

America's Tomorrow: Equity Is the Superior Growth Model



May 9, 2013

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Features

An Interview with New Orleans's Newest Grocer: Actor Wendell Pierce



Wendell Pierce at Sterling Farms.

Last month, Wendell Pierce [opened](#) the first of four Sterling Farms grocery stores planned for the New Orleans region, bringing jobs, fresh produce, and a sense of renewal to Marrero, a nearby suburb. Pierce, a New Orleans native, is best known for his starring roles in the TV series *Treme* and *The Wire*. According to Pierce, "economic development is the social justice issue of the 21st century."

PolicyLink recently spoke with Pierce about his new venture.

Why bring grocery stores to New Orleans?

I went back to New Orleans right after the flood to rebuild my old neighborhood, Pontchartrain Park, and I saw that even though people were coming back, the commercial districts and grocery stores weren't coming back. So I applied the

In Brief

Entrepreneurs of Color on the Rise

Check out this new [infographic](#) from JumpStart Inc. on the challenges and the promise of entrepreneurship in communities of color. The good news? Entrepreneurship is growing rapidly, especially among Latinos. But big disparities persist in access to capital and equity investments.

Racial Wealth Gap Widens

The recession widened the racial wealth gap, says a [new report](#) from the Urban Institute. The average white family is six times as wealthy as a family of color; up from four times before the recession. Why? The report suggests that families of color had more invested in the housing market, which has not come back as quickly as other investments. And because they started out with less in savings, many people of color were forced to cash out during the market low.

Stuck: Young but Can't Find Work

Nearly one in six young people in

basic supply and demand of economics. You see the need and try to meet that need.

What has been the community response?

Absolutely wonderful. People are actually having emotional moments here, saying finally someone is coming to our community with the respect that we feel we deserve. They have a sense of ownership, like this is our neighborhood grocery store, our neighborhood.

What are your grocery stores like?

We are not trying to invent the wheel; we are literally just trying to bring in a decent grocery store. We're not a health food store; we are a conventional grocery store that gives people an opportunity to make their own choices.

What has been the economic impact?

I can tell you one thing, all the vendors who are in the mall where we brought our store are very happy that we are there. While we are in infancy, you are definitely seeing more customers coming through.

When we opened up the grocery store, we directly hired 60 employees. But we've also opened several smaller convenience stores, so we have at least 100 jobs we've created in the community in just the last 30 days. And we're bringing in \$250,000 worth of activity in the neighborhood on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. We hire right from that community so we create an economic engine.

What challenges persist in New Orleans all these years after Katrina?

It's a tale of two cities. If you live uptown, yes, you would think this a great renaissance, a great rising of the phoenix from the ashes. If you live downtown, though, you are eight years into a disaster where you still don't have a hospital. You still have large portions of area without services, without businesses.

What motivated you to invest in this enterprise?

Capitalism has always been about having access for everyone. Access to education means more ideas, means more growth, more competition, which means more growth. But the new idea of capitalism is there is a finite amount of wealth and we need to hoard it. We deny other persons' kids

America who want a job cannot find one. Among African American youth, it's one in four. A new [report](#) by Demos documents the problems and proposes policy solutions: Create a youth jobs corps, raise the minimum wage, strengthen unions, and create career pathways through training programs.

access to education, access to opportunities, and we don't bring our stores to certain areas. We hoard our wealth and don't understand that this is cutting off the fuel that drives our economy.

What would it take to scale up your efforts, to other regions?

There are programs already in place that help community development organizations to bring in groceries and fresh farmers' markets. And the Healthy Food Financing Initiative incentivizes private partners like myself to do business in particular areas because this financing is only available there. The administration has done a great job focusing the resources of the federal government towards something beneficial for all and it's not a give-away, it's a financing program. It builds communities, addresses food deserts, and the U.S. government gets their money back with interest. It's a win-win proposition.

Learn more about Healthy Food Financing [here](#).

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Breaking into Biotech in Baltimore



BioTechnical Institute of Maryland, Inc.
Training Baltimore's next biotech workforce.

Most people think of biotechnology as an industry driven by scientific genius. Kathleen Weiss sees it as a laboratory to grow the economy and connect career-path jobs to the people who need them most.

Weiss runs the Baltimore-based BioTechnical Institute of Maryland, Inc.(BTI) which partners with employers to put low-

income residents on a fast track to jobs in the rapidly growing bioscience sector. By training unemployed and underemployed high school graduates for technical positions that typically require college degrees, BTI is not only helping local residents to overcome a significant employment barrier. It also is helping to build the skilled, inclusive workforce that is critical to the economic future of the city and the region.

"As the bioscience industry grows, the paradigm has changed," said Weiss, executive director of the independent nonprofit institute. "Early on, it was driven by PhDs and highly educated people. But as the industry matures, you need more and more entry-level but specially trained and skilled people. We provide the bridge for those workers, and we open up the labor pool so there are more people who are jobready."

Bioscience is growing globally and because it covers diverse markets – including pharmaceuticals, biofuels, and biologically based industrial products – it is more resilient during downturns. Jobs in the bioscience industry [grew](#) by 6 percent between 2001 and 2010, while overall employment in the economy shrank by nearly 3 percent.

The Baltimore-Washington corridor has one of the largest bioscience clusters in America, and the life science sector [accounted](#) for one-third of jobs gained statewide from 2002 to 2010. But to retain its leading edge as the industry evolves, the region must invest in workforce development. Thirty to 50 percent of jobs in the field are in production and technician occupations, according to [BioMaryland2020](#), the state's strategic plan for biotech development. These jobs pay above median salaries for the area, and don't necessarily require a college degree. For a city that is struggling with stubbornly high unemployment, particularly among high school graduates and in African American neighborhoods, these jobs are vital to the local economy. And while Maryland has a high concentration of bioscience workers with advanced degrees, industry leaders have voiced concerns about the labor shortage at the entry level.

The Bio Technical Institute, founded in 1998, has stepped in to the breach training high school graduates to fill the jobs and convincing employers to hire skilled, motivated applicants who do not have college degrees.

"It changed my life," said Lucie Jones, a recent graduate. "It opened my eyes to opportunities I didn't know existed."

More than 75 percent of its 300 graduates to date have landed skilled entry-level laboratory jobs. These have an average starting salary of \$25,000 a year, slightly higher than the median income for Baltimore, the city, overall. And there are opportunities for advancement. The institute has an agreement with a local community college and graduates leave the program with six credits toward an associate's degree. Forty percent have obtained associate degrees, and some have gone on to four-year colleges. Like Jones, almost all graduates are African American.

Funded primarily through foundation and government grants, the institute spends \$10,000 to train each student. The program is tuition-free and has two parts. The first is a pre-training component, **BioSTART**, which works to strengthen basic math and science skills needed in a laboratory – for example, fluency in the metric system. The program – four hours a day, five days a week for 10 weeks – also introduces students to the vocabulary of the industry and emphasizes "soft" skills such as workplace communication.

Upon successful completion of **BioSTART**, students put on white coats and goggles and learn lab protocols and procedures. After nine weeks as "lab associates," students move on to paid internships. Sometimes those turn into full-time jobs.

It did for Lucie Jones.

Jones had worked as a home health aide and a medical assistant in a doctor's office but she was unemployed for two years when she heard about BTI. She found the program challenging and exhilarating. "I was doing things I had never heard of before. And it was, wow, I actually grew cells that can be used for research. There are so many possibilities to use the skills we are learning."

Jones was placed as an intern at PathSensors, a local firm that makes a system to rapidly detect biological threats. Now she works there as a lab consultant, running experiments to figure out how to apply the system to more pathogens. She is earning more money than she ever did, and plans to complete her community college degree. "I can further my career and help expand the company," she said.

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America's Tomorrow highlights campaigns, leaders, policies, reports, and local models that are advancing equity as an economic imperative. It is produced by Chris Schildt, Sarah Treuhaft, Fran Smith, and Ana Louie. To learn more, visit the *America's Tomorrow* **webpage**.

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