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THE TENNESSEE MAGAZINE

**Penultimate
Development
Reaching Limitless
Heights**

**Family Heirlooms Made by
Lynnville's Colonel Littleton**

**Tennessee History for Kids
The Notorious Ned Buntline**

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Andre, Desmond and Diondre showcase their handcrafted charcuterie boards that are sold through Penultimate Woodworks. Image provided by Madison Loane Photography

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The sun sets on the Defeated Creek campground looking over Cordell Hull Lake near Carthage. Photograph by Robin Conover

Limitless Heights: Diondre Jackson's vision transforms young lives and the local community

Story by AEC Director of Communications Emily Walls

When high jumping, the penultimate step is the second to last before you jump. It is the most important step of all to launch you forward. As a high jumper at the University of Tennessee, this concept resonated with Diondre Jackson, founder of Penultimate Development in Jefferson City. Penultimate Development includes Penult Place, a local co-working office space, a nonprofit called Penultimate and Penultimate Woodworks.

Penultimate is a ministry targeted to underserved African American young men in the local community that focuses on three key areas — personal, professional and spiritual development — and it is transforming lives. According to Jackson, African American men are often not connected to the people or places in the community that lead to their long-term success, and they lack the resources to successfully transition into adulthood. Penultimate gives these young adults that “last step” before they launch into the real world on their own. Jackson purchased a location in downtown Jefferson City where these young men can live in a dorm-like room after high school, and it provides them with real-life skills. Jackson states, “I can sleep up to six here, and there is a nice common area.” In the common area, a beautiful wood table is the centerpiece of the room,

and it was built by the men in the program. Jackson states, “There’s meaning behind building tables. I don’t want them to expect someone to give them a seat at the table. They need to learn to do it themselves ... and they have. They’ve built conference room tables, dining room tables, breakfast tables, and they do a great job.” Because of the success, they’ve created Penultimate Woodworks as part of the program.

Jackson is quick to say, “Penultimate isn’t a last chance or a second chance program. It’s just a program to help guys that have been in different youth development programs, after school programs, clubs, bands or other activities in school, and now they’re 18 and have aged out. I’ve even had guys that have come out of foster care. Whatever the scenario, this program helps them transition into adulthood.”

The men in Penultimate are selected through an application process and must meet specific criteria. They must have a GED or a diploma, and they must pass a drug test. On a personal level, Jackson says, “They must be teachable. If you know it all, then your cup is already full, and I can’t add to that.”

As part of the program, they participate in different activities throughout the month. Every Friday, a speaker is brought in to have lunch with them. These speakers tell their success stories, and they provide three nuggets of information about how they succeeded, and it often ties into what Jackson is already teaching them. He states, “We use Proverbs as our foundation for learning. We want them to have a spiritual foundation that is going to last.”

Spiritual development is an integral part of the program, in addition to personal and professional development. Each type of development focuses on specific goals and objectives. The professional development goals encourage the men to create a five-year plan. They are part of the program for 10 months. They learn career planning, take industry tours and learn business etiquette and professionalism. Rebecca Greenep, director at Aramark at Carson-Newman University, says, “I am grateful to Penultimate ... I have



From left are Ryan McGrew, Malachi Dixon, Andre Jordan and Tyquan Rogers with Diondre Jackson.

had two very outstanding individuals we employed. Both were very hardworking, respectful and dependable. This program is important for our employment community. In our area, it is difficult to find quality applicants. I trust this program to send outstanding candidates that are eager and ready to work.” Through personal development, they are taught how to work with others, communicate, manage money and how to deal with and manage conflict, just to name a few things.



Diondre Jackson brings a co-working space to Jefferson City businessmen and women.

The inspiration for Penultimate

Jackson’s inspiration for Penultimate came from mentoring young men over the years. This began when he graduated college in 1999. He says, “I was a volunteer Young Life leader when I graduated from college and started working. I have always mentored guys. Through the years, I’ve had guys even live with me. My wife Adia and I have taken guys to college, we’ve taught them to drive, we’ve bought them cars and paid tuition. It’s just always been a part of our lives.” When talking about Adia, he says, “She is the best choice I’ve ever made, and she’s totally on board with what we’re doing. A big part of our success is because of her.” Jackson also gives credit to one of the men who went through his program. Referring to the young man, he says, “He is like a son to me. He’s lived with me. I built this program for him.”

In Knoxville, Jackson ran a big nonprofit program and developed relationships with men there who were considered at-risk, lived in single parent homes and came from low-income households, but there was nothing that really transitioned these men into adulthood. Jackson says, “I just saw the need was there. A lot of people along the way thought Penultimate was too high risk, and they thought it wasn’t going to work. I knew it was going to work, and I didn’t see the risk because they’re already living in my house,” he laughs. “Now instead of serving one guy at a time, I’m serving five or six. I ran the Knoxville nonprofit for 12 years, so I know how to raise money, write grants and do fundraisers,” he says.

Jackson left the nonprofit in Knoxville in 2017, and it took about a year and a half to renovate the Jefferson City building and open it. They started programming in 2019. He laughs and says, “It was funny because I was told it would take eight weeks to renovate this building, but it ended up taking a year and a half because it was a restoration and

not a renovation. It had to be restored to show the beauty and qualities in the floor and ceiling. We used a lot of the original wood in the floors and ceiling. Restoration takes time. There’s no such thing as a quick fix. It’s a long-term investment, and the same is true in peoples’ lives. If you’re planting the seeds, you might not see the fruit for a long, long time. I live life with the guys in my program. Life is messy. When I started the program, I didn’t start it with a stat or data point. I asked the question, ‘What am I going to do with these guys to prepare them for life as an adult?’”

Jackson wanted to help the kids who didn’t have a support system at home. He says, “They were good kids, but they weren’t taking advantage of opportunities like college, tech school, two- or four-year schools. The kids who didn’t have a support system were content with an entry-level job. So, by nature, my wife and I were pushing the kids we knew to do more. We’ve seen kids go off to college through the years, and that was the idea of this program. The concept is to help them to take the next step to success whatever that may be.”

Penult Place

When Jackson and Adia purchased their building in downtown Jefferson City, they purchased it for their nonprofit, Penultimate. They had extra square footage, and they weren’t sure what to do with the additional space. After doing some research, Jackson realized there’s not a lot

of meeting spaces locally with internet, so it led him to the idea of co-working spaces. He says, “It really worked out because much of what I needed to open this space, I already had.” With Penultimate being a ministry, they had to be frugal and resourceful. He says, “We



The Jackson Family: From left are Delaney, Diondre Jr., Adia, Diondre and Denver.

got desks that came out of the UT Library. They were surplus items. I got 18 desks for \$6. I just refinished them. All the furniture with the exception of one piece, I either restored it or rebuilt. It's hard to imagine what the inside of this place looked like. It was nasty, and I had no experience doing restoration." Jackson admits he didn't have a lot of money, but he wanted to get it done. He says, "There's only one way to pull up nails, and that's one by one."

They finished the building, and in his words, "It really was a God thing. For example, I needed some material, and it would normally cost \$45 for a piece for trim, but I would stumble upon someone selling them for \$1 a piece. That kind of stuff happened often." He admits when he bought the building it was one problem after the other, and he jokes that he ended up becoming a carpenter, an electrician and a plumber. He partnered with organizations like Renovatus, a local recovery community that provides life skills to those seeking to be free from a drug or alcohol addiction, to help him restore the building. Pete Higgs, the founder of Renovatus, had guys working for Jackson who taught him about carpentry. Jackson recalls, "One of the workers was a godsend. We worked together for a week, and at the end of the week, he said, 'Diondre, whatever I've got, you've got. It was clear God was in everything.'"

The pandemic hit, and many people realized how difficult it was to work from home, so Penult Place provided a convenient working space with high-speed internet. One thing Jackson likes about having a co-working space is it puts his business in the center of the downtown development. He says, "I think it's cool to be in the center of what's happening in the restoration of downtown Jefferson City. There were about a dozen businesses that shot up when I started my building, and I like being part of that."

Penultimate Woodworks

The most recent endeavor Jackson has taken on is called Penultimate Woodworks. It is also in a space in downtown Jefferson City. There is a woodshop where Jackson and the men in his program make custom tables, desks and charcuterie boards and sell them online at penultimatewoodworks.com. Jackson says, "Sometimes you get guys in Penultimate who have never worked before, and this is a great way for them to learn a trade. The furniture is detailed, so if they can do this kind of work, they will have the skillset to do many other things." It is one more positive step they make before launching out into the workforce.

The space for Penultimate Woodworks also has three other rooms, and Jackson hopes this is one way he can expand his program in a different way. This building also hosts young men who have gone through the program, and they are looking to make Jefferson City their home. This is a transitional start for people who come out of the program. Right now, he has a young man who got married and moved away, but he and his wife want to live in Jefferson City.

They moved back in town, and they are living in one of the rooms in the building as they both search for a job in the area. This is one more step into the future that will help young men in the program truly succeed.

A vision for the future

Jackson has built something truly impactful for the men in his program, but also for Jefferson City. Looking ahead, Jackson desires to hire a program director, and he needs to fill a few different staff positions in the future. He wants to do more fundraising to ensure the program is fully funded because his goal is for the organization to last beyond his ability to run it. He says, "The only way for that to happen is to spread the load and get more people involved. We need more volunteers. It's been good so far, but we have so far to go. I would like to see it expand beyond just one facility, but I'm more interested in it being done correctly, right here in our hometown. The only way that can happen is if I hire the right staff and am even more involved in the community." He says, "I want to get to the point where I am managing the people who are leading the young men because just managing the people is a task by itself."

The tagline for Penultimate is, "One step away from reaching new heights," and it is fitting. Many of the young men in the program will have the opportunity to soar with the personal, professional and spiritual development they receive through this program. It will launch them into the future, ready to tackle challenges and excel in life, but perhaps the most beautiful thing is that Penultimate Development not only transforms individuals' lives within the program, but it also transforms our community for good. With a co-working space for professionals in the area to have their own place to work, along with the preparation and launch of young, well-grounded men in our community, the heights are limitless.

Penultimate participant Malachi Dixon hard at work.

