

The Better Detroit Brownie Company

Helping Our Kids Create A Better Future For Themselves and For Us All

Written by Vicki Logan



Compassion is something we all need more of in this world. Compassion and understanding. Sometimes we are dealt challenges beyond our control and it's always a good feeling to know there are people out there who are willing to help us and support us at times when we feel like we are alone and helpless...especially our children and young adults.

On the other hand, there are times when adults have children that were born with special needs or challenges arise beyond parents' control and they need a little help. As parents, we don't always have the answers, so when we find organizations that can help both parents and children, younger and older, that's the best feeling in the world. The Better Detroit Youth Movement (BDYM) is one of those organizations that is an amazing resource for everyone.

From The BDYM website: *"For the past 15+ years, we've mentored hundreds of high school students and young adults in personal and professional development. We've also worked alongside many amazing and inspiring youth servants enriching our children every day."*

We know the power and value of collaboration we need to grow among our youth-serving region in lifting more children up more often. As the pandemic subsides, we've pivoted The BDYM's energies to support our youth resources rather than resurfacing as another youth group. Our mission now is to:

- 1) Generate more awareness of and support for the wonderful works of our youth-serving region.
- 2) Connect more children and families to youth programs and events so more children succeed in school and thrive in life.
- 3) Leverage the value and power of growing a more cohesive and collaborative youth-serving region together!"

One of the ways The BDYM is accomplishing these goals is through a "fun-raising" organization called The Better Detroit Brownie Company (BDBC) managed by Reuben Gordon. Gordon is co-founder and co-director of The BDYM, a non-profit coalition driven by incredible

individuals and groups working together with youth to improve the quality of life and learning for our younger generations. The BDBC was actually the brain-child of a young man on The BDYM youth advisory board.

Gordon created a Google map with more than 325 youth resources to improve the way we connect young people to opportunities. When he wanted to turn it into a mobile app, but they couldn't find the funding to get it done, a young man suggested, "You know those brownies JaJa (Gordon's daughter) and you bake for our youth events? Why don't we help you bake and sell them to fund the map project and turn your brownies into our own golden girl scout cookie?" Thus, the idea was put into action.

Over the next two summers, Gordon and his kids, neighborhood kids and kids from his youth group, spent many afternoons in the hot kitchen testing, tasting, and tweaking brownie recipes. They

discussed taste and texture and flavors, what they liked and didn't like. They talked and learned about the basics of baking and ingredients for success. The kids learned measuring, the metric system, mindfulness, patience, and confidence. "We agreed we didn't have to be the best brownie, just the best brownie we can be," Gordon says.





Gordon writes, "After a lot of fun, funny conversations, and a lot of learning (and some burning), we finally baked a batch of Better Detroit Brownies we felt worthy of our children and that most adults would enjoy too. Once we had a dark cocoa brownie recipe, a 12-year-old decided that she wanted to create a spicy brownie. It might be a bit different, but we all decided, it's okay to be different because sometimes different means special".

"On November 4, 2018, we took four kids and 250 brownies to The World's Largest Food Truck Rally on Belle Isle. We sold out in less than two hours, and our Sweet & Spicy brownie was a bestseller! We now had the social proof, consumer approval, and greater confidence we needed to officially launch The BDBC".

Thus, The BDBC was born.

So how does the program actually work? Well, partnering with other programs helps to garner extra funding for each program. Those who buy brownies are supporting, not just The BDYM and The BDBC, but other youth programs too.

When youth from other organizations bake brownies with The BDBC, they have the opportunity to sell those brownies they bake and earn a percentage of the sale. That percentage is then donated back to the program they are part of. In this fashion, each program generates money to help fund their organizations while at the same time teaching the kids life, business, financial and social skills all while having fun making friends and learning in a positive environment with supportive adults.

Madison Jackson, 14, was recommended to The BDBC by her church. She says that she joined to learn new skills from financial to business and for the social interaction as well as fun with friends.

Aaliyah Garrett, 10, loves baking and selling the brownies and really appreciates what it means to do all the work from creating the brownie to selling it.

All the kids truly love the baking part and spending their time with their friends being productive while learning life skills. The skills they learn help them to transition to adulthood. Being around others going through and having gone through the same things is the best support anyone could have. It teaches us that we are more the same than different and the differences we have make us special.

When asked what their favorite part of the program they enjoyed most so far, the answer was, "the brownie batter"!

Anita and Nicholas Barksdale are parents who brought their son, Christopher, to the group for the first time. Anita said they have never felt so welcomed and accepted. They had gone to other programs for autistic children and just didn't seem to fit in there. The moment they met Gordon, he took Christopher, gave him a smock and told him to have at it. Gordon had Christopher introduce himself to the group and Christopher got to work. The whole family was part of the group



the moment they walked through the door. That's a feeling you just don't get all of the time. Christopher was opening up and responding, and seemed to be truly enjoying himself already.

And how about the brownies and cookies? "That's a perk!", says Anita. "We like to be taste testers."

When asked how they heard of The BDBC, Anita stated that they were told about it through another autism group in the area. She also saw several postings online. So she reached out to Gordon and had a long, productive conversation. She said, "Reuben invited us here to experience the group and that's why we are here today. It appears that Christopher may have found a good fit."

And that's exactly what Gordon has been focusing on: being a resource and sharing information so that people can find the organizations and groups where they fit the best.



Nicholas chimed in that Christopher had just graduated in January and they had been looking for something that he could get involved in. Christopher is now 20. Although there are a lot of groups for younger children, there isn't a lot of groups for older kids who are transitioning from child to adult. That is one of the things that attracted the Barksdales. "Some children are a little slower than others in the socialization realm and a

group like this offers so much for Christopher. He gets to interact with people his age going through the same things. That's important for him to develop into an independent adult", they both stated.

The BDBC and The BDYM provide a lot of different skills training. They not only do baking and socializing, but they also bring in speakers to talk to the kids about financial planning, business, and other needed skills for living in the world today. This particular day they brought in Sharnella Clark who spoke with the kids about financial planning and motivation. Clark recently released her book "Help A Fool Spend His Money". She states that if you think you can, you can. If you think you can't, you won't, so she hopes to motivate them all in a positive fashion to help them to be the best they can be.

Gordon was busy throughout the day helping kids bake brownies and when he finally took a quick break, he said, "In complete transparency, I never knew that I would be running a brownie company at the age of 65. It was not on my bucket list." But when the idea came from a 17-year-old on his youth advisory panel for The BDYM, Gordon started thinking a little differently. He began thinking about how he could open a business with these kids and teach them entrepreneurial skills. He enjoyed selling, or "hustling" as he states, when he was growing up in Brooklyn, and kids in the neighborhoods are selling lemonade at lemonade stands, so why not? "We wanted to bake brownies that were not just for Detroiters, but for folks in Ann Arbor and West Bloomfield too. We wanted everyone to say, 'you know what? That's a pretty good brownie.'"

Gordon said "I listen to kids. I learn from kids. Together we figure things out. Kids will buy in when they know they have a voice. If you don't like the world you live in, then you change it. I have the belief that it's not going to change with adults. It's only going to change with young people because adults have already created the world we live in today. It's not going to change for the better. Young people are going to have to change it for the better. So everything I do, I pour into young people to help them to understand they *ARE* the change. They are the ones who are going to have to make the world better. That's why they are here".

"Firstly we talk about life skills. Gratitude, affirmations, mindfulness and empathy. These are all virtues that I practice daily. Gratitude is so important. Affirmations: your voice is your choice. Mindfulness: I want you to be present in the moment. We have no phone zones. Phones are not allowed in the kitchen. We focus on what we are

doing. And empathy. Many of us are hurting and healing. When you understand the stress of others; that they are hurting and healing, it makes the world a bit more palatable. So life skills are the most important pieces we teach our young people."

"Business skills. There are many ways to sell. How are you going to sell and sell well? We have them engage with the public so they can feel comfortable, confident and be competent when speaking to others. I take the students to farmer's markets and festivals, special events and fairs. Young people are not comfortable communicating with others because we don't put them into those spaces. The more you put them in these situations, the more comfortable they become. By the end of the summer, you can't shut them up!"

"And blessing skills. When a young person understands they are here to help others, not only do they feel better about themselves, but they feel better about the world. What better gift can you give a child than knowing they are here to be a blessing and to help others."

Another life skill that Gordon likes to help youngsters learn, is to do one thing well. Learn one thing the best that you can and *THEN* you can learn another thing. It also applies to the brownies. Do the original well first, then try new recipes. Today, The BDBC, carries about a dozen brownie varieties and the company is licensed, insured, and ServSafe Food Manager certified. Our dark cocoa and sweet & spicy gourmet brownies are commercially baked with proceeds supporting various community and youth causes, and the ongoing development of a regional youth resource mapping effort.

You can learn more about The Better Detroit Brownie Company on their website at betterdetroitbrownies.com. If you'd like to order brownies for the holidays, call **313.597.7888**. And Better Detroit Brownies will soon be in Meijer stores!

Additional information obtained from RiverwiseDetroit.org, a CBS News article Dec. 30, 2024, www.betterdetroityouth.org and betterdetroitbrownies.com.

