

MENOMONEE FALLS NEWS

These Black business owners share the inspiration and challenges of being in the suburbs

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Milwaukee resident Ebony Whitson recalled people warning her and her husband against settling her "dream" business — an event-planning business with a venue — in the suburbs.

"'Stay in Milwaukee,' many people told us," Whitson, who is Black, said. "Even white people."

Milwaukeeans warned Whitson of potential racism in the suburbs.

"White people said, 'Are you going to be OK in Butler?' and people who are Black said, 'It will be difficult to get business there,'" said Whitson. "If you are white, you can go anywhere (to open a business)."

Black business owners interviewed for this story, like Whitson, said it's harder for them to feel comfortable establishing businesses in the Milwaukee suburbs. They were concerned about racial stereotypes, how to establish trust in predominantly white communities and the potential for racist behavior to hurt their business.

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'Are we treated differently?'

After starting Whitson Wonder Productions in 2018 — one of the few Black-owned businesses in the Menomonee Falls and Butler area — the Whitsons found a venue in Butler.

It was a perfect location: not far from their Milwaukee home, in a safe area and close to their Menomonee Falls business office.

They saved money, invested in training, bought equipment and decor and organized events for as little as \$100 just for the exposure.

Unfortunately, Ebony Whitson said, some village residents seemed afraid that a Black business owner from Milwaukee would attract negativity and violence from Milwaukee.

Whitson felt she had to prove herself as a business owner, and she said she felt defined by her race.

So she worked extra hard to prove she was operating a successful and legitimate business.

When Whitson sought an occupancy permit for Elegante Luxury Event Venue in August in Butler, she created an entire business presentation, where others often submit just a few sentences on what the space would be used for.

"We had to prove ourselves," she said. "It is an educational experience on both ends."

It worked; the people who reviewed the permit loved her business plan, she said.

"We are breaking open a barrier," added her husband.

There are fewer Black businesses in the Milwaukee suburbs

Whitson and other Black business owners interviewed for this story said they can count on one hand the number of Black business owners in their community.

Jessica Key, who is Black and owns a human resource staffing business for manufacturing companies with an office in Mequon, said she feels she is in "a fishbowl" because of her race.

"It is hard to be in Mequon when you don't have a lot of (Black) representation," said Key, who also lives in Mequon. About 2.5% of Mequon's population is Black, according to U.S. Census data.

She and Whitson said they often face a misconception from community members that they merely work at, but don't own, their respective businesses.

In 2019, there were 134,567 Black-owned employer businesses — defined as a business that has at least one other employee — in the U.S., up 8% from 124,551 Black-owned employer

businesses in 2018, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Business Survey.

There are a "very limited" number of Black business owners outside Milwaukee who belong to the African American Chamber of Commerce, a statewide organization based out of Milwaukee, said Nikki Purvis, CEO and president of the organization. With nearly 400 members, fewer than 15 are Black-owned businesses, she said.

Lynn Grgich, executive director of the Germantown Chamber of Commerce, encourages Black-owned and minority-owned businesses to take a chance in the greater Germantown area.

"We certainly welcome any businesses, and we are willing to support them. I think they are bringing different values and diversity to the community," she said, which

Even with support from chambers and different networking groups, however, Purvis said she "cannot speak to why some are apprehensive about starting a business in the suburbs."

'Work the business plan'

When Kaycee and Jonathan Frost, who are both Black, bought a building on the east side of Wauwatosa, they were excited to fix up the building and open their two businesses. This is where Jonathan owns Frost Reality, while Kaycee opened Élie Bleu Threading and Spa, 7131 W. North Ave.

But as Kaycee talked to people in Milwaukee and rethought things, she became concerned people would not be as receptive to her business because of their race.

"I started to feel anxious," she said. "I was worried people would not come."

But she said she was in for a "pleasant surprise" when her fears turned out to be unfounded; business has been great.

She said people liked how they were improving the building, and the city was easy to work with to obtain the necessary permits. She joined the Wauwatosa Chamber of Commerce, which was an additional helpful resource.

Her advice to other Black business owners in the suburbs: "Have a vision and a goal for your business; do not get caught up in the insecurity part."

That was the model for Michelle Buckhanan, who owns Yarn Junkie and Gifts in Butler. She and her husband, Walt, own the building that houses her business at 12527 W. Hampton Ave. and her husband's insurance agency, Farmers Insurance's Buckhanan Agency, at 4790 N.126th St. Michelle Buckhanan said she is the first Black person to own a commercial building in Butler.

She said that while some people seemed reserved around her, she and her husband made sure to use excellent business skills when they bought the building in March 2020. "It helped that we went around all the businesses introducing ourselves. That is just what business owners should do," she said.

"Don't be scared of (being Black in the suburbs)," she said. "If you have a good plan and good business model, then just work the business plan."

Finding a community niche

When April Calvert opened a retail store at 1540 Wisconsin Ave., Grafton, in 2019, she did not think it would be difficult.

"I never go into anything thinking it will be difficult," she reasoned.

Instead, she focused her energy on consumer research. Calvert, who is Black, opened Midwest Scrubs + Apparel, with her business partner, Sara Weinrich, who is white. The shop specializes in medical scrubs and restaurant apparel.

In researching the business, Calvert would approach people who were wearing scrubs to ask where they got them and whether they liked them. Most had complaints about the overall fit of the scrubs they ordered online. Midwest Scrubs + Apparel does fittings on-site to help customers find scrubs they like.

"We carry multiple brands, and the store is set up like a boutique," she said. She said she plans to open stores in other suburbs stores as her "retirement plan."

"It is all about your attitude. I don't walk through this world thinking about racism and hate. I don't let the outside noise stop me," she said.

The challenges of obtaining grant funding for Black businesses in the suburbs

One of the challenges faced by Kiyana Mensah, owner of Back to the Basics Tutoring, 12201 W. North Ave., Wauwatosa, is funding.

Mensah, a Black business owner who lives in Germantown, said although there is ample funding for Black business owners, the business must be in a "disadvantaged area." She said some grants specifically fund projects only in certain Milwaukee ZIP codes. The problem for Mensah: Wauwatosa is not considered "disadvantaged."

She needed to use funds generated from her business, but she could not get additional funding that would be able to help her from grants, she said.

"A lot of our people come from Milwaukee, but this does not mean our business does not need the funding," she said.

Mensah, who started her business in 2018, said she chose Wauwatosa for her business because it is a safe place and easy for people to get to from Milwaukee, as well as throughout the Wauwatosa area.

"We started the business because we realized so many students have large academic achievement gaps. We are one of the only tutoring companies that deal with special needs," she said.

"We started from scratch, and we are working on getting a franchise," she added. Her advice to other Black business owners: "All you need is to focus on the gift you are."

Winning trust in a white community

Mensah said it is hard to gain trust from the white community. She said clients who come to the center are Black — something she did not intend.

"We serve only Blacks in an all-white area. It is hard to win the trust," she said.

For example, when she is doing an activity in the park and people ask what she is doing, she tells them about her business. "They then literally want me to list every credential and every organization I belong to," she said.

She wonders if they'd ask that if she was white.

"If you are white, no one questions that. People don't get those questions," she said.

Another time, she said a mother begged for a tutor on social media. When Mensah responded, the mom immediately decided to go "in a different direction," she said. Maybe it was not because of race; the mother might have already changed her mind for any number of reasons. "But I know that is what it is," Mensah said.

By the end of this year, her business will have helped about 300 students, more than twice the number of students helped last year.

More: Kohl's partnered with a local Black-owned business to create and sell equity shirts to support a civil rights group

Rachad Howard owns opened Cream City Print Lounge, a T-shirt print and sip lounge at 8010 W. National Ave., West Allis.

"We just don't get patronized like other businesses," said Howard, who is Black. He said that while he is from West Allis, a lot of his patrons come from Milwaukee and Chicago and that more people who are Black are patronizing his business.

"I think people would patronize us more if we were white," he said.

'If the food is good, it does not matter what color you are'

If Alisha Hayes ever heard anyone say anything racist, her response would be: "Want to try my food?"

Hayes, owner of Pat's Rib Place in Waukesha, is aware that racism exists, she said, but when she opened her restaurant in 2009, it was the furthest thing from her mind. She focused on making great food and offering excellent hospitality. She opened the restaurant to provide catfish and fried okra, which wasn't available elsewhere in Waukesha. She has lived in Waukesha for 21 years and graduated from Carroll University, so she felt comfortable opening the business.

"My worst fear is if people did not like our food," said Hayes, who said, "I feel if the food is good, it does not matter what color you are."

She said her family motto has contributed to her confidence in situations where she is the only Black person: "There is nothing that you cannot do."

Hayes said it is important for people who are Black to not rule out business locations in the suburbs based on fears of racism. "There could be a need. I enjoy being an encouragement if someone is apprehensive," she said.

'There is the stigma that people would give you a hard time'

When Atwood Hwy BBQ Co. owner Donteah Morehouse was preparing to open his first brick-and-mortar restaurant in South Milwaukee this spring, he thought people might give him and his wife, April, a hard time as they are Black in a predominantly white suburb — "especially with the media attention (to race)," he said.

According to 2021 U.S. Census data, South Milwaukee is 80.7% white, 2.9% Black and 12.5% Hispanic.

But did Morehouse wonder if his race would affect people's decision to patronize his business?

His approach is similar to Hayes'. "It never even crossed my mind," said Morehouse, who lives in Milwaukee. "If you cook well, no one is worried about anything else. We knew we could cook the product. You have to believe in what you do."

He opened his southern barbecue restaurant in March.

After premiering at the South Milwaukee farmers market and then working his food truck at Crusherfest, people suggested a specific space that was open for him to have his restaurant.

Morehouse figured he may have to endure some awkward moments of racism, but he said, the city has been "the complete opposite" of what he thought.

"Every department deserves a standing ovation. They made the process easy," he said. If someone who is Black wants to build their business in the suburbs, his advice is this: "Just do it."

Brandon Hawthorne, who owns Twisted Plants, 4905 S. Packard Ave., Cudahy, with his wife, April, had the same advice to other aspiring Black business owners.

He did not plan to open his business in the suburbs, but after he saw an ad on Craigslist for the location, he decided to try it after his Milwaukee location did not pan out.

"For the most part, people have been very welcoming. We have not really experienced any racism, except maybe an incident here or there," said Hawthorne, who opened his restaurant in May of 2020.

"If I walk two blocks from the restaurant, I may get funny looks," he said. "If you have great food, people don't care how you look. We are in times where stereotypes and discrimination will always be prevalent so don't be scared or nervous."

"There is the stigma that people would give you a hard time," added Morehouse. "There would be more (Black Businesses in the suburbs) if the stereotypes (of the difficulty in doing a business in a white community) is not there," he said.

More: This South Milwaukee barbecue restaurant is expanding after just 3 months in business

'Everyone else is white'

When Christian Massey opened Skin Museum at 2917 Oakland Ave. in Milwaukee, just south of Shorewood, he was keenly aware of being the only Black business owner in that area.

"Everyone else is white," he said.

He provides the community with an educational experience by making it known his shop is skilled at tattooing people with brown and black skin tones. "Here, everyone can get what they want. Some white (tattoo) artists don't know how to tattoo someone who is Black," he said.

But he said when he first opened, many people gave him questioning looks. "It was like, 'What am I doing here?'" he said. For example, when he took his garbage out to shared dumpsters, people asked who he was and seemed puzzled.

He wondered if they'd ask the same question if he were white.

He had a negative experience when he had his shop in West Allis where he said people were not as accepting and wrote bad reviews even when they hadn't patronized his place. Massey attributed the actions to racism.

When he recently had his two-year anniversary, he said, people asked him legitimate questions about his business. He said those questions made him feel that others viewed his business as legitimate.

He believes in the philosophy that "the best will come to you if you have good intentions."

"If you work hard, it will make it a success," he said.

He added that it is important to have high self-esteem. "You need it or people will tear you down," he said. "Don't judge a book, it is the unity we provide. We bring a lot together."

His advice to other Black business owners? "Take the risk. Don't be afraid to fail," he said. "Because if you do, you can try again."

What can be done to increase Black businesses in the suburbs?

For the suburbs to have a more diverse business community, Alan Whitson of Whitson Wonder Productions said there needs to be more training and Black mentors — and a concerted effort to make it happen. He said Black mentors and leaders can inspire and motivate others in the suburbs.

"My wife and I realize we may be the ones to open the door," he said. "We are built for this. God designed us to overcome obstacles. Hopefully, we can inspire others, and that is our goal."

Sean Lowe, who is Black and alderman for Wauwatosa's District 5, said that having more Black leaders and mentors in the suburbs can help Black business leaders feel comfortable in reaching out to plan their businesses in the suburbs.

He added that municipalities should offer minority business grants for small businesses to entice them to come to the suburbs. He emphasized that the funding should be earmarked for the suburbs.

"Once (Black business owners) are there, it is important to ensure that the communities know about their business," said Lowe. "Some don't get the opportunity due to racism."

He also said that Black business owners who go to the suburbs should focus on their business plan and delivering a quality product.

"If you have a quality product that people want, supply versus demand wins. Period. People will want to do it if it is quality and people will come back to the business," he said. "Black businesses should be given a chance."

He also said that Black business owners tap into city resources and community ones such as participating in networking events, being involved in a Chamber of Commerce and using community resources the different chambers provide to its members.

Al Timm, past president of the Greater Greenfield Community Chamber, said the members of the chamber are "risk takers" as they are risking starting a business. "We treat everyone equally," he said.

Timm said that race "makes no difference" and that the members are supported. "We work to improve the community," he said. He added that there are social meetings and networking meetings that all business owners should take advantage of. "We cater to everyone," he said.

Kamaljit Jackson, Vice President for Programs and Operations for the Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corporation says that WWBIC helps potential business owners with a "holistic approach." That is, they work on all aspects of a business where they educate people on what makes a successful business, do entrepreneurship training, lending opportunities and financial wellness training since 1987.

According to its website, its services are open to anyone, but the organization focuses on "women, people of color and people of lower wealth." WWBIC is a statewide organization based in Milwaukee with offices in Kenosha, Racine, Lacrosse, Appleton, and Madison to serve all 72 counties in Wisconsin.

"We have a heavy focus on all people who come through the door," Jackson said. She said that when a person has a business idea, the staff at WWBIC focus on education, making sure the business is sustainable and they have a business consultant. "We are here to serve the entrepreneur," she said.

She said if a potential Black business owner wants to create a business in the Milwaukee suburbs, the staff and volunteers will help them create the best possible business plan, coaching and education to make it happen. She said that people can enroll in "Start, Run, And Grow," a nine-week WWBIC program where participants can learn the basics of developing and completing a business plan in order to run a successful business.

Lowe added that when Black businesses are in the suburbs, are successful and engage with the community resources, such as WWBIC and the Chamber of Commerce, the Black businesses can benefit the community.

"It lets people know it is a welcoming city," said Lowe.

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