

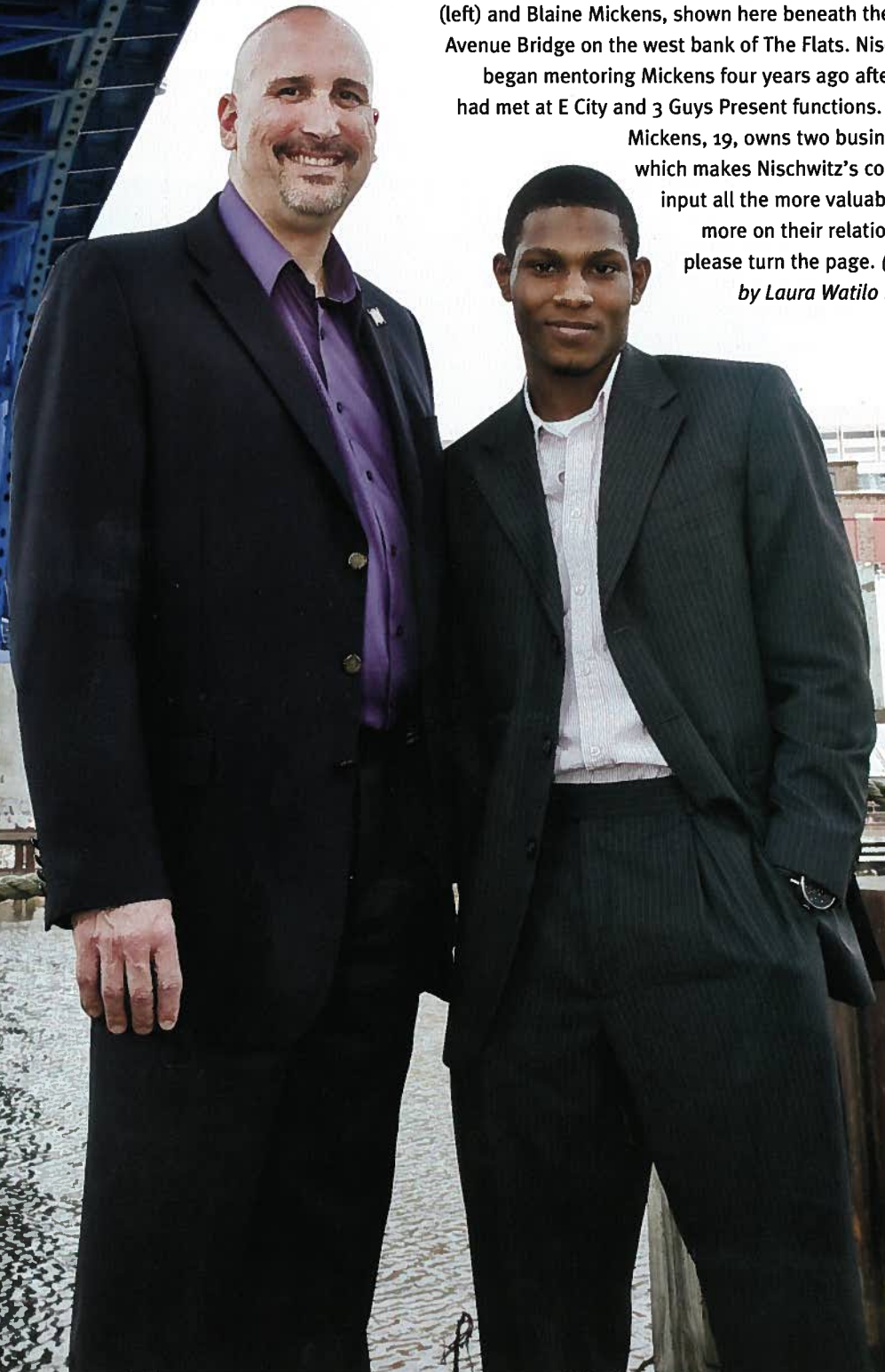


CENTERPOINT

CBC'S INSIDE LOOK AT NETWORKING AND EVENT PLANNING

BRIDGING THE GAP

Few individuals sum up this month's Centerpoint theme of leadership and mentoring better than Jeff Nischwitz (left) and Blaine Mickens, shown here beneath the Main Avenue Bridge on the west bank of The Flats. Nischwitz began mentoring Mickens four years ago after they had met at E City and 3 Guys Present functions. Today Mickens, 19, owns two businesses, which makes Nischwitz's constant input all the more valuable. For more on their relationship, please turn the page. *(Photo by Laura Watilo Blake)*





CANDID CONNECTION

For mentor Jeff Nischwitz and protege Blaine Mickens, it's taken a bit of "tough love" to bolster their entrepreneurial bond and friendship



Cleveland entrepreneur Jeff Nischwitz (left) on his 19-year-old protege, Blaine Mickens: "He's a rock star."

BY THOMAS SKERNIVITZ | PHOTO BY LAURA WATILO BLAKE

Where the mentorship ended, the friendship skyrocketed. That they even spoke again after that fateful summer day in 2009 is a testament to successfully balancing honesty and respect.

On one side of the table inside the Shaker Square Panera Bread was the "Great Debater" — Blaine Mickens, a teenage entrepreneur with questions for anyone willing to listen. Sitting across from him was the "Human LinkedIn" — Jeff Nischwitz, a professional coach, trainer, speaker, and, in the case of Mickens, mentor.

It was far from the first time they had met. E City, the local nonprofit that teaches business and life skills to young people, had connected them a few years earlier. It was about that time that "Blaine started stalking me," Nischwitz says with a smile. "His words, not mine."

"I did start stalking him," Mickens confirms. "When I first heard Jeff speak about relationships and the proper way to act in networking situations, it all made sense. He said it in such a different way."

Nischwitz is pretty good at sending a message. And sitting inside Panera he decided to level with Mickens, who, despite already being the owner of two companies at age 19, had recently been acting irresponsibly ... as 19-year-olds are prone to do. The conversation — "Probably the most direct I've ever been with Blaine," Nischwitz says — went something like this:

"You know what, Blaine, I love you, man, but I'm kind of tired of hearing your stories."

"But they're all true."

"I know they're true. Everything you say is true. But you make these stories about why something didn't happen. You keep looking at something to blame as opposed to looking at yourself."

Nischwitz immediately realized the ramifications of his honesty. "That was a real hard conversation. I knew because he got real quiet."

The silence lasted for a few days. "It was one of the critical moments in our relationship," Mickens says. The relationship resumed when Mickens phoned Nischwitz and told him he had needed to hear his critical words. "They call me the Great Debater because I always try to refute whatever anyone says," Mickens says, "but there was no argument against it."

Mickens, who turns 20 this month, is "very much ahead of the curve" as an entrepreneur, Nischwitz says. He opened a landscaping company, Estate Groomers, five years ago and a residential painting business, Young Picasso Painting, one year later.

The problems that Mickens has faced as a typical teenager — ones involving accountability, commitment, and personal integrity — could just as well apply to adult business people, according to Nischwitz.

"Blaine's a rock star," Nischwitz says. "He was cooking along and he hit some rough patches — adult rough patches — because he was functioning in an adult environment. I said, 'If you figure this out now, you're going to blow adults away because this is a lesson that adults don't even have yet. They're all telling their stories, too.'"

The next chapter in Mickens' story is still a mystery. Does he continue to focus on his companies? Or does he head to college to take advantage of his already-advanced skills?

"I don't want to half-ass college or half-ass my companies," he says.

Nischwitz has a solution — one that may necessitate another visit to Shaker Square.

"We're going to have a chat," he says. "I want to see if he's ready for me. I told him I have some opinions on it — pro and con. If he tells me he doesn't want to go to college, he'll have to sit down with me and tell my why. And prove to me why. And not just sit down and say, 'I just don't want to.'"

Mickens realizes that discussion, like the decision on college itself, won't be easy. But that's what makes Nischwitz so valuable.

"A lot of people say, 'Yeah, I'll be your mentor,' but they tiptoe around what I really need," Mickens says. "I know what I want, but I don't always know what I need. Jeff gave me exactly what I needed. He didn't BS about it."

The feeling, meanwhile, is mutual. "What's been cool for me is having this friendship with Blaine," Nischwitz says. "People say I'm his mentor, but I say, 'No, Blaine is my friend.'" ■

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