

EAST ST. LOUIS AMBASSADORS

New Opportunities with Najah Fennoy

BY Tim Fox PHOTO BY Kevin Hopkins



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Resilience, tenacity, and the belief that where you come from shapes you, but doesn't define you – those are the lessons Najah Fennoy learned growing up in East St. Louis.

Today, she is the Director of New Opportunities at the historic Missouri Athletic Club (MAC) in downtown St. Louis, and responsible for increasing club membership, managing the catering and overnight rooms, and maintaining and strengthening the club's relationship with the community. "As a former member of the Missouri Athletic Club and now serving in a position at the Club,

the greatest joy has been the sense of camaraderie not only among our valued members but also staff members. It's a total sense of community and mutual respect for one another," Fennoy says.

In her position, Fennoy interfaces with some of St. Louis' most influential business men and women. She adds, "I personally reach out to each and every new member of the Clubhouse to be sure they're engaged and plugged into the Club. The most wonderful experience is when you see a new member who has totally immersed themselves into the Clubhouse."

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But not long ago, Fennoy was literally running on the streets of the East Side. “I started running every day with my father at age 6, seven days a week,” Fennoy said, reminiscing about her father, a retired East St. Louis fire chief. She continued, “When I started running track and cross country at Clark Jr. High School and then at Lincoln High School, I ran every day after school for practice, too.”

Fennoy, the fourth of eight children in her family, fondly remembers Lincoln as a school that cared for its students, gave them opportunities to learn life skills, and made them want to learn more. She graduated in 1997 and carried the school's love of learning to Prairie View A&M University in Texas on an athletic scholarship.

After earning her degree in finance, Fennoy returned to the East St. Louis area to work as the education manager at the Jackie Joyner-Kersee (JK) Foundation in East St. Louis. “As Education Manager, my responsibilities included running the Power Hour/Homework Help Hour, coordinating education-based activities and securing funding for programs through grant writing,” she remembered. One of her fondest and smallest grants secured was a \$5000 grant from the McCormick Tribune Foundation. “I [wrote] a financial literacy program called Finance Fanatics. It taught all facets of financial management.” About 15 students successfully completed the program, earning them an all-expenses-paid trip to Chicago that included a Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) facilities and trading floor tour.

“It's interesting how my ties to the JK Foundation, joining the MAC as a member, and now working for the Club are all intertwined, seeing that before 1988 women were not allowed to be members of the Club.” In 1988 Jackie Joyner-Kersee became the first female member of the MAC, thereby paving the way from where Fennoy started her career, to where she is now.

While studying and earning a master's degree in business administration from Webster University, Fennoy embarked on one of her first entrepreneurial endeavors - buying and rehabbing houses. With some of the profits from these investments, Fennoy traveled to Egypt, London, Amsterdam, Paris, and other destinations. “I love to travel. I think you have to live life to the fullest,” she declared.

Now that she's been away to college and lives in St. Louis' Central West End, Fennoy sees her East St. Louis childhood through a different lens.

“Growing up in East St. Louis, I didn't think of it as an economically challenged community. I thought of it as home,” she says. “After returning from college in Texas in 2003, I saw its challenges—and now that I'm in a position to give back, that's what I have and always wanted to do. Giving back is very important to me. I learned that from my parents and working for the Jackie Joyner Kersee Foundation.”

As an ongoing initiative, Fennoy would like to work with young children, especially girls, to help them understand that just because they grow up in a distressed area doesn't mean that's all life has to offer them.

One thing Fennoy knows for sure, “Through faith in God, hard work, dedication, and courage, we can do anything we desire.”