



*Lashana Lewis, President Barack Obama, LaunchCode co-founder Jim McKelvey and executive director Brendan Lind at the National League of Cities annual Congressional City Conference in Washington, D.C. on March 9, 2015.*

# LASHANA LEWIS' **Stubborn** is Good!

BY Tim Fox Photo Courtesy of The White House

"LaShana grew up in East St. Louis," President Obama began. "She had a passion for computers. But because of circumstances, constraints, she wasn't born with a silver spoon in her mouth. She wasn't able to get a college degree, and because she didn't have a college degree, she couldn't even get an interview for a tech job, despite her coding skills. So she was working as a bus driver, and she was working in entry-level jobs.

"But LaShana apparently is a stubborn person," he continued, "which is good. Sometimes you need to be stubborn. So she refused to give up on her dream, and she used her free time to teach herself new computer skills. And today, she's a systems engineer at MasterCard."

As inspiring as President Obama's story of Lewis's life is, the full story of how Lewis went from East St. Louis to being the only woman on a team of server engineers at MasterCard responsible for more than 3,000 computer servers is even more impressive.

Lewis grew up in the Orr-Weathers Public Housing Project. While a student at Lincoln Sr. High School on Bond Avenue, she decided to take a BASIC computer programming class.

"I thought it sounded like a lot of fun," she remembers, "but it was mostly guys in the class."

That wouldn't be Lewis's last time being an outsider in the classroom. After taking a class in the computer program PASCAL—the students had to write their programs on notebook paper because they didn't have computers to run the program—Lewis's teacher told her she should study computer science in college.

She landed a full-ride scholarship to Michigan Technological University in Houghton, Michigan, and found herself as only one of two women, and the only

black person, in a class of 35 students.

"It was my first time being surrounded by whites," Lewis says. "I got help from some of the guys in the class and bought a computer with some of my scholarship money. I was spending every summer there, but eventually the money ran out and I had to go home."

Years of customer service and help-desk jobs followed, plus the bus-driving job President Obama mentioned. But Lewis held tight to her dream of working in computer science. She took classes around her work schedules, and when online courses became available, she started refreshing her web development and web design skills.

"When I'd finished my courses, my



teacher said I should look into LaunchCode, a nonprofit agency that connects tech employees with tech jobs," Lewis says.

She filed the name "LaunchCode" in her mind and went on with her studies and job hunting, but when she heard it mentioned again on the radio one day, she thought maybe it was a sign. She attended a meeting at the St. Louis Science Center and heard about Co-derGirl, an all-women's coding meet-up organized by LaunchCode that engages women in technology. Someone there told her about MasterCard.

"I had been turned down for so many jobs, I didn't take it too seriously," she

recalls. "But then my LaunchCode facilitator talked to MasterCard, and they asked me to start apprenticing the next week."

She joined the Windows Server Technical Service Team and landed a part-time position. Once again, she was the only woman on the team. But she was undaunted.

"My mom and the environment in East St. Louis taught me that if you want something you have to keep going after it," she says. "I knew that I couldn't let me fear or discomfort prevent me from doing anything I wanted to do."

Lewis was at home one morning when her human resources representative at MasterCard called and said they wanted to fly her to the White House the following Monday.

"The next day I had lunch with the Chief Technology Officer and my senior business leader," Lewis remembers. "They gave me all the numbers I would need and my flight information. Sunday I was on a plane, and Monday morning I was three rows away from President Obama, listening to him talk about me."

The president met her after the speech, thanked her for coming, and had a picture taken with her.

"When I got back, the guys at work joked with me about whether I had President Obama's number on my pager!" she says.

Today, Lewis is still at MasterCard and lives on Washington Avenue in downtown St. Louis, not far from the Cortex technology corridor.

"In my earlier jobs, I knew I needed to excel because I was in really small information technology groups," she says. "But at MasterCard, I'm in a big company with a lot of resources. I'll stay as long as they want me."

If Lewis's past record of "stubbornness" is an indicator, that's likely to be a very long time.