

## **Kimberly Greene Starks: An Inventive Streak That Started Early**

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*By Trish Hall*

Kimberly Greene Starks, who has received dozens of patents, is always working on something new. It's her nature.

"I was one of those kids who would tear something apart because I wanted to figure out why it did what it did," she says. Of course, at the age of eight or nine, she didn't always know how to put it back together. "When I couldn't, then I'd make something new. I'd make toys."



Her quest to understand how things worked often involved her younger sister. “I would do things that terrified my parents. I put my sister in the dryer—I convinced her to tumble dry to observe from the inside. I had my

sister get in the car trunk with me to see, firsthand, if the light would stay on.”

Maybe her most extreme adventure: She put a lit match in the freezer to see if the fire would freeze. It didn’t. “I burned my parents’ relatively new side-by-side refrigerator and freezer,” she says.

## **Curiosity, Channeled**

Greene Starks, who grew up near Louisville, says she was lucky to have parents who, instead of “freaking out,” guided her into activities that channeled her curiosity, like STEM camps and the Girl Scouts. After graduating from Howard University with a degree in electrical engineering, she worked for Schneider Electric’s Square D business, then briefly at Sprint before joining IBM 15 years ago.

Greene Starks is now based in Nashville as the global lead for infrastructure and technology strategy for the company’s university programs. In that role, she works with people around the world from IBM who interact with academia.

“We have programs that support academics, programs for people at IBM to go on campus to speak, lecture, share experiences, conduct workshops. We train faculty to deliver skills training to their students,” she says. “We give awards to academics to further their research in areas of particular interest to IBM.”

For IBM colleagues who touch academia, Greene Starks is the technical liaison, making sure that tools, platforms and technology resources are in place to successfully support the academic programs the company provides on campuses around the world.

## **Solving Client Problems**

Many of Greene Starks’ inventions came during the 10 years she spent working in IBM Services. “You hear clients’ problems, and you need to solve them,” she says. But she still invents, whether at work, at night or on weekends, because “what I like to do is innovate.”

“When things come up, I write them down,” she says, “and we’ll spin up a team.”

Greene Starks is especially interested in ways to use data to enrich something, like vehicle to vehicle communication. She has patents in that area, and says progress is being made. Soon, she predicts, “my car will be able to tell your car to pay attention to something ahead. You may need to alter your route.”

Sometimes her ideas come from life experiences.

“One of my favorites: I was at the Kentucky Derby, at Churchill Downs,” she recalls. “They were debuting an app so you could see the slate and bet, and I downloaded it ahead of time to be sure it worked.”

But when she arrived, the app failed to connect because there was too much demand on the available bandwidth. She got a patent for figuring out how organizers of big public events could meet bandwidth demand by spinning up remote access points.



### **Encouraging the Next Generation**

Greene Starks is involved with the inventing community at IBM as chair of the Big Data and Business Analytics Patent Committee. The committee reviews ideas from IBM colleagues and decides which ones should go to the company's patent lawyers for review. Greene Starks praises the company for having a diverse community of inventors.

She's doing her part to expand the future size of that group. She volunteers with [Girls Who Code](#), for example. She also speaks to school groups about what it means to be an inventor, and to make things.

Greene Starks also encourages adventurous thinking at home in East Nashville, where she lives with her husband, Derrick, a commercial real estate developer, and their three-year-old twin daughters, Sinclaire and Simone.

"They are jumpers and climbers," Greene Starks says of the twins, "and when they want to outjump or outclimb the 12-year-olds, I say, 'You should try that.' I tell my husband, 'If they get stuck, we are here.'"

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