St. Louis Character: Crystal Martin hacks her way into the local tech scene

Crystal Martin, who just stepped into a new job at Slalom as an analyst in the management consultancy's customer engagement practice, credits a “no excuses” childhood for shaping who she is today.

Six aunts, many of whom are educators, gave the Detroit native tips on how to move ahead in life. Her mother, Margo Martin, a substance abuse counselor, expected Martin's best. It was frustrating then, but Martin admits now that she can plow through anything.

Martin earned a bachelor’s in nutritional science from Michigan State University and then spent a summer abroad in South Africa working in an orphan care center for children affected by HIV and AIDS. There she saw how dogged the kids were about using education as a step to get ahead.

Back home, she applied for Teach for America in 2010 which placed her at the Lyon Academy at Blow in St. Louis. After one year, she enrolled at the University of Missouri - St. Louis to earn a master of education in secondary education. Three years later, she left classroom teaching.

Scott Baier, former St. Louis executive director for Teach for America and current executive director of College Bound, said Martin was a committed teacher. "No nonsense, super clear, trying to get the most out of her kids and hard working," Baier said. "She cared about accountability for herself and her students. She's super smart, makes good decisions and is really funny."

After attending an STLRuby meetup — where Crystal was the only woman and black person there — she met coders and programmers who piqued her interest in learning code. This led to a job as the education and community engagement manager at LaunchCode to make “CoderGirl cool again.” It was just the challenge she needed.

Rebeccah Bennett, founder and principal of Emerging Wisdom LLC, met Martin when she was a fellow of the St. Louis Business Diversity Initiative. "As a member of the Initiative's faculty, I was struck by Crystal's desire to use what she was learning to advance diversity, inclusion and equity at her work place,” Bennett said.
“She is a brilliant catalyst and change agent who is unafraid to challenge an industry that often undervalues women's leadership and seems largely skeptical of African American talent.”

Martin, 30, lives in Tower Grove East with her cat, Nora.

**Why did you major in nutritional science?** I love science and could have chosen biology or chemistry, but I was interested in nutrition and health. I could learn science and medical things within the context of nutrition.

**You left classroom teaching. Why?** It was tough and rewarding, but I couldn’t separate myself from it. I like to heal people and am a strength finder. I was always worried about the kids. Eventually this took an emotional toll on me.

**Weren’t you about to leave St. Louis thinking it failed you?** I had all these friends who had gone to cool cities. I didn’t know anyone in St. Louis and it’s a hard place to be a transplant without a high school to reference. Meeting new people was difficult. I was in my mid-20s and felt I had done everything here.

**And then?** When I went to the STLRuby meetup, I encountered a new network of people. I love programmers and coders — they are smart but also have crazy offbeat interests. And then the job with LaunchCode came along.

**When you were hired in 2015 by LaunchCode, what did you do?** I was responsible for making sure everyone knew what LaunchCode was. I did outreach, teaching and served as an ambassador. CoderGirl became a business within a business.

**Give one example of how you have effected change.** I was a co-organizer of the Strange Loop Conference in St. Louis which focuses on functional programming and emerging technologies. I call it the freak show of tech conferences. It was also the most inclusive and diverse conference I had attended. I then organized a Diversity in Tech event to help facilitate community and connections between people of different backgrounds.

**Why did you leave CoderGirl?** I love tech and always want to work in it. But I wanted to grow and to learn new skills. I had worked only at nonprofits. At Slalom, a for-profit firm, I will be developing internal training and recruiting people to learn the Salesforce software program. I’ll also be in training to become a consultant.

**You want to start your own business some day. Is St. Louis a good place to do so?** It has been and can be a good place for startups. But I think the city needs to move beyond the status quo. I just joined the Missouri Venture Forum board, which helps early-stage companies find the resources they need. Locally, there’s also the BALSA Foundation that assists entrepreneurs in getting off the ground and gives small businesses more visibility. And there’s BRAZEN, which helps women entrepreneurs advance their businesses.

**How do we get more young black professionals to move into the city, stay and start businesses?** We want representation and startups with diversity. We don’t necessarily feel reflected here, but we are folks with money, ideas and smarts. What we need is a place and a space that brings together a critical mass of young black pros. I’m now working in a business environment that will help me understand how businesses are built, and it will give me the credibility, the vocabulary and clout to be heard.

**What do you do to relax?** I like drawing, doing yoga and entertaining. Most of my extra-curricular activities are tech related. I have a boyfriend (a programmer) of almost two years, and we like to travel and hear live
music. But basically we are homebodies who like to read and to cook. Everyone loves my mac and cheese. Also, I’m on an Asian cooking jag right now.

**If you weren’t doing this, what would it be?** I would have gone to hair school, hustled my way to be either a celebrity stylist or I would have my own salon and spa. I did hair throughout college to earn money. I have the nutrition/science side, the tech skills and am gaining the business experience. I’m both creative and STEM savvy.

**Any hidden talents?** I have a desire to sing in front of an audience — not like Beyonce — at a small local venue with a great band ... although I’m deathly afraid to do so. I’m an okay singer, not great.

**Any other items on your bucket list?** Some of my colleagues and I went natural. We want to begin a natural hair club for girls to learn how to take care of their own hair and embrace their natural texture.

**How do you give back to the community?** I’m speaking at TedxStLouisWomen at the Peabody on Nov. 2, about women in tech. I serve on two boards, one of which is the Civic Tech and Data Collaborative where we’re creating software to consolidate all data from municipalities so people can gain easy accesses to all information about their violations.