

FAMILIAR FACES & PLACES

OUR RELENTLESS LOVE FOR GOING DEEDER!

e—Ron, Gerald, and Shannon—are super thrilled to bring the DVULI investment to Albuquerque, New Mexico; Atlanta, Georgia; Houston, Texas; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and the Twin Cities in Minneapolis for the 2026-2027 training season. That said, nominations are now being accepted for urban youth workers to apply for our 18-month process in these cities.

What's especially exciting is that we have hired local coordinators in each city, and all are familiar faces to DVULI. For the first time in our 27-year history, all five city coordinators are DVULI alumni. These incredible leaders are credentialed with far-reaching networks, rich relationships, and breakthrough testimonies of how DVULI has impacted their lives, ministries, and others in their communities.

We have so much confidence in these city coordinators because they understand the landscape of their region and can access necessary resources before, during, and after DVULI has invested in the leaders where they live, work, and worship. In addition, we have witnessed their commitment to serving others and the difference they are making.

Over the years, Team DVULI has placed increasing value on making a deeper investment in our current 37 cities instead of continuously adding more locations. This "go-deeper" approach, we believe, leads to strength not only in numbers but also in a collaborative capacity that fuels our goal of healthy leaders, ministries, and communities.

We began going deeper in 2006 with the introduction of "three-peat" cities—those returning for a third round. But we didn't stop at city selection. The idea of investing more deeply also extends to how we hire our workshop trainers, national conference presenters, and part-time liaisons.



THIS "GO-DEEPER" APPROACH, WE BELIEVE, LEADS TO STRENGTH **NOT ONLY IN NUMBERS BUT ALSO** IN A COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY THAT FUELS OUR GOAL OF **HEALTHY LEADERS, MINISTRIES, AND COMMUNITIES.**

To date, 100 percent of our trainer and liaison roles are filled by DVULI alumni. We love that! Thus, it brings us great joy to align this same deepening value to the process of selecting city coordinators.

Psalm 80:9 (NKJV) says, "You prepared room for it, and caused it to take deep root, and it filled the land." We can't wait to see what new crop of passionate leaders will spring up from the 2026-2027 DVULI cohorts.

(Kansas City 2003), Editor

f gerald.bell

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DEW STAFF By Ashley Ver Beek, Contributor



"I CARE ABOUT GENERATIONAL SUCCEST IN OUR WORLD.

I HAD PEOPLE WHO BELIEVED IN **ME WHEN I WAS YOUNG, WHICH** IS WHAT I WANT FOR OUR **UNDERSERVED YOUTH TODAY."**

SHELDON FREEMAN. **Communications Manager**

Sheldon Freeman joined the DVULI team as the Communications Manager in May 2025. In his new role, Sheldon will oversee the key elements of DVULI's social media, website, and digital and print publications.

A native of Atlanta, Georgia, Sheldon comes to the DVULI team with a wealth of experience in multimedia production. He is a two-time Emmy award-winning video producer and photographer from his time at ESPN and has his own production company, Suspended Media. He also served as the Director of Video and Livestreaming at his former church in Connecticut.

Through his coursework at Denison University, where he earned a BA in Economics, Sheldon emerged with the desire to increase investments in youth of color. He is further committed to mobilizing resources to empower systemically disadvantaged young people to achieve their goals.

"I care about generational success in our world," explains Sheldon, who developed this passion while in college. "I had people who believed in me when I was young, which is what I want for our underserved youth today."

Sheldon got into youth work in 2020 when he launched an initiative called #47Shoes to distribute new shoes to marginalized youth in Hartford, Connecticut, and taught young people video production in his spare time.

"Being an artist, I want to give youth from disadvantaged backgrounds access to the arts because they're not all being invested in at a fair level," says Sheldon. "This underscores my desire for youth. My goal is to bridge the gap."

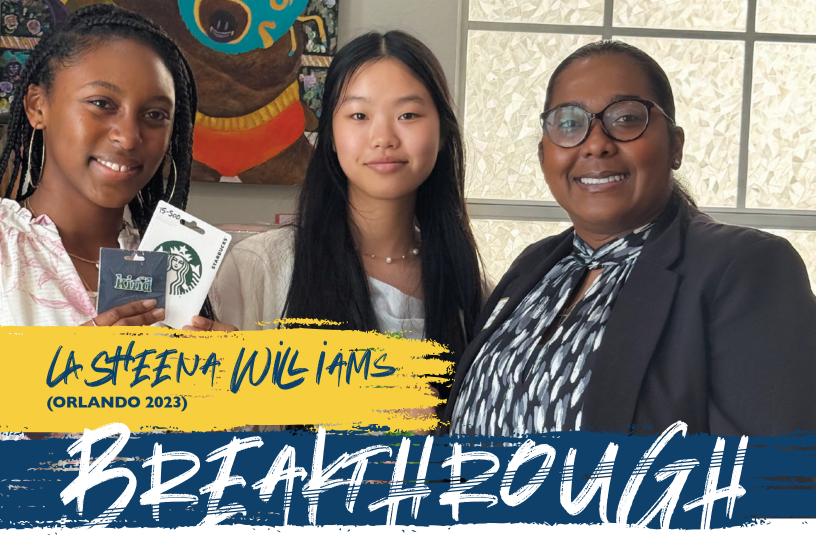
As for his new position with DVULI, Sheldon says, "I'm excited to bring my passion and experience in storytelling to the team." He is eager to highlight alumni stories in fresh and engaging ways and hopes to strengthen the digital network of DVULI.

When he's not behind the camera, Sheldon is a producer, voiceover artist, and musician. He loves basketball and is always delighted to practice his French.

IOIN US IN WELCOMING SHELDON **TO THE DVULI TEAM!**

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By Sheldon Freeman, Staff

myriad of moments can light one's fire for a breakthrough. For Lasheena Williams (Orlando 2023), a learning simulation known as asset mapping sparked hers.

"While doing the asset mapping exercise, I had a powerful realization," said Lasheena, referencing her participation in the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative (DVULI). "There were plenty of community resources but very few spaces intentionally designed for teens. This insight sparked a vision that's now becoming a reality with us opening a teen center in East Orlando."

In 2012, Lasheena launched <u>L.O.V.E.</u> Our Youth (<u>L.O.V.E.</u>), a nonprofit with a mission to encourage youth to embrace their self-worth and value life's lessons in order to maximize their potential through mentorship, workshops, and special events. For most of its existence, <u>L.O.V.E.</u> operated as a 100 percent volunteer-based organization conducting enrichment programs in various community locations. That would eventually change.

Lasheena grew up in South Florida, and when the time came for her to enroll in college, she moved to Orlando to attend the University of Central Florida (UCF). Finding

herself in the higher education space opened her eyes to a world of new possibilities she never perceived were attainable. This realization prompted Lasheena to get into youth work because she wanted other teens to have the same awareness sooner than she did.

"I NO LONGER CHASE URGENCY— I PRIORITIZE WHAT TRULY MATTERS."



"My parents did their best to expose me to options after high school," offered Lasheena, who, like many, believes more informed career decisions can be made when there is broader exposure early on. Two years before her DVULI training process began, Lasheena was directed by God to let go of her full-time position working in local government in Orlando.

"It was truly a leap of faith," Lasheena remarked about leaving her job and not getting a clear game plan from God about what was next. She had to trust that the next step would be revealed, and God did just that. First, she was to commit to more private devotion time, and second, lean deeper into L.O.V.E. Neither of these came easily.

"The early days were full of hustle, late nights, and constant pressure," said Lasheena. "I struggled to separate work from life, and the risk of burnout was real."

Without the parameters of a nine-to-five job, everything felt urgent, and Lasheena realized, "I needed more than just ambition—I needed a breakthrough." This goal could not happen on her own. Through the DVULI training, core values such as balance and interdependence, in addition to trusting God, were key for her breakthrough to become a reality and tools she continues to use on the path forward.





Lasheena stated that going through the process "revolutionized" how she used her time, and she grew to understand that the growth of her organization didn't have to come at the expense of her health or relationships. Learning alongside her DVULI cohort members both locally and

nationally reminded her that the journey wasn't hers to carry alone.

"The cohort became a source of accountability and encouragement," she said. Those resourceful relationships remain intact today and have spread to her own organization. Her DVULI city coordinator joined her organization after their graduation, and one other Orlando cohort member is now on her board of directors.

Leaning further into interdependence, Lasheena sought partnerships with area businesses, most significantly local developers Avalon Park Group (APG) and the Avalon Park Foundation (APF). This relationship helped to prioritize the teen center Lasheena envisioned. As a result, APF put Lasheena and the center on the docket for every community meeting to work toward finding a solution to the problem she hoped to address. With Lasheena leading, a



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youth advisory board comprised of teens in their community was developed to obtain their input on what the center needed and to help see the goal of the physical space come to life.

That part of her breakthrough and vision is now a reality. In June 2025, Lasheena's partners miraculously blessed her with the opportunity to move into a 2,500-square-foot facility for the teen center. This allowed L.O.V.E. to move out of its 500-square-foot office and have adequate space to operate and conduct its teen programs.

Lasheena's breakthrough also included shifting from seasonal to year-round programming. Historically, programs were only held during spring break, summer, and Thanksgiving. "We'd go six to seven months without any programming," recalled Lasheena. As of September 2025, L.O.V.E. now runs weekly programming interdependently with other nonprofits.

Reflecting on where she is today, Lasheena beams, "I no longer chase urgency—I prioritize what truly matters." Additionally, the interdependence core value reminded her that strong ministry is built through collaboration, allowing her to better lean on others, and in return, find greater strength, joy, and sustainability in her work.

For Lasheena and her team, the work is far from complete. She is constantly reminded that "the breakthrough wasn't just for a moment—it was for a movement." A movement that continues to unfold.

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THE ULTIMATE // EVID 1

By Ebonie Davis (Washington DC 2023)

Domingo Mota (Los Angeles 2005) was told by his first mentor that he would be a leader on the team at a time when he couldn't see his own potential. That year, he went on to become the league's MVP. The impact of that encouragement stuck with Domingo, even when injuries cut his promising career short. As he faced the disappointment, God revealed the divine calling He had on his life.





After his third year of professional ball, Domingo spent his offseason in Memphis, Tennessee. There, he received his first invitation to lead a youth ministry. Although it was only for a few months, the experience gave him a glimpse of God's greater purpose for his life after baseball.

When the ongoing injuries drove Domingo to retire after five seasons, he returned home to California and landed a coaching job at a top-notch baseball academy that recruited inner-city kids on scholarships. Mentoring those students awakened Domingo to where God was leading him.

"That's when God really broke my heart for young people," he reflects. "I prayed for two things: to stay involved in baseball and to work with youth somewhere, somehow." A prayer that resulted in nearly 30 years of impacting youth.

Over the next two decades, Domingo served in formal youth mentoring roles—leading holistic development efforts, serving institutionalized teens, ministering to college students, and directing mentoring initiatives for underresourced students. Amid this, he planted Winds of Hope Ministries, a microchurch in the Sun Valley neighborhood of Los Angeles. He noticed the need for redemption in the community, which deepened his resolve for relational ministry and became the heartbeat of his church.

Alongside pastoring, Domingo serves two organizations that provide opportunities for relational ministry. As a trainer for the <u>Search Institute</u>, he helps leaders identify and build on young people's strengths through the <u>40 Developmental Assets</u> and Developmental Relationships framework. As West Zone Field Manager at <u>CarePortal</u>, Domingo helps to connect kids and families facing crisis with churches, organizations, and caring individuals who want to provide tangible and relational support. CarePortal provides a pathway for churches to build meaningful relationships with families in the community they may otherwise never encounter.

"MENTORS NEED TO LIVE WITH THE MINDSET THAT WE ARE LOOKING TO UNCOVER WHAT ALREADY LIES WITHIN OUR YOUTH, SO THEY RECOGNIZE, DEVELOP, AND UTILIZE THE GIFTS THEY POSSESS."

For Domingo, mentoring is like scouting talent. "That's the beauty of a mentor. It's not just pouring in; you help to draw out," he explains. "Mentors need to live with the mindset that we are looking to uncover what already lies within our youth, so they recognize, develop, and utilize the gifts they possess."



A husband and father of three adult daughters, Domingo likes to think of himself as a "coaching pastor." Today, most of his formal mentoring roles involve adult leaders, yet that hasn't changed

his investment in the lives of young people. One of the ways he stays connected to impacting youth is through training urban leaders who work in youth ministry spaces.

Since 2013, Domingo has been a facilitator for the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative's Empowering Youth workshop, which equips youth workers to help build positive capacity in young people.

"SOMEONE INSPIRED ME, SO I HOPE I HAVE INSPIRED OTHERS BY STAYING CONNECTED TO JESUS AND SERVING LIKE HIM."

"My heart always returns to youth," admits Domingo. "Everything I do considers them. It's natural mentoring." He further asserts that mentoring doesn't require a title, just genuine care and a life worth imitating.

Domingo says the church can limit itself by being narrow in its approach to mentoring. "We can be more effective by utilizing the tools God has put at our disposal," he said, referring to church-based mentoring. "The Bible instructs elders to come alongside young people like Paul and Timothy."

"If [a church wants] to transform a youth ministry, adopt more of a mentoring model," advises Domingo. "A combination of what is and what could be." To do this, he says, we must stop focusing so much on building ministries and instead focus on building people.



"What makes the difference for young people is whether they feel loved," offers Domingo, who was recognized in 2023 as Clergy Representative of the Year by LA City

Council. "Do they feel cared for, like you have their best interests in mind? Do they feel like they are part of your team?"

Domingo challenges urban youth workers to stop carrying the "superhero" burden and instead learn to partner well. "Identify assets within the congregation of adults who can come alongside you to help you mentor and guide teens." He notes that for many adults, the idea of volunteering for youth group is terrifying, but those same adults may connect well one-on-one.

"If you tell them, 'Hey, I have little Pablo over there. He could use a big brother. Would you mind hanging out with him, throwing the frisbee, shooting the ball?' Suddenly it's like, 'Oh, pastor, I can do that."

When asked what he hopes his legacy will be, the once MVP said, "I hope they will say, 'He had my best interest in mind. He cared for me personally and not exclusively the church.'" He further notes, "Someone inspired me, so I hope I have inspired others by staying connected to Jesus and serving like Him."

Domingo goes on to reveal, "I'm just privileged that people let me join them in their life's journey."

As a Search Institute trainer, Domingo Mota recommends the **Five Elements of Developmental Relationships.**

EXPRESS CARE: Showing a young person they are valued, known, and cared for.

Actions: Demonstrating dependability, listening actively, showing warmth, and expressing belief in their potential.

2 CHALLENGE GROWTH: Encouraging young people to improve their skills, talents, and strengths.

Actions: Praising their efforts and achievements, pushing them to keep getting better, and inspiring them to strive for more.

PROVIDE SUPPORT: Helping young people achieve goals and navigate challenges.

Actions: Assisting them with tasks, offering practical help, and providing resources to help them complete goals.

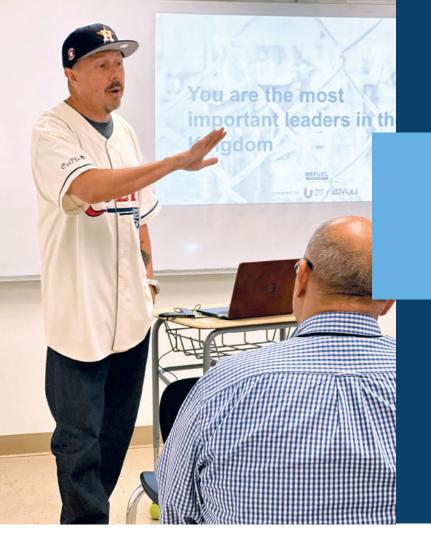
SHARE POWER: Treating young people with respect and involving them in decisions.

Actions: Involving them in decisions that affect them, collaborating on problems, and creating opportunities for them to lead.

5 EXPAND POSSIBILITIES: Connecting young people to people and places that broaden their world and future outlook.

Actions: Introducing them to new experiences, exposing them to new ideas and people, and connecting them with helpful resources.

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STRONGER 70GETHER

UYWI, DVULI, AND THE POWER OF FUEL NETWORKS



By Tommy Nixon, CEO, UYWI

DVULI is grateful to partner with UYWI. In the effort to expand UYWI's influence, message, and reach, this contribution on sustaining youth leaders is for the inspiration of DVULI alumni and the urban leadership community. Enjoy!

A PARTNERSHIP ROOTED IN A SHARED MISSION

For nearly two decades, the Urban Youth Workers Institute (UYWI) and the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative (DVULI) have been running parallel paths with a shared heartbeat: equipping leaders to transform the lives of urban youth. Both organizations understood that the challenges faced by young people in the city required more than good intentions—they required leaders who were trained, resourced, and supported to remain in ministry for the long haul.

Over time, it became clear that their greatest impact would not come by working alone but by locking arms in deeper partnership. That conviction led to the creation of Fuel Networks, a bold initiative designed to strengthen leaders in cities across the nation by surrounding them with community, training, and opportunities for collaboration.

"TOO OFTEN, YOUTH PASTORS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS LABOR IN ISOLATION, CARRYING HEAVY BURDENS WITHOUT THE ENCOURAGEMENT OR RESOURCES THEY NEED. BURNOUT BECOMES COMMON, AND LEADERS WHO ONCE FELT CALLED TO MINISTRY QUIETLY STEP AWAY."

The vision behind Fuel Networks is simple yet profound: If you want to see youth transformed, you must first invest in the leaders who guide them. Too often, youth pastors and community leaders labor in isolation, carrying heavy burdens without the encouragement or resources they need. Burnout becomes common, and leaders who once felt called to ministry quietly step away. Fuel Networks confronts this reality by creating spaces where leaders can come together, pray together, learn from one another, and take collective action for the good of their city.

THE THREE PILLARS OF FUEL NETWORKS

Gather & Connect

The first pillar focuses on building intentional rhythms of relationship. Leaders gather regularly—whether over a monthly lunch, through collaborative workshops, or by sharing curriculum like the Alpha Youth Series. These consistent points of connection break down isolation and create a culture of encouragement and accountability.

Carry & Care

The second pillar ensures that leaders do not carry the weight of ministry alone. Fuel Networks creates spaces for prayer, encouragement, and emotional support, helping leaders sustain both their personal faith and their ministry impact. This pillar reminds youth pastors and ministry workers that they are seen, valued, and strengthened by one another.

Create & Collaborate

The third pillar pushes networks beyond connection into action. Leaders are encouraged to dream, innovate, and collaborate on projects that no single ministry could accomplish alone. Whether it's a citywide prayer walk, shared evangelistic efforts, or new opportunities in schools, collaboration expands the kingdom's reach and amplifies impact across entire communities.

STORIES OF IMPACT IN LONG BEACH

In Long Beach, the heart of these three pillars is coming alive through the leadership of local pastors and youth workers who are building something bigger than themselves.

Amie Schmidgall, the Long Beach Fuel Networks Leader, has emphasized collaboration over competition from day one. Having lived and served in the city for over a decade, Amie has seen the unique challenges young people face and the heavy load carried by those who serve them. She rallied leaders together for a citywide prayer walk across every middle and high school in Long Beach, visibly modeling unity and intercession. "By being united," Amie shared, "we can use our collective resources to bring transformation to schools, families, and neighborhoods." Her leadership reflects the spirit of gathering, connecting, and building trust among leaders who once ministered in isolation.

Johanna Turner, serving as both a youth pastor and a Fuel Networks Coordinator, knows how lonely ministry can feel. By creating spaces for leaders to meet, share, and pray together, Johanna has helped transform isolation into community. One highlight was the Alpha Youth Series, where multiple ministries partnered for an eight-week discipleship journey. Students wrestled with faith questions in safe spaces while leaders grew stronger in the process of working side by side. For Johanna, the most powerful tool has not been a program but the act of building an intentional community.

Manny Gallegos Jr., who also serves as a Fuel Networks Coordinator, brings a story of redemption and resilience into the network. After years of personal struggles, Manny responded to God's call and is now a youth pastor who sees the Fuel Networks as both a blessing and a bridge. Through the relationships he has built, Manny has been invited into schools he once had no access to. Watching their pastor step into their world, his students feel deeply valued and loved. Manny's journey reflects the "carry and care" pillar—he has been strengthened by community and, in turn, is pouring that strength back into the next generation.

Together, Amie, Johanna, and Manny embody what Fuel Networks is designed to do: gather leaders, help them care for one another, and empower them to collaborate in ways that transform their city.

A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

What's happening in Long Beach is just one glimpse of a much bigger story. Fuel Networks is also thriving in Cleveland, Columbus, Houston, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Newark, Queens, and Washington, DC. Each city is experiencing its own version of leaders uniting, sharing resources, and stepping into spaces where God is already at work.

By training, resourcing, and sustaining urban leaders, UYWI is ensuring that the next generation is not only being reached but also transformed. Long Beach is a powerful example, but it is just a portion of the work unfolding across the nation in other cities, all moving toward the same vision: healthy leaders, healthy ministries, and healthy communities fueled by Christ and one another.

TOMMY NIXON

Tommy Nixon is the Chief Executive Officer of Urban Youth Workers Institute, a leadership development coach, public speaker, and graduate of CSU Fullerton.

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100% RESOURCE



fterSchool HQ is a youth organization management platform that creates more time for meaningful engagement with students.

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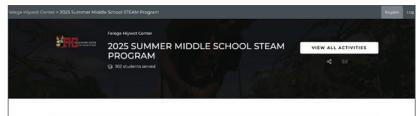
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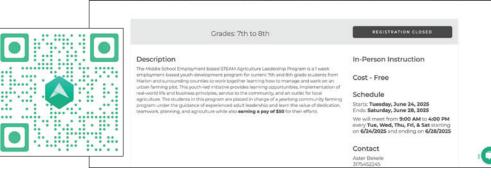
Our software will help you prioritize what truly counts.

Get more students in after-school activities through a platform that allows parents to find, register, and pay for activities in a simplified way.





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EDVULALUMNI UPPATES



Ray Banks (Chicago 2007) published The Ray Banks Story: A Testimony of God's Restoration Power, a message of hope to those struggling with addiction and a reminder of God's power.



Audra Beaty (San Antonio 2022) was promoted to Associate Director of Digital Marketing at Buckner International.



Myron Bernard (Seattle-Tacoma 2011) tied the knot to Leigh Anna on July 11, 2025.



Darius Carlo (Orlando 2023) assumed a new role as Lead Student Advocate with the City of Orlando.



Phoebe Cruz (Phoenix 2017) started her new job as Lead Aide at Vibrant Care Rehabilitation.



Charlene R. Fields (Pittsburgh 2006) graduated from Geneva College with an associate degree in Christian ministry.



Jaye Hill (Detroit 2004)
was featured in a TEDx series. Speaking about his journey with grief and transformation, he reminded attendees that brokenness can lead to breakthrough.



Nate Landis (San Diego 2008) published God Wants His Kids Back: Schools of Thought to Reach a Lost Generation, a new vision for reaching students in your community.



Jack Redmond (NYC 2010)
co-authored
Triumphant: My
Journey, His Call, an
extraordinary journey
from childhood abuse
and neglect to professional achievement
and healing.



Wilbur Smart
(Boston 2006)
received the
Community Partner
Award from the Boston
Police Department
in August.



Angela Smith (Atlanta 2008) received the prestigious Women of Impact Award from the Atlanta Mayor's Office.



Matu Taylor (Los Angeles 2019) recently completed and graduated from the Executive Director Leadership Institute.



Marc Wayne (Kansas City 2001) got married to Jen on July 13, 2025.

Share your personal updates and career benchmarks with us:

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For the equipping of our Spanish speaking urban leaders, DVULI is a proud partner of e625 Generational Leadership.









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