Michael Tubbs, distinguished CSRE graduate of Stanford and candidate for City Council of his hometown of Stockton, CA has a long list of honors and awards. To name a few, he is a Truman Scholar honoring his commitment to public service. He was also honored as City of Stockton Architect of Peace, and was a Rhodes Scholar Finalist. He founded several successful organizations: he is Founder and Executive Director of The Phoenix Scholars, he co-created Save Our Stockton and he co-founded the Summer Success and Leadership Academy at the University of Pacific. For two years Tubbs was Chairman of the Youth Advisory Commission in Stockton, and he was an intern at the White House working in Senior Advisor to President Obama Valerie Jarret’s office. He is also known as the Stanford student who received a campaign contribution from Oprah Winfrey, only the third candidate contribution she has ever given, after Barack Obama and Corey Booker. But as nationwide attention about his campaign for Stockton City Council and incredible accomplishments continue to grow, Tubbs maintains a deep sense of humility and razor sharp clarity about his mission in Stockton.

Not far east from the wind turbines of Altamont Pass lies Stockton, CA, the fourth largest city in the Central Valley. Stockton, established in 1849 became a thriving, diverse commercial center, populated by prospectors during the Gold Rush. Stockton has developed into a major shipping point for agriculture, its main industry. Located in San Joaquin County, Stockton remains one of the most culturally and ethnically diverse cities in California, approximately 40% white, 30% Latino, 20% Asian and 10% African American.

Tubbs has just returned from a conference organized by the Children’s Defense Fund in Cincinnati on the Cradle to Prison Pipeline. He is also balancing his full time leadership academy work at University of the Pacific with at-risk youth. Without a hint of fatigue, Tubbs meets with a diverse group of youth from Stockton ready to canvass districts at 10am. His goal is to walk all 6 districts in Stockton, a city of 296,357.

As the group prepares to canvas, Racole Dixon, Michael’s mother greets the volunteers with warm smiles and hugs. Ms. Dixon explains that her mother, Michael’s grandmother, herself, and her sister helped raise Michael. Michael’s mother gave birth to him when she was 16. Michael’s father is incarcerated. Michael often uses the metaphor of a phoenix rising to describe his trajectory in life. He credits his mother, grandmother and aunt’s guidance for his success. His mother explains she always tells Michael, “to Keep God first, follow your heart, just believe and know that you are not limited.” She always saw this potential in him. “Michael was always a leader. He used to get in trouble with the teachers because they are not used to a young black boy speaking up. They think he is trying to be rude but he just wants to know why and where did you find that answer. He is a researcher. You can’t just tell him something. You are going to have to back it up.”

By Tubbs’s side is his friend Christopher Prado, whom he has known since the 7th grade. He describes how Tubbs led a group of young college students from Stockton to organize Save Our Stockton – A Youth Movement for Change. Save Our Stockton (SOS) is a call for youth to organize, to find their voices and empower themselves to advocate for the revitalization of their city. The organization has been actively participating in City Council meetings, presenting platforms concerning education, crime and other issues from a youth perspective. SOS successfully advocated for the establishment of a youth task force on crime that was eventually established together with the City Council and the Mayor. Prado explains, “These are things he has done without position and without pay and I know that is the caliber of individual he is, and also the character he will have and the principle he will stand on if he is elected for Stockton City Council.”

Michael’s road toward local politics was not obvious. When Michael entered Stanford he was generally turned off by politics. He explains how his junior year at Stanford became a
How does the community envision change?

What concerns do they have about the community? Michael inquires. The answer is often deep frustration about crime, education and city management. He never cuts anyone off. He encourages more questions and comments. At one house, Michael talks to a former Marine who was raised in Stockton. He speaks of his carefree childhood, playing in the streets without fear or violence. He laments the situation today where he feels scared to go to parts of the city he loves and has spent most of his life. He is a Vietnam Vet, so is Michael’s grandfather. As he sits in the shade of what seems to be a typical quiet suburban neighborhood he recounts the recent burglary of his home. His wife comes out to check to see if her husband is talking Michael’s ear off. She is concerned about his tendency to talk too much. But Michael listens patiently to all of the man’s concerns. When I comment about his patience with the man, Tubbs responds, “He just wanted someone to hear him.”

For Tubbs, Stanford and CSRE were key influences on his decision to run for City Council. “Being at Stanford I was exposed to a way of thinking outside the box. I learned that problems aren’t problems, they are opportunities.” He credits CSRE for giving him the tools to think in an interdisciplinary manner. He developed a wide breadth of knowledge to understand crucial, structural issues that affect Stockton.

Michael explains the promise of Stockton, “How do we change a community that is struggling but has so much potential? We have the University of Pacific here, a major research university. We have one of the best community colleges in the State. We have the only inland delta in the State, the 12th largest school district. There are all types of human capital and capital in general here that is not being tapped into yet.”

When asked about finding a balance between idealism and reality he reflects on his participation in the reenactment of the Freedom Rides with some of the original Freedom Riders. The conversations about change with the freedom riders as a long process gave him a framework to celebrate the small victories.

On this day, the talk often turns to the 17 year old who was recently found dead in the local park. Tubbs knows of him and organized an event in his honor. “We had an event at night where the murder happened and got 90 people to show up. We got the police to come, the mayor came, city council members came, so we can celebrate that. Or the leadership academy [at UOP], it is not every teen in Stockton but at least we know 50 won’t be in trouble. I’m 21 so I have time to wait and work.”

—Dena Montague

Dena Montague received her PhD in Political Science from UCLA. Her research interests are race and politics in the African Diaspora. She is also the Co-Founder of EnergieRich, a social enterprise developing the capacity of rural communities in West Africa for local production of solar products and small-scale computers.