



MBP's Story

My work with students challenged by homelessness began at Howard University where I worked for over 15 years for Student Affairs in Residence Life. After retiring in the summer of 2014, I returned home to Georgia. I wanted to create a nonprofit to continue serving homeless young adults struggling to stay in school, but I was clueless about the process. My search led me to Georgia State University's Religious Studies Program to pursue a master's in Religious Studies with a concentration in Non-profit Management.

May of 2017 Mending Broken Pieces was officially incorporated as a nonprofit and July of the same year I applied for and received a Student Innovative Fellowship (SIF), to build a homeless youth resources website. The original proposal for the website would have resources for homeless high school students planning to apply to college or university with a secure storage option for personal documents (transcripts, IDs, etc). The SIF project doubled as my internship requirement for Religious Studies. The website was named Dream Machine.

My work at Howard University gave me an up close view of homeless college students, but I was unaware of the number of children and youth that were homeless across this nation and in the state of Georgia. During the 2016-2017 school year there were 1,304,446 public school children and youth nationally, 39,952 in the state of Georgia, 118,364 unaccompanied minor nationally, and 2,397 unaccompanied minors in Georgia (NCHE and GaDOE 2016/17 Data). After reviewing these numbers I reached out to Homeless Youth Service Providers around the Atlanta metro area to better understand the problem. I learn about of the McKinney-Vento

Assistance Act that authorizes the federal Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program. This program addresses the problems that homeless children and youth face in enrolling, attending, and succeeding in school. There are offices in every school district in the state of Georgia called McKinney-Vento Liaisons. The McKinney-Vento Liaisons' assist homeless youth and their families with getting their school records and monitors the student's progress toward graduation. After becoming aware of the role of the McKinney-Vento Liaisons' I thought I needed to rethink the design and purpose of my website.

I shift my attention to homeless youth, young adults, and unaccompanied minors who despite their challenges remained in school to fulfill their dreams. I asked myself; how can this website assist these students? To answer this question I read everything I could find on homeless youth and young adults. School House Connection was one of my main sources for research, articles, and testimonials on homeless youth and young adults. The research and reading help me better understand their experience and the scope of the problem. After my researching and reading, the answer was to provide a free website of resources to help homeless student ages 14-24 stay in school or get in school to fulfill their dreams. The website would be accessible through a cell phone or the internet. "One of the most significant challenges in addressing the needs of homeless youth [and young adults] is simply identifying them, Hidden In Plain Site, Civic Enterprise, June 2016. Homeless students are often on the move in unstable living conditions, and having digital resources available 24/7 could speed up their re-housing and stability process whether they live in a rural, suburban, or urban area.

After settling on the new purpose and design for Dream Machine, I created its tag line "Opening doors to the dreams of homeless youth, and work with the graphic artist provided by the project to design the logo. I knew from personal experience that a dream needs people to believe in it and funds to achieve it. Dream Machine would give homeless youth and young

adults a door to programs and agencies that believes in them and their dreams and information about funding to remain in or start school to achieve them.

We were unable to complete the website at the end of spring semester 2018, so I asked for and received an additional year. During the 2nd year I was more hands on with the website, our team was smaller and I help to complete some of the data entry tasks. The other part of my time was spent making sure that the programs and agencies added to Dream Machine served homeless youth and young adults and that the funding sources listed were real and up-to-date. We also did an evaluation of the site's design and navigation and use the results to improve both. Leading up to the completion of Dream Machine we discovered that Dream Machine's URL was taken, Dream Connect was the closest available URL to the ideals of the website so I bought it. Through the dedication of Mr. Spencer W. Roberts, Systems and Digital Scholarship Librarian at Emory University and former Director of SIF at Georgia State University; Dream Machine was completed and launched in May of 2019.

After the launch I completed and submitted the application for MBP's IRS 501(c)3 tax exemption and August of 2019 MBP was approved and became a public charity. While working on MBP's IRS tax exemption I struggle to find funding to establish the nonprofit in the Atlanta metro area and to promote Dream Machine. I was encouraged to apply to Main Street Entrepreneurship Seed Fund for funding to market and further develop Dream Machine. Dream Machine was not accepted to be a part of the 1st cohorts of founders, but around the same time I received an email announcing a class that sound like it could help me with further developing Dream Machine, ENI 4201, offered through the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Institute. You had to get approval from the professor to enroll in the class. I reached out to Professor Kenneth A. Mathis and was accepted for fall 2019 class. The class is a Startup Incubation and Mentoring course where students receive coaching and seed funding for their startup ventures.

My mentoring sessions with Professor Mathis were instructive and insightful , and led me to do a 2nd evaluation of Dream Machine to determine how to move forward to promote it. October 2019, an analysis of Dream Machine’s design was done. The analysis examined the website’s design to see if the design met modern best practices and teenage and young adult users’ expectations. The consultant recommended that Dream Machine be rebuilt as a web app. After completing the class and receiving the seed funds I pushed forward with implementing the recommendation by hiring the consultant that produced the analysis. I believed that the web app would give homeless youth and young adults access to resources that address their needs in a non-judgmental safe space, and would draw them out of the shadows to be seen, heard, and served. I knew that they had powerful stories of struggle and survival that needed to be heard and dreams that needed to be fulfilled!

March 2020, Dream Machine’s name and logo changed to Dream Connect, and its tag line was updated to “a door to the dreams of homeless youth and young adults”. Shortly after these changes Dream Machine suffered a major setback and work came to a halt on the web app, but in late June 2020, MBP received several donations and a small loan that allowed the organization to hire a website designer to get back on track transforming Dream Machine. I abandoned the idea of a web app and move forward with updating the website which was my original plan when I join the class. I had to reclaim my vision for MBP and Dream Machine. I moved forward with changing the name, logo, and updating the tag line. I had the web designer updated the design of website and added a donation button and widget, a security certificate to explain how the website user’s information would be handle, and a new page for Mending Broken Pieces, Inc. I also edited and updated the old site’s content and created new content to be added to the site. The renaming and updating of the design and content of Dream Machine was completed September 9th 2020.

MBP will be re-launching Dream Machine under its new name Dream Connect very soon. I discovered over the last three years that Dream Connect is not just a website of resources for homeless youth and young adults, but a labor of love by people who care about the plight of homeless youth and young adults and wants them to complete school and fulfill their dreams! I am thankful for everyone who was a part of the founding of MBP and the building and design of Dream Connect. Your love, support, and hard work made my dream a reality so that others can fulfill their dreams. God bless you all!