

FIRST® Experience Turns Challenges to Opportunities for LA Teen



AT A GLANCE

Background

As a homeless teen from an impoverished LA neighborhood with a high school graduation rate of 30 percent, Yohance Salimu turned to *FIRST*® for more than his educational needs. *FIRST* also answered Yohance's basic survival needs when team Mentors offered him a place to stay, food to eat, and, ultimately, the motivation to pursue a successful career in the Air Force.

Life Changing Lessons From *FIRST*

The Second Lieutenant says the lessons learned from *FIRST* have been instrumental in all that he has achieved today. Yohance credits *FIRST* with teaching him how to perfect his technical and leadership skills, as well as how to manage a work ethic and develop his overall professional growth.

FIRST Experience Turns Challenges To Opportunities

FIRST paved the way for Yohance to succeed in the working world so that he could eventually move his family out of a homeless shelter, away from soup kitchens, and on the path to recovery. Yohance says he plans to reach out and give back; to provide the energy and resources so that others can attain the same goals he has been able to.

As a homeless teen from an impoverished neighborhood, Yohance Salimu joined a *FIRST*® robotics team at Crenshaw High School in Los Angeles because of a basic human need: hunger. Yohance learned that if he worked with *FIRST* after school, one of the team Mentors just might take him home for dinner. For Yohance — who today is a Second Lieutenant and pilot in the United States Air Force — *FIRST* answered more than his educational needs. The organization also answered his basic survival needs: a home-cooked meal and often a place to spend the night.

Yohance had many difficult challenges to overcome as a teen whose family life was in turmoil. The Second Lieutenant shares that he came from a family of 16 siblings, and that both parents struggled with health as well as mental health issues, which led to a homeless situation. Given his background, the teen initially found it difficult to blend in at school because he really didn't "fit the criteria." However, things changed when Yohance decided to join *FIRST*® Robotics Competition Team 1692 "CougarBots" in his freshman year at Crenshaw High. With a 39 percent graduation rate and 85 percent of the student body below the poverty line, the high school's environment was challenging. Today, 90 percent of the school's students who are involved in the *FIRST* program go on to pursue college degrees.

Life-Changing Lessons from *FIRST*®

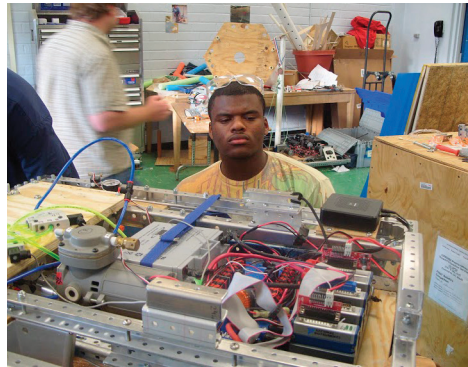
As part of Team 1692, Yohance says although the challenges were many, the experiences were "life changing." He and his teammates worked on many projects and attended numerous *FIRST* competitions where the lessons learned were also many. Yohance remembers one food-related "lesson" in particular. At the end of a long day working on a project, the team would often share a pizza. Sometimes Yohance's hunger outweighed his manners and the six-foot student often was first in line to grab the biggest piece of the pie. As he progressed through the ranks of the team — eventually rising to Team Captain — Yohance remembers a Mentor asking him to step aside and let some of the smaller, less assertive team members have first dibs at a slice. Although it might have been the only thing he had eaten that day, Yohance learned that to be a leader he had to consider the needs of his team members first. "I was being taught to look out for the well-being of my team members and to step aside so their needs could be met before mine. It was a leadership lesson at the most fundamental level."

Yohance recounts another *FIRST*-related occurrence that resonates with him. Returning to school one day after a competition where the team placed lower than expected, Yohance nevertheless

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— YOHANCE SALIMU

proudly displayed the *FIRST* medallion around his neck — as he would any other sports medal (Yohance was also a member of the high school track team). He recalled classmates congratulating him on taking “first prize” when they saw the *FIRST* medallion. Yohance was quick to explain that although the team did not, in fact, place first, no *FIRST* team is ever a loser. “Every team wins, whether they place first, second, third, or last.”



Yohance Salimu works on a project with his *FIRST* Robotics Competition team, Team 1692 “CougarBots” in Los Angeles

Aerospace Internship Was Catalyst for Inspired Career Path

While working with his *FIRST* team Mentor, Tim Wright, Yohance was offered an internship at The Aerospace Corporation, the company at which Tim was employed. Yohance says one word comes to mind when recalling his initial foray into the internship: *incompetence*. The Second Lieutenant explains that he felt “incompetent” because initially he was so overwhelmed by the opportunity at the aero giant. He comments that much of the Aerospace workforce was older, and, as a 16-year-old, it was very humbling to have an opportunity to participate in numerous complicated projects.

“Initially, I worried that I wouldn’t be able to succeed. Although I am extroverted, it was a little intimidating to try to fit in with my colleagues — people who had been in the business for many years. I needed to wear business attire to look the part, but also I needed to act the part,” says Yohance, who is still close with his then-boss, Alonzo Prater, “who really stuck his neck out for me.”

Ironically, once he became acclimated to the routine at Aerospace, Yohance found he was able to complete the work more quickly than some of his colleagues. “I would concentrate on four or five tasks and just get my projects done — whether it meant soldering, creating a chip, or wiring a circuit board. I felt I had to, given the level of responsibility they entrusted me with. In addition, I was truly able to apply the technical know-how I had learned in my physics class and on my *FIRST* team.” However, even more important, says Yohance, was the chance to develop a level of maturity in learning how to interact with people from different cultures and work through issues together in a professional environment. Ultimately, he says the internship was instrumental in motivating him to pursue a career in the Air Force.

No Substitute for *FIRST* Take-Aways

Yohance says the lessons learned during his *FIRST* experiences have been directly applicable to where he is today. “*FIRST* taught me about balance. How to balance the personal with the technical; how to manage a work ethic that influences all I do today in the Air Force.”

He credits *FIRST* with not only helping him perfect his technical skills, but also giving him the chance to learn how to problem solve within a team environment. “The biggest take-away from *FIRST* is the ability for students to learn how to grow in confidence and use their strengths. There is no substitute for what *FIRST* can do. There’s no other place to get that

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— YOHANCE SALIMU



Yohance Salimu speaks at the 2015 FIRST Championship Showcase Presentation with his FIRST team Mentor Tim Wright, in St. Louis, Missouri

kind of all-encompassing experience — technical, interpersonal, professional,” says Yohance, who along with his teammates, often worked many hours past deadlines to complete a competition project.

The Air Force lieutenant also is grateful to his team Mentors, who were instrumental in helping to turn his life around. Their actions not only assured that Yohance had food and shelter, but helped to develop his leadership skills and overall professional growth, as well as providing him with the incentive to follow a fulfilling career path. “*FIRST* Mentors Tim Wright and Urban Reyes had an incredible impact on me. I joined *FIRST* because I was looking for some stability. ... *FIRST* and the people behind it helped me become the man I am today. *FIRST* gave me and my brother, as well as many of our teammates, a future,” says Yohance, who adds that his experiences with *FIRST* paved the way for him to succeed in the working world so that he could eventually move his family out of a homeless shelter, away from soup kitchens, and on the path to recovery.

Where will this ambitious young man be 10 years from now? The Second Lieutenant says he will “be where the Air Force tells me to be,” but also adds he will most certainly be reaching out and giving back. “I want to provide the energy and resources so that others can attain the same goals I was able to.” There is no doubt that Yohance, who has overcome tremendous odds, will accomplish all of that and more in the near future.