

# The Circle of Giving Back

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*By Jernelle Buckley, chief technical engineer, Electric Products*



Growing up, my mother constantly repeated her most notable piece of advice: There is a time and a place for everything. When we think of people who give back to their communities in big ways, we tend to think of professional athletes, musicians or actors and actresses. There was a time in my life when I was the one on the receiving end of others' generosity, and that position set me on a determined path to create a time and place for myself to be on the giving end.

Growing up on the South Side of Chicago meant there were not countless opportunities for us. It was easy to be written off and let the obstacles ahead of you block your path. My family did not own a car; I took public transportation to school because we did not have school buses. When we went outside to play in the winter, we did not have fancy snow boots or pants, and we were lucky if we had a coat that fit. We often relied on the [Bud Billiken Parade](#) or local park districts for our school supplies. While it may not have been ideal, many of us used these hardships to motivate us.



During my childhood, I wanted to pursue a career related to athletics. I was an avid track and field athlete and spent much of my time focused on training with the ultimate goal of being an Olympian. During my freshman year of high school, I came across a competition being held for the Society of Women Engineers. Seeing a group of women do something so technical and forward-thinking piqued my interest and ignited the passion that I eventually turned into a career.

### **Growing Through Obstacles**

When I became a mother at 16 years old, my mother's mantra of "there is a time and a place for everything" went from advice to action. I almost gave up on myself, but my mother repeated her mantra and helped me realize that this was the time and place to be a mother while working toward my goals. My family supported me endlessly while I got up every morning, dropped my daughter off at daycare, studied and graduated high school on time and with honors. I was accepted into 32 universities and chose the University of Southern Illinois to continue down my path, this time with an added notion of making a better life for my daughter.

After a successful first year, the engineering program ramped up and I hit another roadblock. In order to give my education the focus I needed to succeed and give my daughter the focus she needed to thrive, I made the difficult decision to leave my daughter with my mother while I finished my degree. One of my biggest reasons for never dropping out of high school and continuing to college was in pursuit of a better life for my daughter, and I knew that to provide that, this was a sacrifice I had to make.

My journey with Navistar began in the summer of 1999 as an intern before my senior year of college. After graduating with my degree in electrical and computer engineering, I was offered an interview, and then ultimately extended an offer, for a full-time position on the electrical engineering team. The door opened, and I jumped through it. While I was laid off in 2007, I came back to Navistar full-time in 2010 and have been working on the engineering team ever since. I ran down the obstacles one by one, focused on a better future.



### **Championing Professional Progress and Advancement**

While it may sound cliché, it is a cliché for good reason: being a hard worker pays off. Regardless of your color, age, race or sex; stay true to who you are, put your work ethic on display and people will take notice. I grew from an intern to a full-time employee working on various projects. When I noticed my counterparts moving up the ladder while I stayed put, I stepped up and advocated for myself. I knew my requests would be backed up by the blood, sweat and tears I put into my work, and my voice paid off.

When I am on calls, a lot of people look to the men in the room to lead and are sometimes taken aback when they see a Black woman take the lead. For awhile I was the only woman on the emobility team at Navistar, but if I have learned anything from my experiences, it is that you do not let a label hold you back.



Today, I am the chief technical engineer for our electric vehicles (EVs), and helped engineer both our International eMV Series medium duty truck and our IC Bus electric CE Series school bus. I work on performance, validation, and vehicle requirements necessary for all of our EVs. Being the chief EV engineer, it is my job to ensure that our products are delivered to our customers with the highest quality and performance.

### **Coming Full Circle**

This year, Navistar came together to collect school supplies to donate to communities in need in multiple

locations. As president of Navistar's internal employee resource group, International Community of African Americans I worked with members to organize and contribute to a supply drive around our Lisle, Illinois corporate headquarters. When all donations were packed, we loaded up an IC Bus electric CE Series and headed to a few different school districts in the Chicagoland area.



As we drove through Chicago on our way to our last destination, I was sitting next to our social impact manager and we began to talk about our upbringings and childhoods. I did not realize at first where we were going, but I started recognizing places in my old neighborhood as we drove. When we pulled up to a school in the neighborhood I grew up in, the neighborhood in which my mother still lives, and saw a big group of kids waiting for us, I was overcome with emotion.

**I was pulling up to my old neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago in an electric bus that I had engineered.**

As I helped pass out the donated school supplies, I saw my elementary school self in each and every child. I wanted these kids to know that you do not have to be a professional athlete or superstar to give back to the community you came from. You just have to be determined to make a difference and never stop pursuing your ambitions.



## The Personal Side of Social Impact

Navistar's [social impact goals](#) include reaching out to the communities in which we live and work. People may not always have the means to donate money or items, but time is just as valuable. Kids and adults alike need someone who can relate to what they are going through and talking to someone in the same boat that you were in may help them see that that boat does not have to be their permanent situation.

Each of my five kids grew up hearing my story and choosing a volunteering activity of their own. I always push them to be better and encourage them to ask the important questions that will guide them toward their most authentic, selfless characters: When you leave here, what legacy are you leaving? What will people say about how you impacted the world? Who will say and remember your name?



You can make a difference every day, whether it is something as small as helping someone with a task at work or something as large as engineering an electric school bus. No matter where you came from, what your name is, if you're Black, white, purple or green, you can impact the world around you in positive ways.

Like my mother said, there is a time and a place for everything. Every obstacle in your way was put there not to stop you, but to test your strength. It will not be easy and will require hard work but coming full circle and reflecting on the path you successfully followed is worth it.