

# A Detroit Mom's Quest to Breathe Innovation Into Young Minds

[Sarah Schmid](#) 12/23/11 [Leave a Comment](#)



I'm fond of saying that what Detroit needs is a [Cory Booker](#). But I need to amend that: What Detroit *really* needs is a few more people like Ida Byrd-Hill, the founder of [Uplift Inc.](#), a startup whose motto is "Utilizing intellectual property, real estate, and technology to lift people out of tragedy by reconstructing cities one idea at a time."

Byrd-Hill is an indomitable mother of two with an obvious passion for Detroit and its children. She says things like: "I don't take up a cause lightly, and I don't take it up to lose."

"I will grind up a superintendent like it's nothing."

"If I have to pass laws to force you to do your job, then that's what I'll do."

She doesn't tolerate mediocrity or excuses, especially when it pertains to her kids. Byrd-Hill spent years traveling the globe as a financial advisor and corporate headhunter before giving birth to her twins, who are now in their first year of college.

She began advocating for the children of Detroit after her kids started school and she [learned firsthand](#) how dysfunctional the Detroit Public School (DPS) system can be. There's no doubt she's made more than one teacher who hoped to coast through the school year with the same old insufficient lesson plan quake in his boots.

One day when her son was younger, she asked him how his class experiments were going. “What experiments?” he replied. She fired off an email to the teacher asking for a list of the experiments he planned to have the students do during the school year. She received a “flip” response.

Her blood boiling—her children are her legacy after all, just like they’re Detroit’s legacy—she drove over to Grosse Pointe, a tony suburb east of the city, walked into a school, and asked if she could have a list of experiments being taught to students in the same grade as her son. They emailed her the requested information a few hours later. Experiencing the stark contrast in service kicked off “a long battle” between Byrd-Hill and DPS in which she demanded that school officials be held accountable for what goes on in Detroit schools, which has an abysmal estimated graduation rate of 27 percent.

In 2006, she founded [Hustle & TECHknow Preparatory High School](#), which was housed in the Compuware Building and received support from Compuware founder and Detroit booster Peter Karmanos. Byrd-Hill describes Hustle & TECHknow as a cyber school for dropouts ages 16 to 19. She wanted to take the kids’ natural entrepreneurial inclinations they were already using to sell drugs or carry out other street hustles and channel them into something positive. She wanted to prepare her students for a better life not only by helping them to earn a high school diploma, but also by indoctrinating them into a corporate mindset, teaching them about business etiquette, technology, and how to thrive in the workplace.

The students, she says, loved the tech-heavy approach. The kids weren’t too interested in reading books, but if they were e-mailed the same books in PDF form, suddenly they were interested. Her unconventional methods earned regional accolades, but they also inspired plenty of tut-tutting from traditionalists. Byrd-Hill was undeterred. Of the 10 seniors who attended Hustle & TECHknow, eight graduated and went on to post-secondary matriculation before the school was shut down a year after it opened due to a bureaucratic misstep: the school hired its own teachers, which angered the unions.

If the story ended here, it would be just another Detroit tragedy involving a resident who takes on the Sisyphean task of effecting change in one of the city’s institutions. But, luckily for all of us, it’s not. Byrd-Hill is at it again with a new board game called [Fluke: The Wealth Building Game of Accidental Inventions](#), which is meant to teach its

players about the “wild, wild world of intellectual property” and hopefully inspire them to think innovatively about their futures.

“Corporate America revolves around intellectual property,” Byrd-Hill says. “Companies will do anything to protect IP. I’m trying to get kids interested in research and development, because that’s where the money is made. We praise people like Steve Jobs, but we don’t groom kids to be like Steve Jobs. Fluke is the answer to the question of why we need to learn science, technology, and math.”

The board is made up of spaces in the shape of the infinity symbol. Players roll the dice and, according to the space they land on, pay or collect a patent licensing fee, buy a patent if it’s not already owned by another player, purchase research corporations, increase wealth through stock explosions, or spend additional time in the Research Lab to find more inventions. Players also draw from a deck of cards describing the price and history of various accidental inventions such as saccharine and Google.

Along the way, players manage stock portfolios and venture funds, and draw Risk & Reward cards (one card reads, “Nuclear fusion experiment goes bad. Advance to Gas Mask. Lose \$50 mil. Do not pass Idea Incubator.”) If a player runs out of money, they’re declared bankrupt and the game ends. Whoever has the most valuable portfolio wins the game and the designation of Best Corporate Executive.

“We’re just replicating life,” Byrd-Hill says of the game’s focus on building a portfolio instead of simply accumulating cash, like in Monopoly. “Everyone has the ability to commercialize an idea and turn it into a billion-dollar fluke.”

Although the game currently retails at \$100 because it’s still in the prototype stage, Byrd-Hill has launched a [Kickstarter campaign](#) to raise money for factory production, which will bring the cost of each game down to \$30. One day, she hopes to manufacture Fluke right in the riverfront Detroit neighborhood she lives in. She admits to feeling frustrated with how slowly the Kickstarter campaign has taken off, which she attributes it to her location.

“I have a friend in Seattle, and he’s always trying to convince me to move there,” she says. “In Seattle, people are open to big ideas because they happen all the time. In Detroit, we fight against the mindset that we’re not going to pull it off.”

Though Byrd-Hill created her game with children in mind, she hopes that it also becomes an economic development and corporate training tool. She thinks that, right now, corporations are doing a disservice by neglecting to cultivate innovation in their lower ranks. The employees who are slogging away in cubicles or answering phones are the people on the front lines dealing with customers and the public, she points out, and those are the people in any company who should be empowered to test solutions to problems and share their ideas for how to make the business run better.

“Companies tend not to make investments in lower wage employees, but if we can get entire companies innovating from the bottom up, that will revolutionize corporate America,” Byrd-Hill says. “Innovation isn’t always planned. Innovation is the freedom to make accidents that solve problems.”

*Sarah Schmid is the editor of Xconomy Detroit. You can reach her at 313-570-9823 or [sschmid@xconomy.com](mailto:sschmid@xconomy.com) or follow her on Twitter [@xconomyDET](https://twitter.com/xconomyDET).*