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# Locals Support Black-Owned Businesses During Black History Month

Claire Needs, Staff Reporter

“The dream began in a small town in Marshall, Texas, where Ezell and Lewis would work at a place called Brown’s fried chicken,” Lewis Rudd said, brimming from his desk in the main office of Ezell’s, one of Seattle’s most successful fried chicken businesses with 15 locations. “I think I was maybe 15 or 16, Ezell was 17 maybe 18, and growing up as best friends, we used to work together at Brown’s Chicken. One day I heard the statement: We’ll have our own chicken place.”

Ezell and Lewis’ story is reminiscent of a dream held by numerous Black-owned businesses in Seattle: a business that is community-based and community-serving, interwoven with the fabric of Seattle culture.

During current, unparalleled times, small businesses in Seattle have been hit hard. Luckily, consumers have the ability to spend their hard-earned money where it counts. Buying from small, Black-owned businesses helps support entire communities and, in a rapidly changing city, keeps historic buildings occupied by small businesses rather than large corporations.

The ongoing Black Lives Matter protests have taken a firm stance against Seattle corporations, such as Amazon and Starbucks, on account of corporate racism, illuminating the importance of supporting small, independent Black-owned businesses. During the start of Black History Month, supporting small-businesses and understanding the benefits of buying locally has been emphasized.

More often than not, independent, minority-owned businesses are operated by long-time Seattle residents who have committed their professional careers to enhancing and engaging within their own communities.

Specializing in coffee, juice and food made from fresh ingredients, Central District native Bridgette Johnson created Central Cafe and Juice Bar to provide a healthy and sustainable alternative for her community.

“I grew up in this area, the Central District,” Johnson said. “This is one thing about the Central District: it’s always been a food desert...It’s hard to get good food without going to Capitol Hill or downtown, and even if you don’t want to go to a sit-down restaurant, you want your quick food to be a little bit higher scale than McDonald’s, you would hope.”

Co-founder of Estelita’s Library, Edwin Lindo, also sought out an opportunity to serve his community alongside his wife, Estell Williams.

“Our library is focused on books on identity, racial justice, economic justice, critical thought, political theory, movements and political revolution,” Lindo said. “And focusing on that, for the intention of giving people space to have their creative thoughts and ideas around how they can make a more equitable and just environment that they live in.”



Faye White

As opposed to Seattle corporations, Estelita's offers a non-transactional experience which does not thrive off of a monetary profit, but rather the resources it willingly provides for its members.

"The benefit [to owning a small business] is that you get to do what is best for the community, so there really are no limitations, and what's great is our community knows that if there's an event or something they want to host, they just ask us...And that's been true for a lot of people who have either started businesses from Estelitas to starting book clubs, or reading sessions, we say, 'hey, this is for you.'"

Ezell's Famous Chicken, which maintains the family values it was founded upon, has made an active effort to uplift community members through staff empathy. Lewis Rudd, the co-founder of Ezell's, discussed the circumstances of his employees in the brand's early days, and the support the company offered as a result.

"Some of the single moms that would maybe not have...[held] down a job given the circumstances...We would allow them to come to work, bring the kids and Faye would babysit the kids while they worked so they could continually work and keep their job...When you look at the brand of Ezell's that's been around for 37 years...when I say we became apart of the fabric of the community, it's examples like that."

Johnson also emphasized the value of supporting staff.

"I have to pay my employees better...because [small businesses think that], 'We need you to stay, we need you to work harder, we need you to be invested.' People need to know going into a small business is about more than just what's on the shelf—we're also investing in our people."

Chef Edouardo Jordan, the founder of highly successful southern cuisine restaurant "JuneBaby," created his elegant eatery to share food with "guests, friends and the public." In an effort to further incorporate the community into his restaurant, Jordan created an "Encyclopedia" on JuneBaby's website to help diners understand the depth and historicity of southern dishes.

"When I was going through the process of figuring out what the restaurant was going to be, I took a trip to the south to get reacquainted... as I was taking notes, I noticed that a lot of the things I was doing may not be so familiar to people in the Pacific Northwest," Jordan said. "The last thing I wanted to do was have someone to come into the restaurant with a misconception or misunderstanding of the cuisine and history, so I made it my mission to educate people before they entered the restaurant by giving them an index of knowledge."

Deborah Boone, alongside her husband Gary Boone, founded the sustainable fabric consignment shop "Our Fabric Stash", which has offered its services to the Seattle homeless community through the store's "Sew For Good" project.

The entire project was based on an interaction with a homeless woman, who gave Boone the idea for a new blanket design and makeup. The project took off from there.

"When [the project] was introduced, the team started cutting the kits on Dec. 21 of 2018, and that day is the global memorial day for people we've lost to homelessness," Boone said. "We cut the kits for about a month, and in January of the next year, we offered them as a gift of social justice on MLK day."

Our Fabric Stash also made head wraps in honor of the Crown Act, a legislative document being drafted to protect people with natural hair from discrimination in schools and the workplace.

"The head wraps were being made in support of that," Boone said. "We would also have classes on how to make them, and also, for those who weren't necessarily interested in making them, how to wear them and wrap them."

During COVID-19, the business has also invested its efforts in aiding a non-profit company in producing masks for front-line workers, made from sustainable materials.

Many small businesses subscribe to sustainable business models. From using compostable products and sourcing local ingredients to selling recycled materials, these stores prioritize the well-being of their community on a global scale. Johnson stressed the importance of sustainable practices in her shop.

“They’re more expensive, but all my products are compostable down to the straws and the lids. And they work well—they don’t leak. And my silverware doesn’t melt and are compostable, so that’s big to me,” Johnson said proudly in between sips of fresh juice out of a compostable cup.

Small businesses also find themselves operating within a network, often supporting each other in business and social endeavors.

In its library’s physical space, Estelita’s sells books by local authors that the staff is personally familiar with. In addition, the library would host events before COVID-19 with the help of surrounding local businesses.

“From po’ boys Fridays, where we would bring in a local chef, and he would make his amazing po’ boys, to readings, poetry nights, chess days, movie nights, organizing meetings, lectures—you name it,” Rudd said.

Rudd also mentioned first-hand support offered to other smaller businesses in the community.

“Last year, there was a print shop that’s still in business, and he was faced with maybe closing his doors, he missed out on funding through the PPP and other grants that people were receiving in the community,” Rudd said. “We advanced him the funds that would’ve been spent over the year, so that he would have the funds to maybe keep his doors open. Today, his doors are still open.”

Communal environments are integral to the perseverance of small businesses, especially in a city plagued by gentrification. Rudd commented on the perseverance of both Ezell’s and independent businesses alike due to their mission.

“I think the word is culture...Starting out as a family owned business, many of the family members are still involved in the business,” Rudd said. “As we continue to grow and expand, we want to transfer that culture.”

However, familial culture and support did not equate to a lack of struggle or challenges by any means.

“Fast forward to today, where when we would share with different ones the challenges that we had in trying to get finances to get the business open, it wasn’t received as well,” Rudd continued. “There were a lot of people that couldn’t accept and understand that redlining, racism, social injustices and systemic racism played a part, and that five-year span that it took to get the financing to get the business open.”

Now, in an era of unpredictability amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that has wreaked havoc on smaller businesses and specific industries, there’s still a glimmer of hope as the city’s culture and people embrace what makes Seattle so special.

“We saw a massive amount of change due to COVID-19, but I wouldn’t say big businesses are eating Seattle up, mainly because Seattle does a good job of embracing new, independent places and spaces, I think we also do a really good job of keeping out the big box places from coming on every corner of our neighborhoods,” Jordan said.

Elaborating on the sentiment of Seattle’s culture, Jordan emphasized a deeply-rooted diversity that the community cherishes—during a global pandemic or not.

“Black-owned businesses, women-run businesses, we are now the fabric of our communities and we are the establishments that are bringing culture and diversity...It’s important that we spread culture, knowledge, history and diversity—especially if we want the next generation to be better off than we are,” Jordan said.

Boone also mentioned that Intentionalist is a great resource for discovering small, Black-owned businesses in the Seattle area, and helped provide her fabric business with new customers. For additional guidance, Jordan created a website, [theseattlesoul.com](http://theseattlesoul.com), to “empower Seattle-based Black culinarians” and support Black-owned restaurants during this time and moving forward.