



Mr. Kim L. Hunter

Mr. Kim L. Hunter is founder and chairman & CEO of The LAGRANT Foundation (TLF), a nonprofit organization that provides undergraduate and graduate scholarships to minority students pursuing careers in advertising, marketing and public relations. He is also the chief executive officer of LAGRANT COMMUNICATIONS, an integrated marketing communications firm, and managing partner of KLH & Associates, an executive search firm specializing in placing mid-to-senior level ethnically diverse candidates among the Fortune 500 and top 20 advertising and public relations firms. Mr. Hunter received a Bachelor of Arts in business administration, concentration in marketing, and a minor in anthropology, from the University of Washington, and a Master of Arts in international management, with a focus in Latin America, at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota.

People always ask me, “Where does the ‘LAGRANT’ come from?” Actually, it’s my middle name. I’m named after

my great-great-grandfather. I use “LAGRANT” because it’s the name I’m the most proud of. Growing up in the inner city, I didn’t like my first name. People thought it was a girl’s name.

I run three separate diversity and inclusion organizations: LAGRANT COMMUNICATIONS, the integrated marketing firm I started 28 years ago; The LAGRANT Foundation (TLF), which began 20 years ago; and the third, KLH & Associates, an executive search firm founded six years ago, primarily for diverse candidates. These organizations are like my three children. I am one proud papa!

It is my life’s work to help the new generations of diverse talent to succeed. TLF exists to help those kids that have drive, are resourceful and want to advance. Many people don’t know that TLF has four components to it: scholarships, internships/fellowships/apprenticeships/ entry level jobs, career development and professional developments (CDPWs), and mentorship programs. Over the past 20 years, we’ve provided more than 500 diverse students with scholarships. We’ve also placed more than 350 young people into internships, fellowships, apprenticeships and entry-level jobs. On top of that, we produce more than 25 CDPWs every year.

More than 80 percent of TLF scholarship recipients are still in the business, and many of them are in the pipeline to eventually become CMOs or CCOs. I’m proud to say that some have already risen to very high spots including one

young woman who today is director of strategic communications for Blue Shield of California. Another alum has been with Google's marketing team for the past 11 years, and another one is running a very successful integrated marketing firm in Wisconsin with more than 20 employees.

When I was growing up, there were no organizations like TLF. There were no organizations to help a poor black kid like me, growing up in a broken home in Philadelphia's inner city. We were on welfare and food stamps. I was the ninth of 11 children. Our parents — both high school dropouts — were separated, leaving us kids to essentially fend for ourselves.

I was the only one of my siblings to go to college. In fact, many of my brothers and sisters never graduated from high school. Even though I was one of the youngest kids, I didn't have anybody to depend on besides myself. I became so self-sufficient and responsible that I was called the "reliable one." I was the one who had to pick up the welfare checks, to take the clothes to the laundromat, to go food shopping. Look, I had no choice but to take responsibility for all this because my siblings weren't doing it.

I remember thinking at 5 years old — 5 years old! — that as soon as I turn 18, I'm going to leave Philadelphia, and never come back.

Look, I didn't make the decision to live in the inner city. My parents made it. I made the decision to get out. It was not a popular decision in my house, but it was something that was important to me.

But I did see a path out of there: Central High School, the No. 1 public high school in Philadelphia. The only problem was that it was 45 minutes by public transportation each way. I could've gone to the local school where my siblings went, but I was urged by my middle school counselor to go to Central. It was an all-boys school, mostly Jewish. Central High was a change agent. It set the course for the rest of my life.

To support myself, I worked as a cashier after school. I also sold chocolate candy bars to raise money for school. I worked every day, even during school vacations. On weekends I stayed home to study.

I read every Shakespeare book in high school I could get my hands on. We were required to read 15 books per academic year. Despite the rigor of the program, I graduated among the top 50 students out of 534. To this very day, my high school education was far superior to both undergraduate and graduate school. My high school degree says Bachelor of Arts, not high school diploma.

In my senior year, I applied to eight colleges including the University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, Purdue, Texas A&M and Penn State, among others, and won scholarships to all. But I chose the school that was the farthest away from Philadelphia: the University of Washington.

You may be surprised to hear this, but my goal was never to become a marketing, public relations or communications professional. I applied to all of those eight colleges and universities with the intent of becoming a

veterinarian. So I entered the University of Washington as a zoology major. I was very much engaged with the STEM program in high school, which identified a number of kids to go into the sciences. So while STEM is big today, STEM was really big when I was growing up.

In my first year at UW, I changed majors three times. I went from zoology to political science — with the intent of going to law school — and by the end of freshman year, to business. And then I stayed a business major.

American Hospital Supply Corporation, which later became known as Baxter International, came to the UW campus and recruited me, so I went directly from college into the workforce. It was the early '80s, and I stayed at Baxter for seven years.

After that, I went to work for a small minority-owned advertising agency in Los Angeles. During the year I was there, I helped build out other components of the agency such as public relations and public affairs.

One day I had an epiphany that it really didn't matter whether I was working for a Fortune 200 or a small boutique firm. I needed to go out on my own.

So in 1990, I did just that, and founded LAGRANT COMMUNICATIONS. From day one we were an integrated marketing communications firm.

Along the way, I got my master's degree in international management at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota. I knew that the world was becoming more global, and while everyone was getting MBAs, I was studying

international finance, international marketing, international law, international everything.

Ever since I started in this business, I have seen a great lack of diversity in the field — and it's hardly gotten better. My challenge with the public relations side of the industry is we still don't have the numbers. We still don't have minorities running practices, running P&Ls or running regional offices.

Right now, there is not one African-American running any of the top 10 PR firms; not one Hispanic, not one Asian. That's a problem. It baffles me to this very day.

For the most part, the same cast of characters that was running many of the top PR agencies 15 — even 10 — years ago, is still running them. It's still your typical white male.

When millennials look at an agency, before they even start interviewing, they check to see if there are people who look like them. Young people ask the question up front, "Where are those who look like me in your senior leadership team?" And if they don't see it, there is a high probability they will not entertain employment. Now, it's very different from when I was starting out. I'm a baby boomer. What was important to us was to get a good education, get a good job and build our careers.

The kids today, however, are asking these questions and won't join an agency unless they see that there are minorities who succeeded before them.

I'm much more hopeful on the client side, where you do have some people who are CCOs or CMOs. When it

comes to practicing diversity, I think corporations do a much better job than agencies. I came out of the corporate world, so I can tell you that one of the things I would encourage a lot of kids — regardless of ethnicity and gender — is to go to the corporate side. I would say that's more preferable than the agency side, which is typically the place for entry-level people.

That's what I did. I found an incredible career path on the corporate side. I then did the opposite of what most people in the industry do: I went from corporate (client) to agency. I made that decision based on the fact that I found more creativity on the agency side.

Back in 1998, diversity wasn't talked about so much in the communications industry. But it was very much on my mind. I mean, I've been in the industry for 36 years this coming December. When I began my career, I would look around the room, just as I look around the room today, and see an incredible lack of diverse people. It was not an issue the industry generally talked about, but it was definitely an issue for me and for a number of thought leaders in the business. I continuously raised the issue — and eventually, they started to get it.

I vividly remember the moment I decided to start TLF. It was 1998. I was talking to Julia Hood, who eventually became the editor-in-chief of PRWeek, about a number of things pertaining to the industry, and the conversation deviated to the lack of diversity and inclusion. I started

hearing myself complaining about this — and I hate when people complain — and I sure don't like myself complaining.

“Julia, I gotta go.”

“Kim, what did I say?” she replied.

“You said absolutely nothing. I'm going to talk to my lawyer and CFO,” I remarked.

“Kim, tell me! What did I say?” she asked again.

“If I'm hearing myself complain,” I said, “then I need to go do something about it.” And that's how TLF was created.

The first year TLF awarded scholarships was 1999. It was phenomenal! That first year we had 10 recipients and a \$2,000 scholarship for each. The money started pouring in! I mean, the response ... I had never seen an organization grow as quickly as TLF was growing.

I remember reaching out to my CFO and saying,

“Robin, I think we have a problem!”

“What's the problem?” she replied.

“We have all this money coming in,” I said excitedly.

Her response was to give away more money.

“You can't just go below \$20,000 a year, which the articles of incorporation states. Give out more scholarships.”

We went from giving 10 scholarships the first year, to 20 to 50 every year after that, with the exception of the fifth, 10th, 15th and 20th years, when we awarded \$250,000 to 100 ethnically diverse students who are majoring in advertising, marketing and public relations. It's always been a labor of love.

I started working at corporations as an intern while still in college, and this helped shape my perspective. I interned for IBM, Xerox and Dow Chemical (where I had two internships). Before I graduated, I had eight job offers.

It's no surprise, then, why much of TLF's funding goes to our internship programs. My second in command at my agency interned with me while she was at Howard. She has worked for me for 23 years. I've had several employees throughout my agency intern with me first and then ascend to high-level roles in corporate America and agencies.

Internships can be an incredible steppingstone, but only if the program is structured right. I don't claim that most of the current internship programs are structured well, but I think that arranging for minority students to get corporate internships is one of the most important head starts we can give to our young people. I have no doubt that my own success was due to the incredible internships I had in college.

Besides internships, there are many good programs out there — many more than when I was a student, but you can't get help unless you apply for it. I've seen billions of dollars in scholarships go unclaimed each year because kids don't apply for them.

While diversity is much more top of mind than ever before, companies are not making enough progress. I think the industry still struggles with implementing it. They're afraid of taking risks. They are not courageous, not bodacious. As a result, we're not seeing significant strides.

Our industry will be better off when leaders embrace diversity and inclusion as a fundamental business imperative throughout the enterprise. Be vulnerable. Be open. Embrace the present. Embrace the future.

If someone with my upbringing can make it, then any smart kid with drive, talent and resourcefulness can make it, if given the opportunity.