



## Pittsburgh, Do Not Despair



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The conventional wisdom in Pittsburgh says Yasin Shuman does not exist. And yet he does. Mr. Shuman avoids mocking the region's group- think. But by doing what he does, it is unavoidable.

Virtually all Grant Street politicians, urban planners with advanced degrees and the best and the brightest in the Allegheny Conference on Community Development insist economic development simply cannot happen in Downtown let alone in the city's rough neighborhoods without government handouts. And lots of them.

Believe the wise ones or your own eyes.

The Shuman Market at Forbes Avenue and Wood Street -- that's Downtown Pittsburgh, folks -- opened a few months ago with no fanfare or government aid.

"We want to target Hill District, North Side and Downtown customers who take jitneys to the Giant Eagle on the South Side," said Shuman, a 28-year-old Chicago-born Sunni Muslim of Palestinian ancestry with a degree in international relations via Duquesne University and Cleveland State.

He thanks a defunct business for the inspiration. "If you look historically at Downtown, the G.C. Murphy butcher shop did phenomenal business." Shuman should know because he had rented space in the store to sell wireless phones.

Another Downtown store he plans to open -- soon -- will sell take- out food such as fish and chicken. Shuman knows how hard it can be to find fried chicken in Downtown from his apartment days in the Pennsylvanian on Liberty Avenue.

He's come a long way from 1995 when during his freshman year at Duquesne he started selling pagers in East Liberty. He has about 15 stores in or near the city including markets, delis, phone stores and dollar stores. Many are located in the heart of, um, challenging communities such as Homewood, Garfield, Wilkinsburg and East Liberty.

Why risk your own money to open stores in high-crime neighborhoods when local government seems it cannot offer enough taxpayer money to entice others to do the same?

"We want to be involved in the neighborhood or community," Shuman says. "If you need Similac baby formula or milk or eggs, you cannot go to stores of bigger chains and say, 'I will pay you next week.' We have superb customer service. Gangs do not want the store to close.

"You need that store. I know it sounds funny but do you want your mom to know that you robbed that store -- robbed the guy who is very nice to her? We are invited by families to neighborhood cookouts, like in the Hill District."

A dad once brought in his son and made him confess to robbing the store. Shuman set up a payment plan for the stolen \$3,200. The family paid it back in six months, Shuman says.

"It's kind of the way we market the store."

Another way is how employees are treated -- 90 percent of whom are black, he says. Entry-level jobs start at \$5.15 an hour, but skyrocket to \$15 an hour plus commissions because a clerk shares in that store's profit.

Any problems with, um, trustworthiness?

"That is a whole big misconception," Shuman says. "We have more qualified applicants than we do positions. We keep so many on the part-time payroll just to keep them. They are helping our growth."

Shuman's unconventional wisdom: "America isn't dead. It takes harder work than people are willing to put forth. But it is attainable. I wish more people would not despair. It is possible."

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