

EMERGING ENTREPRENEURS

Celebrating Black-owned businesses

Emerging entrepreneurs, Greg and Taniesha (Tee) Westbrook, have established a brand presence and helped other Black business owners through vendor pop-ups for a few years. In 2014, Greg Westbrook met Taniesha and he realized that he wanted to have an entrepreneur for his life partner.



Taniesha and Greg Westbrook

Taniesha Westbrook had a corporate finance (accounting) background and Greg came with a sales and marketing background.

“Tee had a studio and I helped her with marketing,” said Greg Westbrook.

“We came together and used the skills to help other business owners,” said Taniesha Westbrook.

Since that time the couple has elevated themselves through brand identity and new opportunities to help Black-owned businesses thrive. Their entrepreneurial journey has shifted over the past years.

“Shop Black Nashville started in 2019 with 30 vendors. We were doing pop-ups before it was a thing,” said Greg Westbrook.

Like most businesses, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted in-person events and the couple shifted to a virtual model in 2020 with over 60 vendors.

“The following year, we decided to do a festival tour that included Nashville, Memphis, Charlotte, St. Louis, Atlanta and Chicago. We showcased over 600 businesses,” said Greg Westbrook.

Today, the concept has evolved into an experience for small business owners to get exposure, build new relationships and learn together.

“Shop Black Fest is a two-day festival for Black-owned businesses to connect with their next customer, gain more visibility, and prepare for growth with a suite of vendor events, empowering workshops, training and networking opportunities,” said Taniesha Westbrook.

“We’ve helped over 1400 small businesses generate 400K in revenue through events, education and community engagement in just two years.”

This year’s line-up of cities includes Huntsville, Nashville, Memphis, St. Louis and Louisville. As entrepreneurs, Greg and Taniesha Westbrook, want to add more value for the experience of Black-owned businesses.

Day 1 - Shop Black University Expo - A free indoor Business to Business Trade Show, Conference, Educational & Networking Event for Black entrepreneurs, Small Business Owners, and Black-owned start-ups.

Day 2 - Shop Black Fest - An outdoor festival celebration of Black Entrepreneurship, black culture, music, fashion, food and wealth-building for the Black community. According to Taniesha Westbrook, there have been consistent vendors who have traveled with the company.

Akilah Wofford, emerging entrepreneur and founder of [Cherries Shoe Bar](#), started her 'side-hustle' in 2017 with community and pop-up events in Memphis.

"I used those experiences to learn about women and what they like," said Wofford.

In 2020, she saw a Facebook post about Shop Black events.

Wofford participated in Shop Black Memphis and she was instantly attracted to the concept.

"The culture that it brings showcasing Black businesses sends a message about building Black businesses," said Wofford.



"I love when other races come out, I feel like they are supporting the cause. It brings out Latinos, Asians and Caucasians."

Entrepreneur couple, Deverieux and Mardis Warren, have been consistent vendors with the tour.

"Over the past two years, I have participated in many events hosted by Shop Black Fest. My very first event with them was in March of 2020. I think that it may have been one of their first events also. I remember that Greg and Tee went into that event with tons of energy and excitement. They were constantly posting videos to social media advertising, promoting and celebrating the vendors that were going to be present at the event," said Deverieux and Mardis Warren.

"Shop Black Fest has provided a consistent avenue for the small business to be able to showcase their goods, products or services. This is really important if you don't have a brick and mortar or if you don't have strong internet sales. I know that if my website sales are down, I will have the opportunity to increase my business earnings through a Shop Black Fest event. I look forward to the announcement of their upcoming events and I plan my business calendar accordingly."

To view upcoming dates for Shop Black Fest, [click here](#).

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Former educator transitioned into entrepreneurship with a love for cooking

After years of working in education, Christopher Smith, decided to pursue another journey. During the pandemic he thought about his next move.

He was working as dean of students in Indianapolis, but wanted to focus more on his talents and gifts.

“Covid allowed me to reflect on my career,” said Smith. “I thought about the life that I wanted to build and bring glory to God.”

This reflection led him to entrepreneurship and baking.

“Cooking is my ‘love’ language,” said Smith.

Before jumping into this new venture, Smith focused on creating a product that would be perfect before selling. His business model focuses on stuff buns which are fried dough filled with a variety of ingredients. His business name is Bunshine.

“It took me about six months to perfect the recipe by self-tasting, trying different ingredients, getting the flavors right, and having others sample the taste,” said Smith.

“I wanted to be sure I could scale this business, so I had to make sure the process was correct.”

He officially launched the business in December 2021. According to Smith, he sold 2,600 buns and served approximately 1,000 customers through pop-up shops at vendor events.

This year, he is looking to expand his operation.

“One of my goals for 2023 is to build a team, so I can obtain a food truck or a brick-in-mortar shop,” said Smith.

Becoming an entrepreneur is not an easy feat and Smith has faced a few challenges.

“I struggle with imposter syndrome, and I ask myself - ‘Can I really do this?’ - During those times I focus on trusting God and prayer,” added Smith.

“Running a business is not easy, and you have to push through it when it is hard,” he said.

When Smith transitioned from education into entrepreneurship, he did not have any business knowledge.



He found resources and opportunities with [The Academy Powered by Corner to Corner Academy](#), a nonprofit organization, based in Nashville, Tenn. to help Black entrepreneurs turn their ‘dreams into a money - making reality.’

“I learned skills about the business basics and that helped me to keep going,” said Smith.

After the training, there is additional support in The Academy Alumni Program with extra classes and mentoring, Smith stated.

Networking and making the right connections are also a part of the ongoing support.

“Chris is an amazing individual and his focus and determination to have a successful business will carry him to the next level, while attaining all of the goals that he has set for himself,” said Jaron Spicer, Alumni director.

Shifting into the role of an entrepreneur can be rewarding and challenging at the same time.

“I am far more capable than I give myself credit for-I think about when I started and where I am today,” said Smith.

“I reflect on my current circumstances, stay present and keep going,” said Smith.

To learn more about Bunshine, visit bunshinebuns.com.

Food entrepreneur bakes cookies made from the ‘heart’

As a college student at Tennessee State University (TSU), Mikayla Jones, wanted to pay her own way, so she started baking cookies.

“I wanted to buy things for myself and not have to call my parents,” said Jones.

“I asked random people if I could bake in their homes.” Jones sold cookies Thursday - Sunday and classmates were her initial customers on campus.

Since this time, she has graduated and holds a bachelor’s and master’s degree from TSU, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU).

Now, she is continuing to develop her brand and setting the standard for the best cookies. VenaCava Baking & Co. is the official business name, and it is an online store.

“E-commerce has allowed me to grow and learn what works and does not work. Having an e-commerce business allows you to keep your overhead low and build out where you want to go,” said Jones.

The business is named after two arteries in the heart (superior vena cava and inferior vena cava) and it has significance.

“VenaCava was chosen as the name because it is an artery which is a direct connection to your heart and



that leads to your stomach. I thought of the name in high school and said one day, I am going to use it,” said Jones.

The online bakery has over 40 gourmet flavors. Some of the flavors are Almeda, Belafonte, Half-Baked and Strawberry Butter. A few of her clients today are Citizens Bank, Urban League of Middle Tennessee, Hydrate the Hood, Corner to Corner and Aveda of Green Hills.

Jones had to develop and cultivate her knowledge about becoming a business owner.

“Entrepreneurship has taught me how to show up and advocate for myself,” she said.

“Each year, I am trying to learn new skills and better position myself in my business or my network.”

She participated in the Academy powered by Corner to Corner - a business program that equips underestimated entrepreneurs with the skills they need to turn their ‘dreams into a money making reality.’

While attending the Academy, they look at fine tuning your business structure, stated Jones.

“We covered mission, vision, business model, pricing and your ideal customer,” said Jones. “It teaches you to focus on one thing and build the house around it.”

“Corner to Corner gives you a foundation and a network. There is continuous education and support for classes and events to meet other people and connect with lawyers.”

Jones also participated in Walker’s Legacy business accelerator. According to the website, “the company equips entrepreneurial Black and Brown women with the tools to level up their businesses while leveling the business playing field.”

Running and learning how to manage a business can be challenging.

“Entrepreneurship has taught me to be comfortable with failing forward. It is life-long learning.” She said, “The money will come, the resources will come and the events will come.”

“We don’t reap the benefits in the same season.”

To learn more about VenaCava Baking and Company and place an order, [click here](#).



Taiisha Bradley | Courtesy photo



Entrepreneurship ‘seeds’ were planted at a young age

Taiisha Bradley, publicist and entrepreneur, learned the value of making money when she was 12 years-old.

“I come from a family of business owners, so I started my first business fingerprinting and selling my artwork to neighbors

from my grandmother's porch," Bradley said.

After this experience, she shifted to another creative process.

"I learned how to face paint, and started working at churches painting faces at Vacation Bible School during the summers." She learned at an early age that you can use your talent and creativity and get paid for it.

During the summer, she traveled to Baltimore, MD to babysit and earn extra money.

Bradley continued on her entrepreneurial journey through middle and high school.

"I was a licensed cosmetologist when I graduated high school. I did hairstyles for proms in high school and homecoming hairstyles in college," said Bradley.

Her journey in public relations started as an intern at Winthrop University in South Carolina.

She majored in Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) which covered marketing, promotions and advertising.

She interned at a Radio One Inc. station in Charlotte, NC.

"It was a new hip-hop station, and they did not have an internship program yet," said Bradley.

"I worked with the radio station and my university to help to start an accredited internship program for college and high school students."

She took celebrities around town and worked with the promotions team.

"I really enjoyed the media aspects because I had an uncle who was a celebrity and I knew how to act," said Bradley.

After the internship, she found a job in the nonprofit industry in public relations.

"People who work in the nonprofit space, do it for the love and not the money," said Bradley.

Bradley moved back to Baltimore and obtained her first PR job and connected with the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in Maryland. According to Bradley, this role also positioned her to take on freelance clients that were small businesses and public figures. She moved to Tennessee in 2011 as an adjunct journalism professor at MTSU and in 2018 she started the Rutherford County Black Business Community which was rebranded as Modernoire in 2019.

Bradley hosts community programs and events to give visibility to Black-owned and locally owned businesses under the Modernoire business model. She also manages her publicity business where she helps entrepreneurs and experts earn press by being featured in the media.

"I focus on my PR business from January-September and on Modernoire from October-December to help local businesses get ready for Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday. I've been an American Express Neighborhood Champion since 2019."

To learn more about Taiisha Bradley, visit <https://www.taiishabradley.com/> .

Bradley will be the Lunch + Learn series speaker on March 9, to register [click here](#) .

SMALL BUSINESS RESOURCE

Small businesses have a ‘unique’ opportunity for business growth and development



Jozelle Booker | president and CEO | courtesy photo

Small businesses in Tennessee will have an opportunity to scale and grow with the assistance of the Minority Business Development Agency.

Writing by Design Media, Inc. interviewed Jozelle Booker, president and CEO of MMBC Continuum about the latest funding initiative.

She shared the opportunity that socially and disadvantaged businesses will have with the MBDA Capital Readiness program.

MMBC Continuum also operates the Tennessee MBDA office through a five - year grant award. The office is located in Memphis, Tenn.

“The U.S. Treasury gave the state of Tennessee \$100 million to help small business owners. Each state received a specific allotment from the Treasury,” said Booker. The funding was allocated under the [State Small Business Credit Initiative](#) (SSBCI) as part of [the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#).

“The latest investment is \$93.5 million for minority businesses who need help with technical assistance to be ready for lending or venture capital opportunities,” said Booker.

[In a press release dated Dec. 21, 2022](#), the U.S. Department of Commerce launched a capital readiness program.

“The Capital Readiness Program will provide funding to incubators and accelerators across the country, with expertise to assist and train minority and other underserved entrepreneurs seeking resources, tools, and technical assistance to start or scale their businesses in high-growth industries such as healthcare, climate resilient technology, asset management, infrastructure, and more,” according to the release.

“The program will focus on the needs of each business because businesses are different. It will help businesses launch or scale,” said Booker.

According to Booker, there is ‘pre-work’ before a business can approach a lending institution.

“Preparing businesses to access loans and money can be in the form of financial assistance, mentoring, web presence, marketing or legal assistance. It is focused on business development.” said Booker.

“Businesses positioned for success will be able to scale and grow,” said Booker.

One of the challenges for some small businesses is having multiple departments to meet the needs of customers.

“Every business does not have the infrastructure like large corporations. Small businesses don’t have all of the ancillary and support services like major corporations,” said Booker.

According to Booker, MMBC Continuum will apply for the competitive grant. The organization has a 30 year history of serving minority-owned businesses in Memphis.

MBDA is offering webinars to help individuals understand the funding process.

“This is communication to let small socially and economically disadvantaged individuals (SEDI) know about the opportunities coming. The program will not start until July 1, 2023, “ stated Booker.

“I want to encourage businesses to change their mindset and think about receiving help from organizations providing the business development and support services,” said Booker.

“This is a ‘magical time’ for Memphis with the infusion of \$100 million dollars across the State and we may not ever have this opportunity again.”

To learn more about MMBC Continuum, [click here](#).

To learn more about MBDA Capital Readiness Program, [click here](#).



Entrepreneur couple supports other Black-owned Businesses

Supporting Black-owned business throughout the year has been the goal for Ken and Mary Olds, co-founders of Muggin Coffee House.

[Muggin Coffee House](#), a coffee shop, located in the Whitehaven community opened its doors in July 2020. Ken and Mary Olds was raised in this neighborhood and now they are helping other Black-owned businesses with events. It is the only coffee shop located in the Whitehaven

community near Methodist South Hospital and Southwest Tennessee Community College - Whitehaven campus.

“As a Black-owned business in Whitehaven, we want that dollar to be recycled here in Whitehaven. Partnering with other black owned businesses is double exposure and provides the customer with the introduction to another way to keep the dollar here,” said Ken and Mary Olds.

In August 2022, Writing by Design Media, Inc. hosted a magazine release at Muggin Coffee House to celebrate [National Black Business Month](#) and the final edition of the Memphis Small Business Quarterly (MSBQ) magazine. The venue was the ideal place for learning and networking.

“We see the importance in lifting one another as we climb. There is the notion that one can reach the proverbial “top” and THEN reach back for someone else. We are of the belief that it is better to lift as you climb so when you reach the “top” you are not alone. It all goes back to the old adage Iron



Candid Conversations w/Entrepreneurs - Black History Month Edition was held Feb .16 at Muggin Coffee House | 1139 Brownlee Road | Memphis, Tenn. 38116