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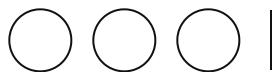
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BIZ & TECH

Oakland's Bitwise puts diverse students on path to tech success by paying them to learn

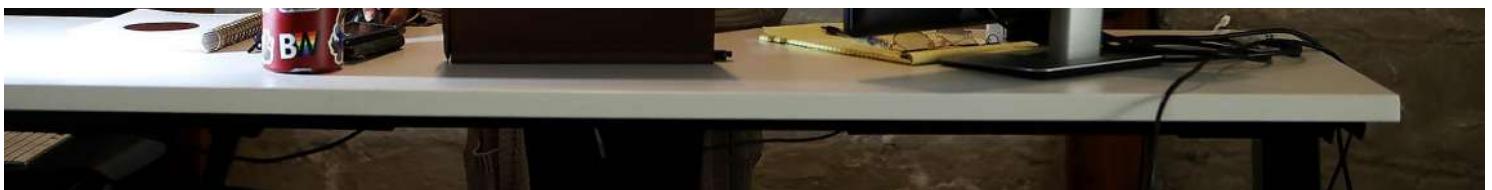
**Carolyn Said**

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SI

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Adorable Jasmine went through a pay-to-learn program from Bitwise Industries and now works at Code for America.
Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

For years, Adorable Jasmine sought to break into technology. But the 35-year-old Oakland resident couldn't land even an entry-level gig despite years of nonprofit work, a master's degree and a lot of diligent self-instruction. Jasmine, who is Black,

said she encountered racism and sexism at interviews and networking events, but kept trying, eager to leverage tech for social change.

Then by serendipity she learned about a school where she could not only get tech training but be paid to learn through an internship.

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She started at Geekwise Academy — now renamed Bitwise Workforce — in Oakland

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last year.

"The most refreshing thing was that I went from feeling like I didn't really belong in tech to an all-Black cohort where everybody looked like me, and Black women were leading it," she said. "It was incredible to have that contrast happen so quickly."

Jasmine became certified as a Salesforce administrator through the nine-month program, which was conducted virtually because of the pandemic. She is now working as a project manager at Code for America.

She is among some 5,000 people who have gone through Bitwise's "pay to learn" curriculum. More than four-fifths of them have landed tech jobs, many with Bitwise itself, the company said.

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Adorable Jasmine became certified as a Salesforce administrator through Bitwise's virtual nine-month training program.
Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

Unlike many tech boot camps, which charge big bucks up front, Bitwise places its students, mainly minorities and people from disadvantaged backgrounds, in paid internships so they can earn while they learn.

Bitwise's co-founders, Irma Olguin and Jake Soberal, each the children of struggling immigrant families, said seeing how the tech industry can transform people's lives led them to start the parent company, [Bitwise Industries](#), in 2013.

"We wanted to connect folks from historically marginalized communities to skills that would let them access opportunities in the tech industry," Soberal said.
"What's fundamentally different is paying people to learn. If you want to achieve diversity and inclusion in tech, that is the secret sauce."

Bitwise supports students in other ways, helping with transportation, child care and even food, for instance.

"We believe deeply that when you move enough rocks out of the road, folks from all kinds of backgrounds can take advantage of opportunities in the tech economy," Olguin said.

Adorable Jasmine went through a pay-as-you-learn coding program from Bitwise Industries and now works at Code for America.

Yalonda M. James / The Chronicle

To make that work, Fresno-based Bitwise Industries has three arms. It trains people in tech skills; it rents commercial real estate to tech companies and others; and it runs a tech consulting division that both generates revenue and provides a place to pair senior talent with apprentices from its tech school.

Now, thanks to a \$50 million funding round, the 250-person Bitwise, which focuses on what it calls "underdog cities," is expanding nationwide. Its first destination outside California will be Toledo, Ohio.

"We look at investing in tech startups whose core business helps close gaps of access, opportunity or outcome for low-income people and people of color," said Freada Kapor Klein, a partner at Oakland's Kapor Capital, one of the investors.

She said she appreciates the company's "scrappiness, talent and heart; the marriage of tech and compassion."

Bitwise's workforce development is needed more than ever with rampant pandemic unemployment, Klein said.

"Bitwise can put people on a quick and sure footing to a new career," she said.

"They're being upskilled, given access to a whole new industry that will provide them a path to mobility."

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Among Bitwise's consulting projects is [OnwardCA.org](#) for California, sister sites in other states, and [OnwardUS.org](#) for the nation. The sites connect people to emergency resources for food, shelter, childcare and money; link to career training programs; and list open jobs.

Bitwise taps public-private partnerships to help fund its technology education, getting money from government, philanthropists and corporations.

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BY GRETA KAUL

Besides Fresno and Oakland, Bitwise has operations in Bakersfield and Merced. It seeks to buy and develop historic buildings in city centers to help revitalize them, provide a home for its tech school and provide space to lease to up-and-coming tech companies that might employ its graduates.

Its Oakland launch came at the beginning of shelter-in-place so it is still seeking a physical space there. About 200 people have gone through the Oakland program and another 200 are going through it this year.

Its schools teach both traditional tech skills, such as programming, and related

areas such as tech support, inside sales, online marketing, user experience/user interface design, data science, product management, and entrepreneurship.

For Jasmine, the hands-on internship was as valuable as the curriculum.

"I loved the teaching model of having us start to apply what we were learning," such as doing work for the Fresno food bank, she said. "We got to work on real problems. Now I feel like I have an advantage in the competitive job market because I was given the space to exercise the skills the industry is looking for."

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Carolyn Said covers the on-demand economy (new marketplaces such as Uber, TaskRabbit and Airbnb that let people rent their time, goods and services), the impacts of automation and AI on labor, and the world of autonomous vehicles. Previously she covered the housing market and foreclosure crisis, winning awards for stories that shed light on the human impact of sweeping economic trends. As a business reporter at The Chronicle since 1997, she also has covered the dot-com rise and fall, the California energy crisis, the corporate malfeasance scandals, and the fallout from economic downturns.

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