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REBEL VENTURES AND YOUTH-LED FOOD INITIATIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

Raven Lewis with Jarrett Stein

My name is Raven Lewis. At the time of writing this, I am a senior at the Philadelphia High School for Creative and Performing Arts in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I was in middle school when, in 2017, I ate my first Rebel Crumble, a delicious fruit and grain snack invented, tested, produced, and sold by Rebel Ventures in Philadelphia public school cafeterias. I learned that Rebel Ventures was a youth-led nonprofit organization dedicated to feeding the students of Philadelphia healthy food that we will enjoy. Three years later, I applied for a job through their website. My mom had been berating me about getting some work experience, but I had a lot of anxiety about customer service or waitressing jobs. One of my friends was working at Rebel Ventures, so I knew they were big on teen representation in the workplace and learning through experience. I was hired to join their crew in March 2020.

Initially, I had taken only editing jobs within my work at Rebel because that was my main role in the team: cinematographer and editor. I wanted to stick with what I knew, media arts. But at one meeting, our co-executive director, Jarrett Stein, presented us with an opportunity, writing this chapter, to strengthen our communication skills and write about Rebel's mission. I decided I was up to the task. This led to me reading grants, meeting key people, and conducting interviews with our high school social media manager Tiguida Kaba, entrepreneurship mentor Kevin Dixon, co-executive



5.1 Raven testing recipes in Rebel Ventures' commercial kitchen in 2020. Credit: Rebel Ventures.

director Trecia Gibson, co-executive director Jarrett Stein, Amy Virus of the School District of Philadelphia Division of Food Services, board member Jane Kauer, and Rebel Ventures alum Tim Scott. As I learned about their experiences and the history of our organization, I also did a little introspection about my own experiences.

A REBEL STORY

The origins of Rebel Ventures can be traced back to Pepper Middle School in Southwest Philly. According to Tim, the neighborhood was tough on the city's youth, and street life seemed like the only option for many adolescents. As a student, he wanted to stay out of trouble and participated in many sports so he could stay on a positive path. But he worried about his peers and their overall well-being. At the time, it was common to see students walking through the hallways with chips and candy bars from convenience stores rather than the healthier, free meals that the district offered for breakfast and lunch. He was in eighth grade when he met Pepper's nutrition class teacher Jarrett Stein (now Rebel's advisor and the University-Assisted Community Schools director of health partnerships and social ventures for Penn's Netter Center), in 2009, and found that they both wanted to improve their school food environment.

With the help of Pepper's science teacher Ms. Siegler, Tim and Jarrett gathered a group of ten eighth graders who were dedicated to working cooperatively to make a change in the middle school. They started making and selling healthy snacks to their peers. Jarrett describes the experience in greater detail: "We were in the basement of Pepper Middle School. Myself, as a teacher who knew nothing, with a small group of eighth graders who had a ton of energy . . . making [snacks in] a little classroom with ingredients stored in bins in our closet and trying to partner with the cafeteria manager to let us use the oven and then going upstairs to another classroom after they were cooked to package them in plastic wrap and then go and sell them in this hallway."

The first product the students at Pepper made were Far Bars, with the tagline "It takes you farther!" These bars were made with granola and dried fruit and sold at an accessible price of fifty cents. When Tim and his

fellow Far Bar makers walked around after school trying to sell them to their peers, they were met with a lot of questions and skepticism. It was also difficult because many students were focused on trying to get on the bus. Still, they got some sales, teachers were very supportive, and Tim and his classmates were excited to work on the project.

In 2013, a few years after the first Far Bar was made, the School District of Philadelphia decided to close Pepper Middle School along with twenty-three other public schools.¹ Jarrett worked to secure funding from his employer, the Barbara & Edward Netter Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania, to hire Pepper graduates to continue the Far Bar project as an after-school job training program. The students decided to call themselves Rebel Ventures and started working afternoons in the basement kitchen of the People's Emergency Center in West Philadelphia. The crew soon moved to the Center for Culinary Enterprises, a commercial incubator kitchen, where we continue to work today. Far Bars became Rebel Bars, hundreds of which were handmade, packaged, and sold by the crew to local schools through Netter Center after-school programs.

To expand the reach of Rebel Bars, the crew reached out to the School District of Philadelphia Division of Food Services. Manager of food services Amy Virus explained how working with Rebel Ventures was different from her experience with other food vendors: "There are people who want to sell us something every single day . . . so the difference here was helping us to understand that this was not just a Rebel Crumble, or one product. This is an experience for students, something that's going to fund a nonprofit that will ultimately give job skills and other opportunities to our students . . . Once we understood that, then it was a no brainer."

The school district supported Rebel Ventures' ideas but explained that to get on the school breakfast menu, they had to create a product that contained one-half cup of fruit and thirty-two grams of grain (at least sixteen grams of whole grain) per serving. They also need to supply fifty thousand units at a time and do so for about 50 cents per product. Because Rebel Bars didn't fit these requirements, the team got straight to work on recipes that included healthy ingredients like bananas, sweet potatoes, and applesauce, assembled into a snack whose name evolved with its transformation



5.2 Students giving feedback on Rebel Crumbles' packaging designs in 2016. Credit: Rebel Ventures.

to the current one, Rebel Crumbles. They also did public taste tests at local K–12 schools through the Netter Center's University-Assisted Community Schools programming, visiting hundreds of classrooms and public events to get a consensus on things that the children liked.

They provided samples of different versions of the Crumbles and asked tasters to fill out a paper survey with smiley faces and sad faces to measure how much they liked the Crumbles and the packaging design, and a space to write in any suggestions for improvement. Our crew later entered this data into a spreadsheet to compare flavors and make adjustments based on the feedback.

During the Crumbles development process, the school district introduced us to Michel's Bakery in Philadelphia, who had the capacity to help us manufacture our new product in the quantity the school district needed. By January of 2017, the first Rebel Crumbles were being served in over three hundred schools. Since then, more than one million Crumbles have been distributed citywide in district schools.

OUR ORGANIZATION

In 2016, Rebel Ventures, while still actively partnering with Penn, evolved into an independent nonprofit with a mission of increasing access to healthy nutritious foods and developing youth entrepreneurs. The high school crew has continued to power the organization, as I learned when I joined in 2020. We continue to get support from the Netter Center and engage Penn undergraduates, graduate students, staff, and faculty as mentors and co-learners. Over the years, we have also formed partnerships with the School District of Philadelphia, through the offices of Food Services, Student Leadership, School Climate, and Nutrition Education, as well as principals, teachers, and staff in K–12 schools. We partner with nonprofits such as The Food Trust, Philabundance, and The Enterprise Center as well as government (Philadelphia Health and Commerce Departments) and industry partners (Michel's Bakery, Bimbo Bakeries, High Street Hospitality, Dechert Law Firm) to support our crew's learning and organizational growth.

Currently, the crew of high schoolers making up Rebel Ventures work nine to twelve hours per week during the school year and twenty to twenty-five hours per week in the summer. These Rebels develop healthy food products and educational activities that reach thousands of students, create videos and marketing campaigns, track budgets, steward partnerships, speak at conferences, fill out IRS 990 forms, take business trips, and learn through each experience. The high school Rebel crew, a group ranging from five to fifteen students, is supported by a group of mentors, including paid part-time and full-time staff mentors as well as college and graduate students and professional volunteers. Our goal is to have a balance of high school students and adults in the crew. We are also overseen by a board of directors who share a commitment to Rebel's mission and values. As of 2022, the board has eight members, but it can change size over time with crew input.

To ensure that youth have meaningful leadership positions, Rebel Ventures also has a high school student co-executive director. Our first teen co-exec, Tre'Cia Gibson, described her experience this way:

In my 11th grade year, I went from being a high school team member to high school co-executive director. At that time, I was taking on a lot of responsibilities because 11th grade is the most important year in high school because

colleges look at it. It took a lot of effort, but I was able to manage. Being in high school and managing high school students was a challenge, this is wholeheartedly true. I would not change anything and being at Rebel helped me achieve. The experience was amazing and if I had the chance to bring every high school student on I would.

MISSION AND VALUES

The Philadelphia School District is made up of almost two hundred thousand students, most of whom are Black and / or African American.² All students in Philadelphia public schools are eligible for free breakfast and lunch.³ But a research study conducted in 2016–2017 found that student breakfast participation across the School District of Philadelphia averaged 42 percent.⁴ Based on my experience, reasons for low participation include the difficulty some students have getting to school early, the “outside-of-school” competition from fast-food and corner stores, as well as the stigma around school food not being good.

As students, the Rebel crew identifies these issues and actively works to create change. We were created to empower youth to speak out about what we believe in and to create a better school food environment. Today, youth power is a core feature of our approach to transforming school food politics. We live in a time when adults are primarily in charge of what students consume daily at school,⁵ but students have valuable perspectives and capabilities too. The youth at Rebel Ventures understand modern school food communities, and we believe that school food will be better if the people eating that food have control over what is being purchased, produced, and served.

We believe that students want to be healthy but don’t always enjoy the food they’re told they need to eat to reach their goals. To solve that problem, we promote “healthy deliciousness,” a phrase developed by Rebel youth leaders to reflect the idea that fresh food should be good *for* you as well as good *to* you, so that staying healthy does not mean sacrificing taste or flavor. In our entrepreneurship mentor Kevin Dixon’s words, “Rebel Crumbles is telling you that it’s healthy deliciousness. It’s right there. It’s health in your face and it’s tasting so good.”

Youth power extends beyond having youth envision the product they want to create and consume. It is the core value that guides our actions.



5.3 Rebel crew member Lauren testing new recipes in 2020. Credit: Rebel Ventures.

Youth power doesn't just mean providing teens with jobs and leadership positions. Youth power means high school students taking real-world responsibility to run our nonprofit. Our predecessors at Pepper Middle School set Rebel's values: kids can grow into the young entrepreneurs and leaders we know we are capable of being.

Since we are our own target audience, we have a unique drive and determination to improve our community. When asked about the importance of youth power, manager of food services Amy Virus explained: "It's informing. [Rebel] helps make pathways for other students to do more work within the district and remind the district that, you know, we are the students. We need a voice. We want to be heard. We want to be seen." This is how our organization grew to be what it is today. Power is in the hands of the food consumer. With this control, we have created a model for how youth power can be directly applied to the school cafeteria.

IMPACT AND CHALLENGES

As the first youth-created product served in all Philadelphia public schools, Rebel Crumbles has a special place in the heart of the community. Rebel

board member Jane Kauer speaks to the impact of these snacks: “As an anthropologist, to me, we have a cultural artifact that is something that people interact with in this very physical way because you’re eating it. This is hugely powerful and the fact that kids are making the decisions that lead to that getting into schools or into stores is amazing.” Jane also elaborates on Rebel’s status as a social enterprise that engages students in running a business: “Kids are too infrequently associated with . . . commerce. . . . They’re out there and they’re repeatedly showing up in the community and people are interacting with them, eating the Crumbles, reading the packaging, and hopefully going back and looking at social media and all these other things. In terms of Rebel Crumbles, I think that itself is hugely powerful.”

My personal experience shows how youth perspectives on school food have changed since Crumbles was created. I remember my middle school cafeteria being livelier than ever on Crumble day. And, as I later came to appreciate, healthy deliciousness was making it possible. My friends and I say that Rebel Crumbles remind us of fresh baked goods. As co-exec Tre’Cia Gibson put it: “Crumbles remind me of a cake fresh out the oven, even when they’re reheated. It’s a burst of flavors.”

We also impact the lives of the students on our crew. While working with Rebel, teens learn life lessons including cooking, time management, and leadership skills. High school student and Rebel crew member Tiguida Kaba says that working with us has helped her with her struggles with stepping out of her comfort zone: “One challenge is forcing yourself to be comfortable doing things you’re usually uncomfortable with. Presenting at an event by yourself, it’s like, ‘You expect me to go out into all these people by myself?’ It’s gotten to a point where I’m comfortable doing that. Sometimes I get nervous a few seconds before I have to do it. In terms of getting prepared, practice makes perfect. You get better at it the more you do it.”

I relate to this a lot. Coming into the crew, I planned on staying behind the scenes. It was only about a month later that I found myself leading an hour-long workshop at our annual Youth Entrepreneurship Expo. The audience for the workshop was high school students across Philadelphia, and the topic was planning and organization. In the moment, I was incredibly anxious and sweating profusely, but when the event was

over and I had a moment to process everything, I felt this amazing sense of accomplishment. The impact of working at Rebel comes after we overcome our challenges.

I, and many of my peers, decided to work for Rebel when we saw how different it was from your typical first job or after-school activity. This wasn't a fast-food job that would pay us the bare minimum for hard labor. This was an opportunity to better the community and ourselves in the process. Our work has inspired us, as individuals, to speak out on other issues that are important to us. For example, Tim Scott started his own nonprofit organization after his work with Rebel: Project Pledge Philly, an initiative dedicated to providing students with the resources to excel academically.

WHAT'S NEXT

While I write this, we are in the middle of a life-changing pandemic. People are losing their jobs, their homes, and access to food. At Rebel, we knew we could help solve at least one of those problems with the help of the school district. When the Coronavirus struck, a lot of Philadelphia's youth were either going hungry or spending their money on junk food without realizing that there was healthier food accessible to them at no cost. The School District of Philadelphia was providing free grab-and-go meals for students at sixty-three different district sites, but far fewer kids retrieved these meals than those who were eating school food prior to the pandemic. The Division of Food Services realized that they needed help getting the word out, and asked their formal partner, Rebel Ventures, to improve communication between the district and its students. Starting in May 2020, the Rebel Team created social media posts and videos telling people where to get their grab-and-go meals and how to spice them up in true Rebel fashion. There is more to Rebel Ventures than making and selling our own products.

Prior to the pandemic, we had been designing and testing a new program, the Rebel Market, which we plan to restart when it is safe. The afterschool-based Rebel Market is run by students in schools with the goal of providing healthy and delicious snack options, which are "sold" for coupon

incentives called “Rebel Bucks.” Students earn Rebel Bucks in school for good behavior and completing tasks. Product offerings will include fruit smoothies, whole fruits, Rebel Crumbles, Rebel Nachos (whole grain chips with lentil barbacoa and vegan carrot/potato “cheez” sauce), and other fruit- and veggie-centric snacks. Unlike Crumbles, which are manufactured by Michel’s Bakery, products served at the Rebel Market will be made off-site by the Rebel Crew and delivered by Rebel staff to the schools. The market will employ high school students as entrepreneurs running school-based stores that provide students with access to healthy, delicious, affordable, kid-desired foods right in school.

Rebel Ventures is part of a community, in Philadelphia and around the country, of youth-led organizations focused on building healthier food systems. Since our founding, we have been influenced and inspired by the work of others. The Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative in Philadelphia (a program of Penn’s Netter Center) has for many years engaged high school students in building gardens, growing food, running fruit stands, farmer’s market entrepreneurship, and cafeteria interventions—all of which inspired Rebel Ventures’ approach. Across the country there are organizations such as Food Empowerment Education Sustainability Team (FEEST) in Seattle, Washington, and the Food and Finance High School in New York City that directly engage young people in advocating for and creating healthy school food. Moving forward, we plan to continue our youth-powered school food work and collaborate and learn from these organizations and others.

We also hope to increase youth power with new connections between the school curriculum and the school cafeteria. For example, Philadelphia has a category of school called Career and Technical Education (CTE), which offers courses in specific, practical, and professional skills. The school I attend is CAPA HS, where I’m majoring in media design and television. Other schools include majors such as culinary arts, food processing science, and horticulture. We see great potential in having students use and refine those skill sets to help transform school food. For example, CTE culinary arts students can be responsible for creating their school’s cafeteria menus, and the meal itself. CTE horticulture students can grow the produce used in school meals. And CTE media students like me can participate and make commercials and designs to promote school food. Here at Rebel, we truly

believe in food justice, and we actively work to engage youth in creating healthier schools.

NOTES

1. James Jack and John Sludden, "School Closings in Philadelphia," *PennGSE Perspectives on Urban Education* 10, no. 1 (2013): 1–7.
2. "Fast Facts," The School District of Philadelphia, last modified January 20, 2023, <https://www.philasd.org/fast-facts/>.
3. Kevin McCorry, "Let Them Eat Lunch: All Philly Students Now Eligible for Free School Meals," WHYY, September 4, 2014, <https://whyy.org/articles/let-them-eat-lunch-all-philly-students-now-eligible-for-free-meals/>.
4. "School Breakfast Participation," The School District of Philadelphia, last modified June 30, 2021, <https://www.philasd.org/research/programsservices/projects/school-breakfast-participation/>.
5. For a similar argument at a national scale, see chapter 2 in this volume.

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