



IT'S OUR Neighborhood

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA



Mission

It's Our Neighborhood provides at-risk youth with mentors, employment, academic and recreational opportunities that help them grow into successful entrepreneurs.

IT'S OUR Neighborhood

Something extraordinary is happening in the heart of Saint Paul, beneath King Milan's Barbershop on University Avenue. Tucked away in the lower level, It's Our Neighborhood (ION), a 501c3 nonprofit, is more than just a space—it is a launchpad for the dreams of African American youth ages 14 to 20. Founded by the barbershop owner Milan Dennie, known for his personalized cuts and deep community ties, ION provides a safe, supervised environment where young people explore entrepreneurship in a hands-on, real-world way. In this space, designed by youth for youth, they engage in unstructured social interactions, develop business skills, and gain the confidence to carve out their futures.



Dennie knows firsthand what it means to grow up in a neighborhood with limited career opportunities. "I didn't grow up with much. My mom struggled to make ends meet," he often says. Now, he is paying it forward through ION, ensuring the next generation has the tools, mentorship, and opportunities he never had. ION is more than just a nonprofit—it's a movement shaping young entrepreneurs and transforming lives, one idea at a time.

At ION, youth from nearby St. Paul neighborhoods step into a space designed to inspire and empower. There is a gaming corner, a math lab, a small library, chess tables, and walls filled with words like "entrepreneur," "linear equations," "verbs," and "geometry." This dynamic environment, nicknamed "The Seed," is where young

Service Area

Every year, youth throughout the Twin Cities visit ION's University Avenue location to take advantage of the Labor Day engagement event, where barbecue is served with a side of school supplies and free haircuts. Owner Milan Dennie says it's his way of helping out his community. On a weekly basis, ION serves an average of fifteen young people from the Frogtown Saint Paul community. In 2024, more than one thousand Frogtown youth took advantage of ION programs. Nearly as many young women as young men are served annually. ION's youth population is largely African American. Their parents treasure ION for setting and adhering to high standards of good behavior, specifically, fostering a sense of respect, responsibility, and engagement that sets the stage for success.



Important Dates

Exciting changes are coming for ION as they transition from the barbershop location to a new expanded space next door at 509 University Ave. This move will have an even more significant impact, including launching a barber school where St. Paul Public School juniors and seniors can earn credits toward their barber license upon graduating from high school. The barber school will further reinforce ION's mission to equip youth with real-world skills that open doors to successful careers.

GRAND OPENING

April 1, 2025

BARBER SCHOOL BEGINS

September 1, 2025

talents blossom. Everyone who walks through ION's doors is valued for what they bring into the space—no matter the challenges they may face at home, in school, or in their community. ION lessons show youth that they have what it takes to succeed.

With professional guidance, ION youth examine the roles of ideation, planning, project execution, and project sustainability relating to creating and preserving a new business. They are paired with mentors who help them improve their academic and life skills; gain employment skills through entrepreneurial activities; and experience recreational opportunities. Using a one-day opportunity (Saint Paul Youth Business Fair), ION participants start their own business enterprise. They develop a brand, create a product or service, build a marketing strategy, and open for customers at a one-day marketplace held at the event.

Some opportunities, like competitive chess, assist ION youth in developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills; help youth improve their concentration and focus; teach patience; build social skills, and confidence. King Milan's staff and ION volunteers team with other local entrepreneurs to position youth to be well educated in business, especially economics. At ION, youth are as excited as anyone else to use an app that tells them the correct amount of change to give a buyer of an item, but ION teaches youth to "do the math" themselves so they understand the concepts of sales, receiving cash or credit, and completing accounting steps to keep up with how a business is making or losing money. Teaching youth to "do the math" is important because it develops critical cognitive skills like logical reasoning and problem-solving abilities. Youth are taught that relying solely on an app can bypass the deeper understanding of the mathematical concepts needed for real-world application and flexible thinking; essentially, "doing the math" builds a stronger foundation for mathematical reasoning and comprehension.



"It's because of difficult personal experiences that I am committed to helping people today."

MILAN DENNIE, *Founder, CEO / Executive Director*
IT'S OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

One of ION's goals is to ensure program participants encounter positive choices that allow them to use their skills in multiple settings, including helping them make good choices and stay safe. The program helps youth identify their unique skills and abilities; learn how to discover their best winning strategies; and determine what they are willing to protect and what they are willing to sacrifice. Program participants are encouraged to regularly take inventory of their assets and protect themselves from harmful societal elements.

Overall, ION helps young people develop their social, emotional, and cognitive abilities and it offers pathways to experience achievement, enjoyment, friendship, and recognition. Because of its emphasis on entrepreneurship, the ION space promotes a sense of ownership and freedom of expression.

Fueled by Milan Dennie's commitment, ION has operated for over five years, sustained by his personal investment of more than \$75,000 in its success, including purchasing a vehicle and equipment for a hands-on entrepreneurial experience. He is also well-known for providing free haircuts to St. Paul students at the start of each school year. Milan remembers the pressure to have new shoes, clothes, and a fresh haircut before heading back to school, and he wished there had been a way to help his family afford those things. "It's because of difficult personal experiences that I am committed to helping people today," Milan said. In addition to free haircuts, ION provides school supplies. "Now, children in the neighborhood can go to school with pride and self-esteem, knowing their parents didn't have to shell out yet another big expense," Milan explained.



2025 - 2030 Program Highlights



By design there is rarely a routine day at ION. ION's founder and volunteers encourage youth to use their curiosity, stretch their imaginations, question traditional ways of being, consider new ideas, and approach problems with unique perspectives. Such behavior fosters creativity and can lead to unique solutions. ION will offer three standard program modules from 2025 through 2027 that will encourage creativity and problem-solving:



Saint Paul Youth Business Fair

An opportunity for youth to launch their very own business. They are encouraged to develop a brand, create a product or service, build a marketing strategy, and open for customers during a one-day marketplace. Acton Academy and the generous support of ION donors and volunteers sponsor this event. ION's founder and volunteers believe that principled entrepreneurs are heroes and role models for the next generation.



ION's Food Truck Workshop

ION's signature mobile restaurant, was conceived, and launched by Saint Paul youth, and it is run by youth in the ION program. Food Truck's work teaches entrepreneurial skills, including business knowledge, technical expertise, economic knowledge, and leadership skills, and allows the practice of behaviors that build strong entrepreneurial mindsets. Using a simple menu, youth prepare and serve food directly from the vehicle.



Coding and Computer Technology Workshop

Youth learn the process of creating instructions that computers can interpret and execute, including writing sets of instructions in a programming language that a computer can understand and follow to perform specific tasks or solve problems. Some of the youth in this workshop build and deploy their business websites to showcase their business model, products, and services.

Outcomes and Impact

ION aims to ensure participants are able to:

Build a business marketing strategy.

Create a business product or service.

Design and launch business websites to showcase a business model, products, and services.

Develop a business brand.

Develop and effectively use critical thinking skills.

Effectively serve customers.

Experience opportunities for networking.

Forge career pathways and partnerships.

Gain market insights related to their business interest.

Identify and utilize the four key elements of entrepreneurship.

Launch their very own business.

Offer delicious food truck items that fit modern dietary preferences.

Showcase business products.

Understand and execute the elements of a successful customer experience.

Understand the role of branding and social media in business.

Use the appropriate technology to operate the ION Food truck.

Write instructions in a programming language that a computer can understand and follow to perform specific tasks or solve problems.

2025 - 2030 Goals

1

Engage at least 1000 youth annually (e.g., community events and direct service activities).

2

Help youth develop life skills through their participation in ION program activities.

3

Increase youth thinking/learning and entrepreneurial skills by completing a business plan and other ION activities.



ION was founded because youth in the Frogtown Neighborhood of St. Paul do not have access to enough career pathway opportunities, mentorship programs, and academic support.



Your support is instrumental in making a difference.

Join us in empowering young leaders and creating lasting change for our youth and community.

Invest in the Future of ION Youth

According to “A Statewide Crisis: Minnesota’s Education Achievement Gaps,” by Rob Grunewald in 2019, Minnesota has some of the largest academic achievement gaps by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in the nation. These gaps have persisted for decades despite Minnesota “implementing policies designed to close them.” ION was founded because youth in the Frogtown Neighborhood of St. Paul do not have access to enough career pathway opportunities, mentorship programs, and academic support. Achievement gaps correlate with higher dropout rates and engagement in risky behaviors, while educational and career development opportunities support financial security and positive civic engagement.

It’s Our Neighborhood’s program seeks to connect youth with positive role models and learning opportunities, fostering personal, career, and academic growth that can significantly alter their life trajectories. ION has existed since 2015 with limited funding from its founder and a few dedicated investors: Acton Business Fair, F. R. Bigelow Foundation, Saint Paul and Minnesota Foundation, Mardag Foundation, Propel Nonprofits, Ramsey County, Teamsters, and donated activities and resources.

ION has built a strong foundation through community partnerships, collaboration with service providers, and dedicated parental involvement—ensuring that young people gain meaningful entrepreneurial experiences. Now, we need your support to expand our impact.

We are seeking financial partners to help provide hands-on business training, academic enrichment, and mentorship opportunities for youth. With your investment, ION can equip the next generation of entrepreneurs, strengthen their financial literacy, and take the organization to new heights.

PARTNERS AND INVESTORS

ION's founder and volunteers are deeply grateful to their incredible partners for their dedication to youth development. These partners create meaningful moments with young people, advance ION's organizational goals, and extend their impact beyond the program—benefiting the broader community.

Acton Business Fair	Ramsey County Youth Works!
Face to Face	Restoration Inc
F.R. Bigelow Foundation	Right Track
Greater Twin Cities United Way	St. Paul Jaycees
H.B. Fuller	Saint Paul and Minnesota Foundation
Mardag	Saint Paul Public Schools
Neighborhood Development Center (NDC)	Shepard's Work
Propel NonProfits	St. Paul College
Ramsey County	UPS

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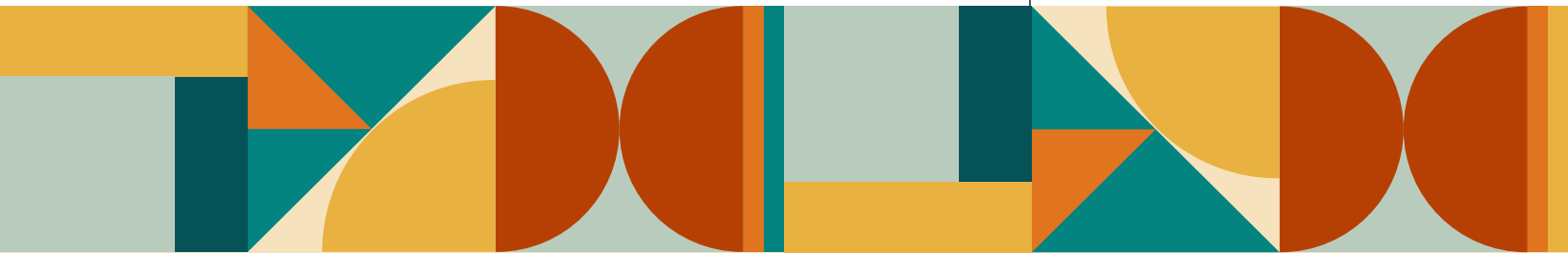
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Milan Dennie, *Founder, CEO / Executive Director*



Contact **It's Our Neighborhood** to provide youth with mentors, employment, academic, and recreational opportunities that help them grow into successful entrepreneurs.

Milan Dennie, *Founder, CEO/Executive Director*

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