that we do. So in addition to the educators who already do so much, um, having mentors who are from the communities that the students are from, um, or who are working in the industries that they're interested in and connecting them is really, really important. Because for young people to see themselves reflected in their, you know, course material in their classrooms, in the spaces they want to enter into is really important for them.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Hmm. Yeah. That's really great. And I love another thing you mentioned too, and I can equate it to the work that I do. And I go and I do lectures or talks, and I speak about, um, one of my main platforms when I do that is teaching people about how to turn their own personal story into their brand.

Tamar Huggins:

Right.

Corey Andrew Powell:

And what I hear you saying too, there's an element of that where you're going out, you're talking to the students, you're asking them about who they are. Right. What they would like to see reflected in the courses they're taking or the world around them, right? Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And I think what's important about that is, you know, they're being invited to the table.

Tamar Huggins:

Yes.

Corey Andrew Powell:

'cause very often we're not, it's like a, an afterthought.

Tamar Huggins:

Exactly. And also, young people need to understand the value of their data, the value of their information. Us conducting that survey, that information that they are, you know, willingly giving us and participating in, in those sessions, that's something they don't have to do. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. That's something of value that we're able to, to use to build a product. In this case, it was a curriculum to, to really serve them. And in doing that process, you know, we paid them for their time because I wanted them to understand that their voice and their information, their data is valuable. And owning that data and being able to monetize that data is extremely, extremely important. Especially when we're talking about underserved or marginalized, uh, communities or underrepresented, um, underestimated whatever you want to Right. To say. It's important for us to know the value of our data. And, uh, data is really king, especially when we talk about AI and the development of that ai. It, it's all based on the data.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Yeah. Yeah. I love that too, because people don't realize, you know, young people especially, um, I deal in like the media world, I guess, with television. And so when you deal with that, you have sponsors of course, who are gonna be, uh, sponsors on a TV show mm-hmm <affirmative>. And then you realize there's like a demographic that they really all wanna tap into. You may be in that demographic of 18 to 25 year olds, let's say. Yeah. And there are people who really want to know how you think, what makes you tick. And that means you are obviously important to the entire construct. Right.

Tamar Huggins:

Of course.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Um, versus a lot of us have been made to feel like we're not really relevant. We're not important. Right. So, you know, these are really important things that, you know, I think you're driving home that are gonna make a difference. And the self-esteem issue, like the confidence issue to go out in the world and go, yeah, I'm relevant. I have a part in this.

Tamar Huggins:

Absolutely. Absolutely. It, it's really important, especially as we know, um, when we think about the, the black community specifically, um, I think of the United States is like a $1.7 trillion spending, um, budget that, you know, the, the black community is really engaging in. Hmm. So when we look at that amount and compare it to, to other groups, it's actually quite high. Yeah. And, and with that comes a lot of buying power. And oftentimes we don't understand as a community how powerful our dollar actually is. And if we wanted to create change, whether it's politically, economically, socially, what have you, um, we definitely could do that with our dollars. So it goes back to what you had mentioned with financial literacy. I think it goes even deeper, just even also understanding, you know, the, the finances of, of the government.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

Uh, of the country and how things are working and how you're really contributing as, as a citizen to really see your value. That you're not just this number, you are contributing member to, to your community and your voice, your data, your, all of that matters in, in the grand scheme of things. But it really comes down to I think, how we, how we teach the next generation. And that's one of the things I'm really excited about with Spark Plug, for example. Is that we are able to take otherwise maybe complex or sometimes, um, boring as some of the teens would say, <laugh> some of the courses, um, using Spark plug, being able to take, um, things like Shakespeare and turn it into something that is modern, that speaks in the voice and tone of a teenager and has the, um, has the resonance of, um, you know, the black community for example.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm. Right.

Tamar Huggins:

It has that culture a part of the overall experience. And again, the way that we were able to reach that is by, um, really asking those questions and understanding the value that we're bringing to the table and ensuring that we're building with the community at the center. And that's been the challenge, I think, outside of our community, is that things are being built and they're being built without our voice, with or without us knowing. But sometimes it is our data, but they're, we're not being told that our data is being used. Right. And oftentimes it can be used against us.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Hmm.

Tamar Huggins:

But in this case, we're able to take the information, um, which we use to train our large language model, which essentially is, um, works from the Harlem Renaissance, um, the civil Rights movement. There were some, um, private, um, authors who also lent some of their works as well. And we wanted to ensure that we were building something that was for the community, by the community and what way, what better way to do that than to actually have the platform built on, you know, the shoulders of our ancestors and giving them the voice of their descendants, which essentially would be the teenage voice that we have, um, in our model. So when students engage with the platform, they're able to receive responses as though they were just speaking to, um, their friend Yeah. At school,

Corey Andrew Powell:

Very often, brands mm-hmm <affirmative>. They don't really have a clear idea of how to talk to people of color or true organizations don't know how to talk to us. That's true. There is a likelihood that they are underestimating how to talk to us. And it's not been more prominent than I've seen it in advertising. When I would have a situation, for example, they wanted to, I had a situation where there was a client from MOA and Chong, they wanted to market this new champagne to the black community. Okay. And the brief was like, we wanna make some comparisons of great couples in history that black people will understand. And I said, oh, well, like Romeo and Juliet. And one of the directors from MOA said, well, we were thinking more like peanut butter and jelly and macaroni and cheese. And I'm like, so you don't think black people know who sh who <laugh>, Romeo and Julie are, but you're trying to sell them MOA and Chandon champagne. So I bring that up to say, it's so important for someone that looks like us to be in the room

Tamar Huggins:

Yes.

Corey Andrew Powell:

When they're making these decisions about marketing and programs for black people, because we see it go wrong all the time because of stuff like that.

Tamar Huggins:

Yeah. And I would actually, you know, my perspective on that is they probably couldn't identify a, a black couple

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm.

Tamar Huggins:

Would resonate with the community.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Right, right. And

Tamar Huggins:

So is aligned to their brand. Mm. You understand what I mean? Because Yeah, I understand what you are saying. 'cause peanut butter and jelly, macaroni and cheese does not align with Moee chandel <laugh> at

Corey Andrew Powell:

All. At all.

Tamar Huggins:

No. Right. And, and I think that a relationship would've made sense, but because they were not connected to the community they wanted to market to, they weren't able to identify, you know, a, a a a community or a, a couple within the community that they could use as Sure.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Part of the ideal brand strategy. Right. Yeah. Yeah,

Tamar Huggins:

Yeah. We see that happen a lot. And one of the great things about Spark plug, I'm so glad that you mentioned advertising, is that we've actually found, um, many use case scenarios for our technology outside of education. Hmm. And one of them is in marketing and advertising for that very specific reason. Oftentimes brands, um, are so entrenched in, in their own worlds and don't really understand, um, how to market effectively to black communities or brown communities mm-hmm <affirmative>. Or other, you know, quote unquote minority communities. And our technology is being used again to create copy, ad copy, um, that is able to, again, speak authentically to the demographic, um, particularly black folks in this case mm-hmm <affirmative>. So that they're able to create ad copy that then resonates with some of the nuances that we do see in our community. So I'll give you another example. So there is, uh, an advertising campaign that happened here in Canada, and they had it, they had, they used bus, uh, transit shelters, and it was in what we call little Jamaica.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

And, um, it had a woman, like a older lady, like a, like a auntie kind of vibe, a grandma kind of vibe. And she was cooking, and I believe the copy referenced, um, Jamaica's traditional dish, which is a, and salt fish. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. But she was cooking it in a soup pot. You know, those big tall right soup pots that make you boil like your seafood boil in.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

Drinking. But in our culture, we don't use those pots to cut a and salt fish. We use a Dutch pot. Okay. That's something that's very, very specific, so, and very nuanced. Now, some people may look at it and say, wow, you know, this company is actually using, you know, a a black person and identifying, you know, Jamaican culture in their advertising, but they miss the mark. So now it doesn't feel authentic. Hmm. So the black, the, the Jamaicans in that community are seeing the ad and they're just rolling their eyes because Right. I would never cook Aki in a, in a soup pot. Mm-hmm. You need a pot, you know what I mean? <affirmative>. So it's like, it's a little nuances that are able to be picked up using spark plug because of how the model was trained. Yeah. So we go very deep. So some people might say, well, what's the difference between, you know, spark plug and chat GPT? You know, chat, GPT is is still very general, and yes, it's trained on a lot of data, um, that has not been equitably sourced. Um, but our model has been trained on data that's very nuanced to individual communities and can be personalized and tailored to the specific customer who will be using the technology. So that, you know, we were very intentional about how we built it, um, because we knew at some point that we would want to scale, you know, outside of education, but still serve, you know, black and brown communities with our technology.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Yeah. That sounds exciting. I wanna use it. I'm looking forward to using TechSpark. No, <laugh>. It sounds really, it sounds awesome. And now you're expanding also into the US market. Yes. Not just in Canada. So I know that you have, um, you participated recently in the Southern California Black Tech Express. Yes, I did. And that was during LA Tech Week. So, uh, what opportunities came from that? Or were there any challenges that you encountered while you were doing that? How'd it turn out?

Tamar Huggins:

Well, first of all, it was an absolute honor to be selected by the Trade Commissioner. Um, to be able to come down to LA and take part in LA Tech Week. I'd never been to LA at that point. I'd been to other places in California, but not la. And, uh, we were selected with, um, five other companies. And so it was great to build a relationship with other black founders who were also in technology. Um, it was really great to, to meet with different investors. So they had us meet with, um, I would say investors who were part of our community, so black investors mm-hmm <affirmative>. And then they had us meet with, you know, non-black investors as well. And I would say that the response, um, was night and day was very different. I felt that, you know, there's something to be said about dealing with investors as a black founder, and ensuring that not only do they understand your industry, not only is there compatibility just in terms of do you like them and do they like you, but they're also, it is really important that they also understand some of the challenges that we do experience as black founders in a, you know, a white male dominated industry.

Tamar Huggins:

Right. So as a young black woman, you know, those are three strikes that I have working against me. So it's important for me to identify and partner with individuals who understand that. And when we connected, um, through the, uh, the Daja collective, when we connected with, um, some of the black founders, the black VCs in that space, even though they were all male, they still understood the challenges that we experienced, even from a gender perspective. Right.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Right.

Tamar Huggins:

And while they understood that, they still demanded that excellence. I think that's another, um, piece that's important to state as well, that sometimes people think that black investors only invest in black companies just because they're black, and that's not true. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Um, they definitely still demand and look for excellence. So that was, that was really great. Yeah. Um, but the overall process was, was exciting. It was very challenging. Um, imagine, you know, a six week accelerator happening in, you know, two days <laugh>, three days. Like, it was, it was very challenging, but very rewarding. I learned a lot about myself. There were things that I thought I was a hundred percent on, and I realized actually, you know what? I think I'm gonna take what I learned here, and I'm gonna start exploring and, and, and looking at different ways that I could perhaps run my business, which I'm extremely grateful for.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Yeah. I love that because we have, um, a big, big, uh, affinity here at the NSLS for the growth mindset. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And, and the growth mindset is exactly that. You know, it's, it's saying, Hey, I don't know everything. Uh, I think I know a lot. I think I know enough, but I'm willing to know when I need to learn more. And that only makes you better. And that's, and that's really a, a strong leadership quality that I think everyone needs to, to pay attention to. Yeah.

Tamar Huggins:

Mm-hmm

Corey Andrew Powell:

<affirmative>. That's really big. Absolutely.

Tamar Huggins:

Yes.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Well, congratulations on that. You know, and I think it's, um, also, unfortunately, I think maybe with you going to that conference at this time, there seems to be a really interesting sort of push against DEI now in this country, which is, you know, after George Floyd, it was the other direction, you know, every company was like, yeah. You know, and everything was all about DEI and equity. Yeah. And now, currently it's going the other way. So mm-hmm <affirmative>. I, I wonder if that may have impacted if you didn't necessarily have all the, you know, the responses that you would have hoped by some of the non-black LED organizations. I do wonder if that maybe played a part in it.

Tamar Huggins:

Um, you know, I think that's a good question, but I would say no. Hmm. I think it was just a mismatch in terms of industry. Mm.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Okay. So,

Tamar Huggins:

So it just so happened that the black tech investors that we were connected with were also more aligned with us from an industry perspective, whereas some of the other investors who were not black, um, were, were invested in different types of industries. Right. So maybe for example, like FinTech, I'm not, I'm, I'm more so, um, you know, in the ed tech or like the gov tech type of, you know, B2B space just because of the way that our platform can apply to, you know, different, um, industries, right? Mm-hmm <affirmative>. So again, it really just comes down to making sure that you're aligned with an individual or a company that understands your industry as well as you as a founder. But what I will say, though, um, and this, this may be controversial, um, but what I will say, and something that I've noticed in Canada as well, is that whenever a conservative government is in power, um, so for you, it would be Republican here, it would be called conservative. It forces black people to ban together in a way that I have not really seen when a more liberal or democratic government is in power. Hmm. So when you think about, when you go back to George Floyd and, and, you know, go back a little bit further, when all of those atrocities were happening to black Americans, what did we do?

Corey Andrew Powell:

We

Tamar Huggins:

Got together, when we put pressure on corporations as a collective, they listened

Corey Andrew Powell:

Mm-hmm <affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

And going back to understanding the power that our voice and that our data and that our dollars have, and coming together as a collective to be able to usher in a movement, right. This is, this is part of how we are innately as, as Africans as I mentioned earlier, when we think about the, the collective mindset, um, that we see more so in like Africa and other parts of the world, world, and the western world is more individualistic. Hmm. And when we have no choice but to stick together, we come together. And I find that we're actually much more powerful that way. So I don't care what John has to say, I don't think de and I is going anywhere. I think it may be rebranded. Um, but there are companies out there who obviously know the power that we hold as a community and will still continue to do what they can to, to serve the community and, and to support the community.

Tamar Huggins:

So I think it's just really an opportunity for us as black founders as well, to really think creatively about how we solve, um, problems or maybe how we find loopholes or how we, how we get around it. And just knowing how, knowing the game and knowing how to play it. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Really important. But in order for us to have strength, we have to come together. And sometimes, unfortunately, we have to be forced or something major has to happen for us to band together, but that is how we are as a people, and that is how we should be moving forward no matter who is in power.

Corey Andrew Powell:

Hmm. I love that. Those are actual, actually wonderful closing words. <laugh>, I would say, uh, for our conversation, I will ask you one more question about the future of AI advocacy, though. Um, I would love to know what you think are sort of like the next step, the, the next steps in, in ensuring that AI is going to be around for, or, or i, I should say, equal opportunities in ai. Like, you're doing this now. Yeah. But what do you think is a step? Is it like you convinced the government to make sure that there's more equity involved in AI development so that it has a much more, um, accurate representation when it comes to tech? Or is it up to the individuals like you to do it? Or is it a collective altogether?

Tamar Huggins:

Definitely a collective mm-hmm <affirmative>. So we cannot rely on the government to do everything, especially where technology is concerned, because there's still a lot of skill, like understanding, um, lack of understanding skills, gaps, issues with some of the politicians who aren't in power. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. So it's, it's, it's partially the government. It's partially those who are in the industry. So the industry leaders also need to be a part of the table and the, the founders, the, the small businesses as well, as well as the community, right? So all of the community organizations also need to be a part of, you know, pushing policy and talking about AI ethics at, um, the, the leadership level at corporations and educational institutions, understanding what, what that means, what does it look like in practice, and not being afraid to bring AI into the classrooms. I know there are a lot of teachers who are very fearful of, of AI either changing their job or mm-hmm <affirmative>. I've heard some people say dumbing down the students, the cheating and all of these things. But again, we had the same conversations when calculators were being introduced into the school. Or even as simple as like even an open book test. Like you can have an open book, you can have a calculator, but if you don't know how to enter in the functions, it's useless to you. Mm-hmm

Corey Andrew Powell:

<affirmative>.

Tamar Huggins:

Right? Yeah. Yeah. We use, there's still a foundational need for, you know, the understanding of the mathematics in order to be able to use a tool that would then help you accelerate. So we have to look at artificial intelligence the same way we're doing our students a disservice by not engaging AI in the classrooms. And I think it really starts with the educators and with the parents first to really understand what that looks like and to really engage with the AI themselves, and then find ways to introduce it into the curriculum in a way that is meaningful and engaging. So some of the ways that educators are using Spark plug in the classroom outside of creating lesson plans is having it as a reference tool. So as the students are reading things like Shakespeare, for example, or Lord of the Flies, they can actually engage with the technology and say, Hey, you know, what does this snippet,

Tamar Huggins:

Quote mean, or explain this to me? And it breaks it down. It helps 'em with brainstorming, critical thinking, critical research skills, creative thing. Like there's so many, uh, 21st century skills that these young people can gain from leveraging a tool like Spark Plug. But it really starts with the educators and being a little less fearful and taking a little bit more of a risk, because now with the, uh, dismantling or potential dismantling of the ed, uh, education department, educators are going to have to get really creative Hmm. In the ways in which that they teach students and the ways in which they personalize content and ensure that those who are already on the fringes are, are not going to fall deeper into the, uh, achievement gap. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And, and that's what, you know, spark plug is, is here to, to help them, um, support them in, um, in their transition during this time.

Corey Andrew Powell:

That is amazing. Spark plug. Sounds incredible. I'm so glad you have created it. I'm so glad you're doing the work that you're doing, and, um, your insights are just really, really interesting. And I think, I love that it's a new perspective on ai. We're not having the normal conversation of like, is it gonna take my job or not? There's a whole other layer to it that you've introduced. So thank you so much for being here today. Tamar Huggins, Canadian tech, entrepreneur, educator, trailblazer, and founder of TechSpark. We really loved having you today here on Motivational Mondays.

Tamar Huggins:

Thank you so much, Corey.