

If We Want to Diversify Professions, We Have to Provide Mirrors to Our Youth

By Shawnta S. Barnes – November 18, 2018

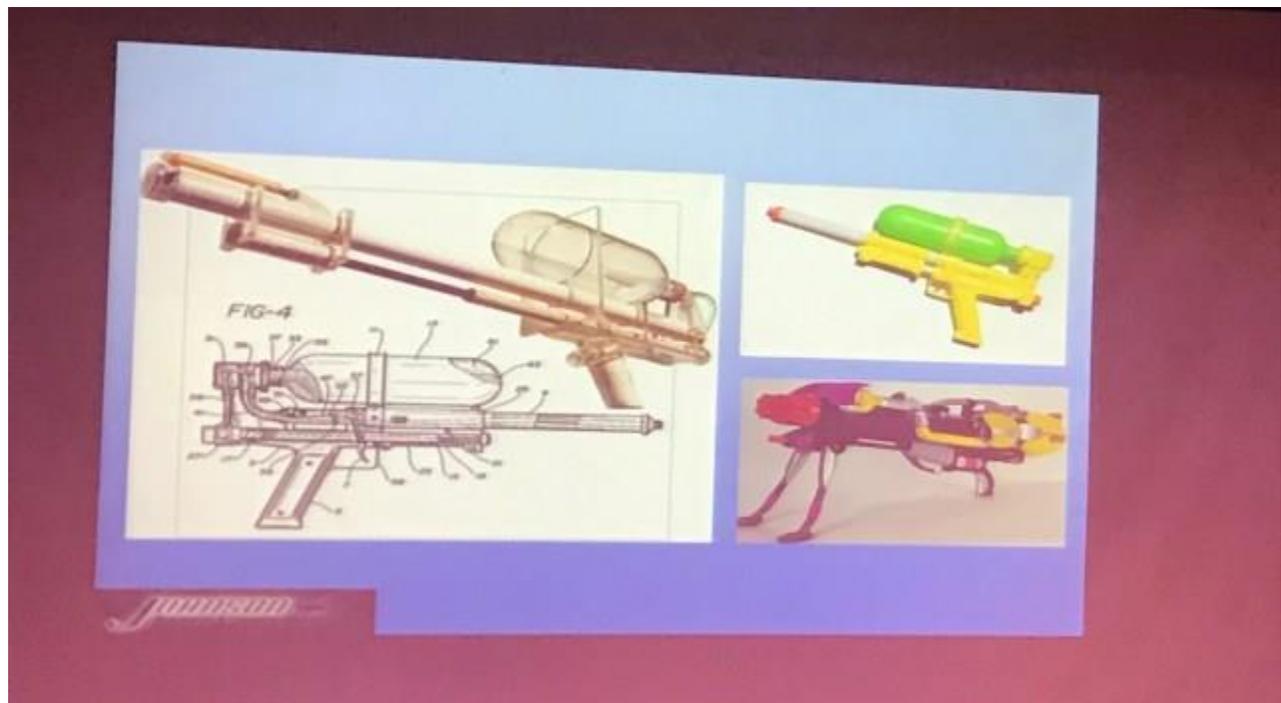


In my family of four, we all love anything that has to do with STEM. I'm a board member of The STEM Connection, and my sons participate in their programming. My husband has a STEM career, and he is a Senior Oracle Database Administrator for the state of Indiana. Whenever we have an opportunity, we attend events that involve STEM. Yesterday, we attended Fall Fest at Central Library, and we were able to listen to Dr. Lonnie Johnson speak. He was the inventor of the super soaker water gun, a best selling American toy. In addition to his lecture, audience members were also able to view items from the black inventor museum.

Both of my sons have expressed repeated interest in becoming scientists and inventors. As a parent and educator, I know the one way to support children in figuring out what career path

they will follow in the future is providing plenty of exposure and plenty of opportunities for exploration. Dr. Johnson also highlighted this during his lecture when he said, "When kids learn by doing and actually experience their success they gain some self-confidence that you really can't take away from them." In addition to exposure and exploration, children of color need one more component. They need to see people who look like them doing the career they might pursue one day.

What I appreciated most about Dr. Johnson's lecture was his honesty and transparency. He did not sugar coat his experience. He shared his experience growing up in Mobile, Alabama and how he used to take toys apart and make new toys out of the parts. He explained that he took a test and the results showed he wasn't smart enough to pursue the career he wanted. That did not stop him from working on a robot for over a year. At the end of his senior year, he entered the robot in a contest, and he won first place. It was not a local competition, but a regional competition with students from many states.



My boys found the diagrams of the first super soaker gun interesting. He explained how it took time to create, but it was worth persevering through the difficulties. What my husband and I found most interesting is when he revealed it wasn't all about the water gun. He explained to the audience:

I wanted to be the king of all toy guns, so I started making Nerf dart guns. They became successful as well. My strategy was to get back to working on these environmental projects. If I could make enough money from the toys to support myself, I could work on my own projects.

Not only is Dr. Johnson an inventor and an engineer, but he is also an entrepreneur working on solutions to make our society better. This is the type of role model I want my sons to see. Children of color face extra barriers than their white counterparts and having mirrors is important for children of color to help motivate them when they want to give up. They will have an example to think back upon when they believe their goals can't be accomplished.