

Black Small Business Association of California

SMALL BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT



Black women get things done. This is not hyperbole; it's a fact forged out of necessity. The systemic oppression that reduces the level of control that we as Black people have over our existence has forced us to learn how to make a way when there is no way. This resilience, part of our DNA as Black people in America, has served as a catalyst for us to push society forward, and carry it on our backs when we had to. The ability of Black communities to "bounce back," has saved our lives for generations, and it's helping some of us preserve our livelihoods in the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

One Black woman entrepreneur whose resilience is helping her stay afloat during the ever-changing pandemic economy, is Stephanie Hunter-Ray, owner of Sacramento's Exquisite U Beauty Boutique. Stephanie, who has been a hairstylist for over 25 years and a business owner for 15 years, got started in the beauty industry because she "always loved making women feel good about themselves making people feel good about themselves." Using her talent as hairstylist to build a salon business, Stephanie made a career out of making people feel and look good by providing an array of hair styling services, including relaxers, hair color, hair cutting, braiding, weaves, locs and more.

The fruits of Stephanie's successful business model, however did not shield Hunter-Ray from the realities of owning a small business while Black. Like many Black small business owners, she had to deal with having less access to capital and information about small business loan and grant programs, than her white counterparts. This dearth of information became detrimental when COVID-19 swept through the country, forcing hundreds of thousands of businesses, deemed by the government as nonessential, to close. This "nonessential" distinction included hair salons and barbershops, which left many without a way to support their families. While unemployment was an option for some, and the federal Paycheck Protection Program loans were eventually made available for some, most Black small business owners were left to fend for themselves and figure out their next move. For Hunter-Ray, that meant leaning into her creativity and pivoting her business by turning her salon, that had to close, into a retail boutique, that could remain open.

COVID-19 "has been a great loss that made me dig deep to find other business avenues to make money." Stephanie says of the pandemic. She notes that she "turned the salon into a full boutique to make ends meet." To make the leap to retail, Stephanie had to invest her money to renovate her salon and purchase equipment to make the space conducive to the sale of clothing and accessories.

While the change has allowed her to stay open, Stephanie admits that it's only bringing in about a quarter of what she was making as a hairstylist. Not one waste an opportunity, however, she has used this new venture to build her original brand - Nicci Ray - which includes a line of sunglasses, and sell custom made t-shirts.



While Stephanie's resilience has allowed her to keep it moving during "The Rona," she said that organizations like the Black Small Business Association of California (BSBA) have provided critical information about state and local funding programs that would have otherwise been unknown to the Black small business community. Now a go-to resource for her, Hunter-Ray plans to participate in BSBA's Technical Assistance Program (TAP) in 2021 to build her network, find new ways to reach customers and increase her knowledge about the financial resources that are available for small businesses.

Although we're still in the midst of the pandemic, the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines has given us a peek back at our pre-pandemic lives and hope for our post-coronavirus futures. Stephanie, who uses social media to regularly promote her new products, is looking forward to "getting back to business and serving her clients." Whether that means reverting her boutique back into a salon, or finding the space to have both businesses in one place, remains to be seen. One thing is certain however; Mrs. Stephanie Hunter-Ray will get it done.