Kirkwood alum parlays early business acumen into successful restaurant empire

Sterling Coleman has been passionate about business since he was a child, even before he attended Kirkwood High School through the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corp. program.

Coleman, a 1988 Kirkwood graduate, is now chief executive officer and president of SJAC Food Groups Holdings in Atlanta. The company is the largest African-American licensee group in the Zaxby's Franchising Inc. network and it operates the franchise's top grossing location. He founded the company in 2001 to operate first-class brand restaurants, deliver an outstanding guest experience and achieve great results while positioning the company for continued growth.

And grow it has. SJAC started with one Atlanta location with annual sales of $1.5 million and has expanded to more than 17 stores in 12 cities with annual sales of over $30 million.

It all started when young Sterling solicited neighbors to hire him to shovel snow, cut grass, carry groceries and pump gas. He also ran a paper route and a hot dog stand. When it came time for high school, his mother knew what to do.

Diane Coleman registered her four sons in the VICC program in the Kirkwood School District, wanting them to receive the high school education she did not have. She knew they would meet classmates from different economic, social and racial backgrounds and that would shape their future trajectories. “Kirkwood High School and its faculty opened my eyes to more possibilities and encouraged me to go to college and even beyond,” Coleman said.

Coleman credits his accounting teacher at Kirkwood for giving him the all-important understanding of accounts payable and receivables and notes payable and receivable and other vital business concepts.

While at Kirkwood, he played on the varsity basketball and junior varsity football teams.

Former Kirkwood High Principal David Holley, also Coleman’s basketball coach, saw the ingredients that would lead to business success for Coleman. “The hard work and positive attitude that he exhibited as an 18-year-old are the same traits that have surely contributed to his success in life,” Holley said. “I can still see the furrowed brow when he was hunkered down in an intense situation. I also can see the wide smile and garrulous laughter when things had gone well. As a player, his most outstanding quality was the tenaciousness with which he played defense.”

Holley has no doubt that the same tenaciousness is evident in Coleman’s business dealings.

Coleman was inducted into the Kirkwood Outstanding Alumni Hall of Fame in October 2019. He returned to the high school campus for the induction ceremony and related events.

After high school, Coleman earned a bachelor’s degree in business administration from Tennessee State University. A lifetime member of Kappa Alpha Psi, he was recognized for his academic achievements and earned a place on the Dean’s List. In 2018, TSU awarded him the Entrepreneur Achievement Award, which honors alumni who are prominent, emerging leaders and have made a positive impact on the university’s brand and community.

Sterling Coleman and his wife, Shameka, have four children and live in Atlanta.
These are the 2020 outstanding graduates.
The following summer, she returned on a positive note, positively impacting their communities. She had become a peer facilitator for the intensive program for students dedicated to increasing their social awareness and to their school's dialogues. Continuing with her senior year, she became a peer facilitator for the Rockwood School District's Leadership Program, where she advocated for her peers that whether they lived in the county or city, students should not be defined by their address or the neighborhood they grew up in. Jameah excelled in academics while being involved in Longhorn Council, cheerleading, and serving as a South Tech ambassador for her junior and senior years. Jameah will continue her education at Webster University in the fall after being awarded a top academic scholarship and placement within the McCabe Honors Program.

Lafayette High School

Collection was a mature, focused Lafayette student who is highly motivated, personable and responsible with an outstanding work ethic. Her leadership role was invisible as she continually strived for more knowledge and skills. She is a leader by example and has succeeded by her willingness to go the “extra mile” without being asked or told. Tajiri was a first-rate competitor in Lafayette’s newly developed girls volleyball programs. She also excelled as a cadet of the MO-8131 Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (AFJROTC) program. As a cadet, she exuded leadership in a way that demonstrated love and a caring for others and was a natural wingman to her fellow cadets. While earning excellent grades, Tajiri still found time to bake to earn extra money and to volunteer at food pantries and veterans cemeteries and perform community service projects. Tajiri made herself a significant force of positive change and influence within the community.

The St. Louis educational community is taking care of each other in a time of crisis. Food was not the only thing our buses delivered. They also carried cleaning supplies, Chromebook computers, Hot Spots and even ice cream and personal pan pizzas from Papa John’s and breakfast pastries and sandwiches from Panera. These are just some of the many ways the St. Louis educational community is taking care of each other in a time of crisis.

MESSAGE from the CEO

It is hard to believe, but I have now had the privilege of serving as VICC’s CEO for over 10 years. Because of the courage and truthfulness of coworkers and friends whose hue is different than mine, I have grown to better understand the problem of systemic racism. The love, patience and care offered by people of color in my life has given me a new set of eyes. I now recognize that I have failed many times, particularly considering recent events, my goal is to listen carefully and emphatically to my black brothers and sisters. While COVID-19 has certainly been tragic, sad and unbelievable, those words apply as well to the most recent events involving Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Christian Cooper, George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks. I was recently invited to a meeting at the Victoria Institute and it was stated that the system helps itself to learn more, become more just, and reach new levels of humanity previously missed and misunderstood. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all of us to mentor and advocate for people who do not look like ourselves. It enhances and spreads to our community as well. Jonica has received a Rotary Club scholarship, the Ivory Crockett Scholarship, the Webster Groves Family and Friends Scholarship, the UML-Bound Scholarship, the Diversity and Inclusion Scholarship and Horace College Scholarship to help her achieve her goals.}

Ahmed Suada plans to pursue a B.A. Scholarship to attend St. Louis Community College, pursuing a degree in nursing. His grade point average is 3.276. He is a good friend and a positive mentor to those around him. He has grown in maturity and confidence since freshman year and will no doubt be successful in his chosen career path.

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transportation information

COVID-19 — Please see additional guidelines for 2020–2021 listed on VICC website (www.choicecorp.org) that must be followed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**transportation information**

**TRANSPORTATION INFORMATION**

The Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation (VICC) staff includes five counselors/social workers who can assist families with issues related to their school transfers. Counselors are happy to respond to concerns and/or questions from parents or students regarding any issue that would interfere with the success of a child in the school setting, such as attendance, bullying, behavior or curriculum, achievement or other concerns. They also can provide counseling assistance for students and help parents understand their educational rights. Counselors generally are assigned according to the first letter of the student’s last name. They can be reached by calling 314-721-8422, and dialing the extension number below, or via email.

- Vickie Williams, Counselor, Part-Time 314-721-8422, ext. 3011 vwilliams@choicecorp.org Serving Students: A – C
- Laurenne Mitchom, Counselor, Part-Time 314-721-8422, ext. 3020 lmitchom@choicecorp.org Serving Students: D – H
- Jennifer Christy, Counselor, Part-Time 314-721-8422, ext. 3096 jchristy@choicecorp.org Serving Students: I – N
- Mildred Scott, Counselor, Part-Time 314-721-8422, ext. 3027 mscott@choicecorp.org Serving Students: O – R
- Mary Schafer, Counselor, Part-Time 314-721-8422, ext. 3016 mschafer@choicecorp.org Serving Students: S – Z

**Student Responsibilities**

Students are responsible only at their assigned stop. They must arrive at their designated pick-up location 5 minutes before the scheduled pick-up time, and remain at least 15 minutes after the pickup time before calling the transportation staff at 314-721-8422 to report a missing bus. These individuals will provide direct supervision of our service providers. St. Louis County/Yellow Cab and Laclede Taxi. All drivers will be certified in the following Missouri Department of Education specifications:

- Will hold a school bus endorsement on their state license
- Pass a thorough fingerprint criminal background check in accordance with VICC guidelines
- Carry commercial auto liability insurance in accordance with VICC guidelines
- Comply with all state and local laws governing student transportation.

All vehicles will be marked with signage and an App will be made available for use by parents/guardians to provide parents/guardians with the driver’s facial picture, make of vehicle and license plate number.

**General Safety Rules**

- Obey the driver promptly.
- Smoking, eating and drinking are not permitted.
- Remain seated while the bus is in motion with respect to the student’s safety and security.
- Refrain from using loud or obscene language.
- Do not damage the bus/cab in any way.
- Do not throw objects on the bus or out of the windows.
- Do not extend head, arms, legs or hands out of the windows.
- Do not tamper with the emergency door exit in the case of a real emergency and only under the instruction of the driver.
- Fighting, scuffling or creating loud disturbances are not permitted.
- Avoid the Danger Zones next to the bus where the driver can’t see you. This distance is approximately 10 feet around all sides.
- If you must cross the street after you get off the bus, wait for the driver’s signal to you and then cross in front of the bus.
- Don’t try to pick up something dropped near the bus because the driver might not see you.
- Remember that other motorists don’t always stop for a stopped school bus. Use extreme caution when getting on and off the bus.
- Never run back to the bus, even if you dropped or forgot something.

**Trespass Policy**

To bolster the safety of students riding buses to school, the VICC Board adopted the following trespass policy: “Trespass occurs when anyone boards a school bus without prior approval from VICC. Any VICC-designated person (including students), contractor or school staff whose job responsibilities require him/her to be on a school bus shall be authorized and not considered trespassing. Only with prior approval from VICC or a contractor may any parent, guardian or member of the general public be allowed on a bus at any time.” Be sure to review the transportation section in the Voluntary Transfer Program Handbook (pages 8-17) with your child before the start of school.

If you need a handbook, please call 314-721-8422, ext. 3012, or visit our website: www.choicecorp.org.

**EMERGENCY Communication System**

To improve communication with parents regarding transportation and their child’s participation in the St. Louis Student Transfer Program, the Voluntary Interdistrict Choice Corporation uses a telephone broadcast system, similar to ones used in many participating school districts. This system, provided by School Messenger, allows VICC to quickly send all households and parents a pre-recorded message by phone within minutes of a transportation emergency or unplanned event. It may significantly delay a child’s pick-up or drop-off time. These emergencies include traffic jams, bus breakdowns, inclement weather, accidents, etc. The service may also be used from time to time to communicate general program announcements or reminders. This system will simultaneously call a home and one additional cellphone or alternate number for each student’s family who needs to be contacted and will deliver a message from Tammi Webb. In order for you to receive such messages it is critically important that you are provided accurate and up-to-date telephone numbers.

**Contact Persons**

- Special School District-SLT County
  Emily Boeckmann
  314.988.8125
- St. Louis Magnet
  Mr. Lon Miller
  314.721.8422 ext. 8012
- Valley Park
  Mr. Ted Savage
  636.923.3626
- Webster Groves
  Mr. John M. Thomas
  314.918.4378

**Serving Students**

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**Student Responsibilities**

- Looking for lost items left on the bus/cab
- Checking on activity bus location
- Questions or cancellations when VICC Transportation office is closed. Refer to your child’s bus/cab driver.

**Taxi Cab or (non-yellow bus transportation)**

VICC now incorporates individual providers along with traditional taxi cabs in the daily operation of transporting students. These individual providers will be under the direct supervision of our service providers, St. Louis County/Yellow Cab and Laclede Taxi. All drivers will be certified in the following Missouri Department of Education specifications:

- Will hold a school bus endorsement on their state license
- Pass a thorough fingerprint criminal background check in accordance with VICC guidelines
- Carry commercial auto liability insurance in accordance with VICC guidelines
- Comply with all state and local laws governing student transportation.

Transportation may run late and/or routes may not be firmly in place during the first weeks of school. Please make sure your child knows exactly what to do if the bus does not arrive at the correct time. After being picked up, the child should call. Also make sure your child knows what is expected when he or she is dropped off at the end of the school day. If you normally meet your child at the bus stop, be sure he or she understands what to do if you are not there. If the transportation route to which your child is assigned does not operate in a timely manner, or other problems arise, please communicate with the VICC transportation office. It is important for parents to keep the school as well as the district contact person informed of any changes in either the home phone number or cell or alternative emergency number for your child. Also, be sure to request that this information be forwarded to the transportation staff.

If You Move

If you move during the summer, the principal at the county school your child has been or will be attending or that district’s contact person immediately. All districts have central office personnel who work during the summer to handle such situations. Please remember, it takes up to 10 working days to make a transportation change. If you plan to move during the school year, please contact your home district’s contact person at least two weeks before you move. If you move outside of your school’s attendance area, you will need to request a transfer to a school in your new attendance area prior to being provided with own transportation in order to remain at your original school.