

City provides innovative supportive services for Black-owned businesses

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Providing support for Black-owned businesses key to addressing community's equity challenges



Smallcakes, a self-described “cupcakery and creamery” located in downtown Spartanburg, opened in the fall of 2019. Owners Chirella and Thomas Lee got through the normal ups-and-downs of opening a new business and then weathered the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

They are grateful for their customers. And they’re grateful for the support they’ve received from local government and business leaders. As they geared up to open Smallcakes, Chirella and Thomas participated in the city’s Amplify program – a 10-week training course that provides practical support, mentorship, and networking opportunities for Black businesspeople.

“You think you know everything you need to know before opening a business, but you really don’t,” Chirella said. “The Amplify course helped us put together an in-depth business plan, and we had the chance to ask other entrepreneurs about some ‘dos and don’ts.’ It was a really good experience.”

Amplify is headed up by Natasha Pitts, who serves as Equity and Inclusion Manager for the City of Spartanburg. “With exposure to some determined ‘best practices’ in business startup, we feel we can get participants on the right track, lead them to financial wellness, and properly guide them through the process of starting and operating a business for the long term,” she said.

In addition to developing a curriculum that provides technical training, Pitts recruits Black entrepreneurs to lead discussions and give encouragement and perspective.

Gerod Allison, who owns an Allstate Insurance agency in the City of Spartanburg, serves as an advisor with the program. “I wish we’d had this when we started out,” he said. Allison has been in business for 25 years. He said he enjoys “giving back” and is eager to see Black-owned businesses prosper. He believes role-playing activities and question-and-answer sessions are especially valuable for aspiring business owners.

As Allison sees it, Amplify is valuable not only to aspiring businesspeople – it is an opportunity for the City of Spartanburg to identify and recruit Black entrepreneurs with good ideas and a drive to succeed.

Attracting Black-owned businesses and fostering an environment to promote their success is a priority for city leaders. For decades, Spartanburg was home to a thriving community of Black business owners. They provided economic opportunity as well as civic and cultural leadership.

Urban renewal projects in the late 1960s and early 1970s brought sweeping changes to Spartanburg, displacing hundreds of Black business owners and residential property owners. Spartanburg's Black business class never fully recovered.

“For a lot of years, it wasn’t a priority,” said Mitch Kennedy, Assistant City Manager with the City of Spartanburg. “But we want to restore the infrastructure.”

In addition to the Amplify program, Pitts is available to answer questions and connect entrepreneurs with key resources at City Hall and in the community. The City has also established a partnership with Carolina Foothills Credit Union to facilitate loans for qualified borrowers.

Meanwhile, community revitalization projects, such as efforts in the Northside, are strengthening neighborhoods and promise to make the City of Spartanburg more attractive for Black professionals and business owners. And partnerships with local schools are aimed at building a stronger workforce and promoting a culture of success.

Providing support for Black-owned businesses and, ultimately, rebuilding Spartanburg’s Black professional class is a team effort, according to Kennedy. While the work involves incremental gains and progress can at times be difficult to definitively measure, he believes momentum is on Spartanburg’s side. “We’re doing better than where we were last year and the year before that,” Kennedy said.

He added: “In years past, this conversation wasn’t even taking place. The fact that we’re having this conversation is important.”