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BUSINESS

30 Black-owned businesses to gain free membership in Columbus Chamber of Commerce

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The Columbus Chamber of Commerce and the Columbus Urban League will collaborate to benefit 30 Black-owned businesses in the city.

As part of the partnership, CARES Act funding will support one-year chamber memberships for the businesses, which includes access to high-level consulting, marketing support and other benefits. Additionally, the Chamber aspires to connect Black-owned business suppliers to Chamber member businesses, with the goal of increasing spending with them by \$1 million. The 30 businesses have already been identified.

“It’s about advancing these entrepreneurs in our community, hopefully bringing them more business and more contracts than they had the opportunity to get on their own,” Chamber President and CEO Don DePerro told The Dispatch. “I knew that the Urban League had tremendous presence in the Black business community, and we needed some help with diversity of our membership. It’s just a perfect marriage.”

The program, which DePerro said has a value of \$50,000, continues the work of the league’s Minority Small Business Resiliency Initiative, which was created last year to help Black business owners level the playing field through access to capital. The initiative has secured \$7.6 million in funding and saved or created approximately 1,250 jobs.

“Certainly the social justice movement and COVID-19 illuminated the disparities that we know have existed for decades,” Urban League President and CEO Stephanie Hightower said in a release. “We see an opportunity now for Columbus to set a

national trend when it comes to helping our minority businesses grow. It's about creating an infrastructure where truly everyone in our community can thrive.”

The program helps eliminate barriers for some small businesses that can't afford membership costs, said J. Averi Frost, who manages the league's Minority Small Business Resiliency Initiative.

“There is value to being a part of a chamber of commerce, not only through access to the different supplier diversity initiatives or general sales, but it helps with legitimacy,” said Frost, who also serves as the executive director at the Central Ohio African American Chamber of Commerce. “If people are not from here, and they're looking at doing business in the city of Columbus, they do look at the chambers of commerce to see who's available. So, being on that platform is very important.”

The 30 participating benefits span a variety of industries, from IT and retail to healthcare and food service. Juana Williams, owner of J's Sweet Treats and Wedding Cakes on Parsons Avenue, called the support a blessing.

“We haven't had a lot of opportunity to network with other business owners,” said Williams, 49, who operates the bakery with her daughter and another employee. “The Chamber has been phenomenal. They've already talked with us about a marketing plan and put us in touch with someone from Yelp so that we could (increase) our presence. They come in and they buy things.”

Williams was running her bakery out of her home for years. She knew it was time to open a brick-and-mortar when her husband accidentally used her ingredients to make breakfast.

“He had the nerve to make some eggs,” said Williams, who was featured on a cake-decorating segment on the Drew Barrymore Show last year. “And I came downstairs like, ‘What are you doing? I have cakes due!’ And he said, ‘It's time for you to go, honey. You've got to find somewhere else to do this.’ ”

Last month, Williams celebrated her one-year anniversary on the South Side, which was no easy feat amid the pandemic. And both the Chamber and Columbus Urban League showed up to congratulate her.

“Black-owned businesses historically don't see the foot traffic and the support that a lot of other businesses do,” Williams said. “So, it's very important that the Chamber rally behind us.”

Entrepreneur TJ Johnson said she was excited when she found out her business was included in the program.

“We are looking to increase our market share,” said Johnson, owner and president of Tra’Bian Enterprises, an IT staffing and solutions firm in Dublin. “We want to be more visible, and we're able to get that through the Chamber. We get incredible exposure through the Urban League, but this just provides a better opportunity for us to bridge communities. I believe that this partnership brings cultural richness to the Chamber.”

Johnson didn't think about becoming an entrepreneur until she was laid off during the financial crisis of 2008 and 2009. Now, she is celebrating eight years at Tra’Bian, which has eight employees and over 50 contractors.

Johnson credits the Urban League with helping sustain her through the pandemic.

“They focused on making sure that African American businesses had access to capital,” she said. “In addition to that, the webinars and the business speakers really played an integral part in our business success. Without their advocacy and their support during this tumultuous time, I don't think that we would be where we are.”

And Chamber membership will only propel the business to more success.

“Ultimately these collaborative efforts will make Columbus a better place to live,” she said. “It's just wonderful and encouraging and empowering.”

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