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BLACK-OWNED BUSINESSES FIGHT TO SURVIVE THE PANDEMIC

Through forced closures, curfews and limited operations, Black-owned businesses look for ways to survive amid a pandemic that has ravaged the sector.

BY ISAI ROCHA

It has been nearly a year since COVID-19 flipped the U.S. on its head, with schools shutting down, professional sports leagues postponing their seasons and businesses across Los Angeles being asked to close.

The economic impact of the pandemic was felt almost immediately by Black-owned businesses in the U.S., as by April 2020, 41% of them were forced to close, compared to 32% of Latino-owned businesses, 26% of Asian-owned and only 17% of white-owned businesses, according to a report by the New York Federal Reserve.

The report描计 the scathing percentage to two things: one being that Black-owned businesses have typically been located in COVID-19 hot spots. The other cause of the closures was attributed to federal aid, such as the Paycheck Protection Program, covering less than 20% of U.S. counties that are densely populated by Black-owned businesses.

“All of the things that they say are available as business resources, are not really available for Black-owned businesses,” co-founder of Black Lives Matter Los Angeles, Dr. Melina Abdullah told L.A. Weekly. “Even your ability to get those emergency funds, it really was dependent upon your relationship with banks and a lot of Black-owned businesses don’t have relationships with banks. This economic crisis is hitting Black workers really hard and even harder when we talk about Black-owned businesses.”

Beauty Pro L.A., a West Hollywood salon that specializes in nail and waxing services, had its grand opening days before a state of emergency that forced many businesses to close their doors until there was more clarity on the coronavirus.

“We opened on a Monday and closed on a Friday. That’s how our business started,” Eleni Fields, co-owner of Beauty Pro L.A. said.

Nail salons in particular were hit with stricter regulations than most California businesses, as one of the first reported outbreaks in the state came from a nail salon.

Through the early months of the pandemic, nail salons and other close-contact personal care services such as barber shops and tattoo parlors had to sit on their hands as they watched restaurants, shopping malls and several other sectors reopen before they did.

While Fields’ nail salon took an immediate hit, she and her business partner Sunshine Chung had a little luck on their side, as their landlord did not charge them for the time they were closed.

They were also able to use the closures as an opportunity to maximize the vision of their salon.

“It gave us time to gather how we really wanted to present ourselves,” Fields said. “It gave us time to invest and sharpen our website and gain access with people in the community. Knowing how people felt about being in public, we didn’t want to open something where people felt unsafe.”

In early June, a social media push to support Black-owned businesses, anchored by Black Lives

Matter, made waves across the country, as a concerted effort was made to raise awareness toward Black-owned shops and restaurants that were fighting their way through the pandemic.

The “Buy Black” campaign was inspired by a holiday-season campaign that Black Lives Matter started in 2014 called “Black Xmas.” The annual tradition was positioned to persuade people to shop at local Black-owned stores in lieu of doing their holiday shopping at major retailers.

Instead of limiting the “Black Xmas” campaign to the holidays, the concept has been extended and renamed, “Verified Black Owned,” but still provides the “Black Xmas” resources where one can search for Black-owned businesses, Black-run organizations and Black-run banks in their area.

It was that push to “Buy Black” that connected Beauty Pro L.A. and BLM Los Angeles co-founder, Dr. Abdullah, as the nail salon was highlighted on the “Verified Black Owned” website.

Beauty Pro L.A. became Abdullah’s go-to nail salon during the pandemic, which in of itself showed the effectiveness of the “Buy Black” campaign.

“This year was more urgent than ever because of the pandemic,” Abdullah said about the movement to buy Black. “We’ve been kind of leading much of that work, even though people don’t know that it’s us. It’s been really a struggle for Black-owned businesses and so that’s one of the reasons we’re so committed to making sure that we amplify Black-owned businesses. I know some of the businesses that I used to frequent are gone. I know Black business owners, like a good friend of mine who’s a barber, I have to check in with him on his ability to even eat. He was a really popular barber, but they shut down barber shops and he wasn’t able to make money.”

Although small businesses have been ravaged by closures, communities have rallied around their local favorites when possible.

“I’m happy and I’m blessed that people always support us, even before that, you know what I’m saying?” Craig Batiste, owner of Mr. Fries Man in Gardena, said. “The community, they’re always supporting us. We was never scared. Once you panic, you going to sink like the Titanic.”

From the moment the pandemic hit, restaurants and bars in the hospitality industry have had to work around curfews, prohibition of indoor dining, prohibition of outdoor dining and COVID-19 health and safety guidelines.

“At first, the hardest part was getting all the customers and stuff used to it,” Craig Batiste, owner of Mr. Fries Man in Gardena, said. “We tell them they got to wear a mask and they still want to take their mask off. A lot of them didn’t want to go by the rules.”

Dozens of sit-down restaurants that weren’t equipped to handle non-indoor dining were forced to shut down, while many had to adapt and operate through pickup or delivery services, only.

Even through all those challenges, Batiste attributed his restaurant’s survival to the community and support he has continued to receive through the pandemic.

While the COVID-19 vaccine rollout has been far from ideal, with Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti continually pointing out that the city is not receiving enough doses, vaccinations are still being administered and the troubling numbers that L.A. saw in early January are diminishing.

The week of Jan. 4 saw a peak in COVID-19 infection rates, but as of this writing, the Los Angeles Department of Public Health reported a 67% decrease in positive cases rates.

While the end of the pandemic feels more real than it has in months, only time will tell what type of damage will have been ultimately inflicted on Black-owned businesses. Dr. Abdullah noted projections that up to 50% of all Black-owned businesses may shutter when it is all said and done.

Even then, there are Black-owned businesses that have continued the fight with support from communities and even a mainstream movement to uplift the hard-hit sector.

“Support for Black-owned businesses isn’t just about Black support for Black-owned businesses,” Abdullah concluded. “We need everyone to support Black-owned businesses.”

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FOR GODDESSES, BY GODDESSES

Black-Owned Beauty, Fashion and Wellness Creators Join Forces

BY LINA LECARO

The women of Goddess Gifts Studio in Inglewood had long desired a space to showcase their handmade wares that was free of the exorbitant vendor fees they often encountered selling stuff at pop-up events, craft fairs and the like.

Sannae Hopson, of the natural skincare line Dame Body, had made a name for herself at local events via workshops, helping women of all skin tones to get beautiful inside and out, mixing consultation and customization into the marketing of her handmade beauty products.

As her popularity grew, she decided to join Von "Elle" Watson hosting their own women's wellness events, which spotlighted the numerous local vendors they met along the way.

“We never had shelves to fill, so we were full of excitement and uncertainty. In the past, we hosted community events or private home parties,” says Hopson. “In 2020, Elle began looking for a space to rent to create a suite for women that specializes in handmade products, something that was rare in South L.A. After looking for a couple weeks, she found a cute office space in Downtown Inglewood on historic Market Street. It was perfect.”

In March 2020, Hopson and Watson, along with co-founder Fantajia Thomas, finally opened their new space, after designing the layout, purchasing fixtures, painting and stocking the shelves with a variety of merchandise from their circle of crafters and creators.

But only two weeks after being open their dreams were cut short. The first shutdown of small businesses was implemented in L.A. due to the pandemic, beginning a struggle that many local brick-and-mortar spaces are still dealing with today. The goddesses kept
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busy creating and making sure the space was safe as they adjusted their public shopping experience.

"Since COVID, we have operated by appointment only," explains Watson. "This helps to control the number of bodies in the building, keep track of who's coming in the space, and gives us time to clean and sanitize between clients. Curbside pick-up is also offered through our website.

Operating during stay-at-home orders has been a challenge, but Goddess Gifts Studio got a boost at least, following the Black Lives Matter protests and the collective focus on supporting Black-owned businesses. This made a tough year a little bit better.

"In 2020, we definitely experienced an increase in supporting Black-owned/women-owned businesses due to the Black Lives Matter movement and concerted efforts to shop locally," says Hopson. "Because we had systems in place, we were able to handle the influx of sales. We were so thankful for the outpour in support of our workspace/online platforms."

In addition to their relaxing, well-stocked Inglewood space, GG Studio ships products all across the U.S. and to some international locations, striving to provide excellent customer service and a personalized connection, which promotes sharing and connecting independent and handmade business models.

"Our philosophy is to create, make and sell locally," adds Watson. "We offer a space to create your vision, make the products and provide a retail space to promote revenue. The vision for our collective work space is to help build and nurture women in a creative environment that allows them to thrive and find a new work/life balance."

As their website touts, "each goddess specializes in a gift created by her mind, heart and hands." Info on GG Studio vendors below.

I Love Juellez – LaVon "Elle" Watson's handmade custom beaded jewelry.

IROC Charms – Fantajia Thomas' hand-made one-of-a-kind glamorous earrings, bracelets and necklaces.

Dame Body – Sannae Hopson's collection of scrubs, soaps and body butters.

My Daddy's Recipes – Nekia Hattley's plant-based food company "on a mission to enhance the quality of life of people of color through health, wellness and healing."

Jaire IC – An edgy L.A.-based contemporary clothing line.

Teaschool – 12-year-old Chancellor Clark's organic loose-leaf tea line.

Prett Lyys – Mary Carpenter's cosmetic company specializing in pretty colors for pretty lips of all shapes & sizes.

Spread The Light – Micayla Coquia's environment-friendly candle company.

Piece Love Sew – Stephanie Ellis' unique upcycled sweatsuits, aprons and jackets.

Goddess Gifts Studio is now accepting bookings for small events at their space with strict health & safety precautions. Those interested in hosting an event email info@goddessgiftsstudio.com. 233 S Market Street, 113. Inglewood. (401) 232-4810. More info at www.goddessgiftsstudio.com
JOY AND RECOGNITION: 40 YEARS OF THE BLACK DOLL SHOW

The William Grant Still Arts Center Gets All Dolled Up

BY SHANA NYS DAMBROT

S
ince 1977, the William Grant Still Arts Center has operated a hub for music, art, place-making and creative education. Dr. Still’s vision – as both an acclaimed composer and an engaged community leader – has expanded and evolved over the years. With the support of ambitious and dedicated directors and staff, the DCA, and most of all, the tireless efforts of members of the community, the WGSAC remains as active and essential as ever.

Probably their best-known program is the center’s world-famous Black Doll Show, which has been going strong for four decades. They haven’t missed a year since artist and pioneering curator Cecil Ferguson (1931-2013) curated its first edition (except for the year they celebrated the AKA centennial instead), and despite the dreaded pivot to the virtual world, they made it work this time too. All Dolled Up: A 40 Year Celebration opened in December and was released in stages, with a gorgeously designed e-issue catalog (shoutout to Myshell Tabu, a previous BDS curator who tried to recreate the energy of the site-specific installations in its design), and live online events. The show has been rolled out in three parts: “Getting Dolled Up,” “Going to the Club” and “The Gala” which goes live on Saturday, February 6, honoring the history of the show and the artists and collectors that have loved it.

Over the years, the shows have ranged from the all-out fabulous, to the jazz-inspired, materials-driven, mass-produced and mythological, showcasing “traditional dolls, rag dolls, baby dolls, porcelain dolls, manufactured dolls, representations of Black childhood, fantasy and mythology, Afrofuturism and Black liberation.”

Maxine Waters had pieces from her collection in an early show. Legendary artist John Outterbridge was in the very first show, and subsequent editions as well, and the roster of featured artists and guest curators includes some of the most respected artists, makers and designers in Los Angeles. The center’s early, foundational directors include Hakim Ali, James Burks, and Kamsu Daudoo.

Their current Director Amitis Motevalli, herself an artist, tells the Weekly that for the 2020 show, All Dolled Up!, it was important to properly center “how the show has been upheld through all these years by Black women who never got credit for it. We need to thank them.”

Women like Billie J. Green, who started collecting dolls in the 90s – especially the Shindana dolls, famous for being not only a Black-owned business (seeded with Operation Bootstrap funds in the wake of the Watts Rebellion) but also for making dolls intentionally reflective of the true, diverse Los Angeles community. Green tells the Weekly that what grew into a lifelong passion and probably the largest Shindana collection around, all started in her own childhood. “Growing up in the South, in Arkansas,” she says, “my dolls were brown, my Santa was Black (that’s how we found out it was my dad)!. I never took my kids to the mall Santa, and their toys were always a reflection of them. It was important to me. Shindana were my daughters’ first dolls.” Barbie didn’t look like them – or like any woman for that matter. It didn’t work for her because, as she says, “art and toys are so you can know who you are.”

Sending kids out into the world with positivity, Green says, is something that needs to start at home. “There is trauma when the culture is not built for you.” And gender is a factor too. Apparently the most rare and expensive Shindana now, if you can even find it, is Slade – a secret agent based on Shaft.

Peter Woods, who works with the program at WGSAC, speaks with reverence of the show. “Representation matters in instilling self-worth,” he says, “and this show has consistently been an entry point to artistry, especially for BIPOC and women.” Danielle Brazell of the DCA speaks with reverence of the show. “Heartbreaking psychology is absolutely an aspect of this work,” she says. “How people’s minds are a war zone, processing trauma, deep connections, and serious experiences – even beyond what the maker intended. That’s art.”

Teresa Tolliver – another artist who like Outterbridge was in from the very first show – makes transgressive objects with punk and funk roots. At the time, she was creating soft sculpture dolls that were more realistic than her current dolls. She sold one to Stevie Wonder who gave it to his daughter. “The doll was made out of fabric with jointed wrists and was beautiful. After that I moved to mixed media dolls with clay heads, hands, and feet. Since that time, I have made wrapped dolls out of twigs with cloth heads, and found objects for heads. I do not limit my art. I also have made sock dolls, stick dolls, creative recycling dolls, gourd dolls, flower pot dolls, and more. I also made a doll for a museum. It was called Gutsie and it was so big that the children would get inside of it to be born. I made a life-size mermaid doll that was hand-painted that my grandmother put on her couch. She said it did not get her house dirty and it kept her company.”

Montevalli is proud to be honoring these and other artists, like Pat Shivers whose works she describes as “beautiful, complex, significant works touching on the history of figurative sculpture,” along with collectors like Green, and the towering figure of Dr. Cynthia Davis – a curator, advocate, and advancer of a public health-centered practice merging doll-making with philanthropy and AIDS education, in order to promote healing from trauma both personal and generational, in the name of the empowerment of women and girls.

“The true history of this show is the history of its struggle,” says Montevalli. “It was always a challenge for it to even exist, and through lean years it’s been the artists and collectors who’ve collaborated with the WGSAC staff to ensure its survival – even in the midst of budget cuts, federal politics, and the pandemic. One silver lining of at least this latter condition is that going virtual has allowed for much greater national and even international access. “We have new artists and new audiences,” she says, “from the Bronx, to Philly, Detroit, Atlanta, and beyond. The community just keeps growing.”

Follow WGSAC on Instagram and flickr, peruse the flipbook of the 2020 exhibition; get dolled up for February 6, and encourage the kids in your life to express themselves at the February 13 doll-making art workshop with Alek Tabu.
dig through the website copy and promotional blurbs, and the mission of the 1500 Sound Academy is pretty simple: the more you know about the music industry, the better chance you have to succeed. That seems like a no-brainer, like stating the obvious. But it’s often the case that people within the music industry find their niche and then stick to it, honing very specific skills. The folks at the 1500 Sound Academy insist that, by looking outside of your own circle of knowledge, you’re simplifying your own life, and career.

The academy was founded by singer-songwriter and producer James Fauntleroy and Grammy Award-winning producer Larrance Dopson about four years ago, and the pair was soon joined by entrepreneur Twila True.

“We had been thinking about it for many years before we started the school,” says Fauntleroy. “It started off just as a bad experience in the music business. Then it turned into us wanting to help people have a better experience than we had. The people that we worked with, some of the new artists, some of the collaborators. Whoever wanted to listen — we just wanted to share as much wisdom as possible, which is not a popular activity, at least listen — we just wanted to share as much wisdom as possible. That’s how 150 Sound Academy was born. A nearly 20,000 square foot building in Inglewood, eight minutes from LAX, across the street from Snoop Dogg. He has a huge facility across from ours, and he told us he got the idea from our facility. We stole that shit from LAX, across the street from Snoop Dogg. He has a huge facility across from ours, and he told us he got the idea from our facility. We stole that shit back. The rest is history. The support we’ve gotten from the community and the city of Los Angeles and Inglewood has been above and beyond. It’s been a hard journey.”

Dopson says that they have an advantage over other similar institutions because they both bring “everything” to the table.

“The whole point of us is that everybody could do everything, individually,” Dopson says. “When we come together, it’s the Power Rangers. That’s what the engineer is doing, and we learned all the rules to break them, now it’s easier for us to teach.”

Still, there was a learning curve. The team had to transfer their knowledge of the entertainment industry to education. Fauntleroy says that church helped.

“We’re always going to be looking to do things better,” he says. “Each class, each graduation cycle, we learned new things to implement. Pre-school, we were already thinking about online curriculum. The pandemic really has given us a new level of learning curve. Teaching is something that I think comes naturally to me and Larrance, and so many musicians, especially musicians who come up through the church system.”

Now they offer courses in music production, engineering, songwriting, the music business, mixing and artist branding. It all comes back to the original message — everyone needs to learn everything.

“We do so much, and we’ve all seen the impact that multiple skills have on your career. That’s the premise of what we want you to learn,” says Fauntleroy. “If you come in and you’re a producer, it beheoves you to also learn about what a songwriter is thinking about, what an artist is doing, what the engineer is doing. For one thing, you may need to do or facilitate some of these things. But also, you can learn to speak the language of the other people. If you know how to use Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop, that means you won’t have to get someone to do that. If you learn how to engineer and you’re an artist, you can record yourself. If you’re a producer, you can record the artist.”

It’s working. Now partnered with Roland, graduates of the academy have been hired to engineer for artists as prestigious as Young Thug. The team is working with the likes of Justin Timberlake and Roc Nation. None of this is just promo lip service — the results are tangible.

“That’s the goal — jobs, money and being able to support yourself while pursuing your dreams,” Fauntleroy says. “We hope to have more. We have clients coming up with internship pipelines. We’re trying to come up with an even clearer pipeline. We have a constant flow of active, real-world practitioners coming in and talking to the students on a regular basis.”

While 2021 will see us remain locked down for a while, 1500 Sound Academy are striding forward thanks to their online classes. Meanwhile, they’re looking to build a new studio.

“Looking at the future, we’re building what’s probably going to be the most advanced studio in Los Angeles,” says Fauntleroy. “The premise is proximity and the value of exposure. That’s what I look from Blackbird, and you turn this into even more of a valuable experience. We’ll be able to take them from the classroom to actually be around the business. Nipsey Hussle was a good friend of ours — he promoted the school at the beginning, he had an idea that we’re putting to this studio side, for an observation studio. For celebrities to be able to have premium experiences with their fans, they can come and look at them while they’re in their elements. They can see what’s really going on in the studio, without disturbing the process. That’s what’s coming next.”
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JAQUI RICE UNLOCKS THE MAGIC OF MUSHROOMS IN G.O.A.T FUEL

The entrepreneur has teamed up with Hall of Famer dad Jerry in their new family business - a better for you energy drink.

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

Cordyceps is a parasitic fungus that sprouts long, slender stems out of the heads of certain dead caterpillars in the high mountain regions of China. For G.O.A.T. Fuel energy drink founder Jaqui Rice, they are a thing of beauty.

Found in traditional Chinese medicine for centuries, these mushrooms have been used to treat everything from fatigue and kidney problems to low sex drive. It’s the secret ingredient in the low carb brightly colored energy drink developed by Rice and her Greatest Of All Time dad, NFL wide receiver Jerry Rice.

“My dad is like the bionic man,” entrepreneur Rice tells L.A. Weekly at the North Hollywood headquarters of G.O.A.T. Fuel, the first all Black-owned beverage company in the energy space. “While me and my fiance, Trevion “Tempo” Stokes, were dragging ourselves out of bed, Jerry at age 58 is on the peloton every day at 6am, meticulous about everything that goes into his body. Why not put them in a drink?”

In that research she came across the tale of the charming caterpillar fungus. According to Rice, the story goes that goat herders in the Himalayas noticed their flocks eating something out of the ground that made them more energetic and vibrant than usual. So the herders took the fungus back to their villages and tried it for themselves. In traditional Chinese medicine cordyceps would be used in soups to help the body utilize more oxygen. They found that it gave them energy and their respiratory systems started working better.

Together with Chief Creative Officer Stokes and her Executive Chairman Hall of Famer dad, the team did an all-out blitz of tastings at their Benicia, CA flavor house starting in 2018 as well as nailing down distributors and manufacturers. Using the Rice business acumen, they launched online to great success at the end of 2019, right before the pandemic shut everything down. Raising money was another feat in and of itself. The last check from investors came in out of New York on the same day that Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced a state of emergency. The former San Francisco 49er would sit in on distributor meetings and sales calls, never missed a formulation meeting and did production runs together for days at a time alongside his daughter, flying in from the Bay Area where he lives.

“He’s always been very disciplined,” she says. “That ethos has transferred into the beverage and our company culture. We’re a small team of six, but we’re all driven and ambitious. When you have something that says ‘Greatest of all Time’ on the can, the bar is set kind of high.”

“As for the future I do feel there’s a long way to go, but I’m so inspired by seeing how people have rallied behind black businesses in the last few months,” says Rice. “2020 was an eye opener. If you just look at how many people are paving the way now, starting with this administration. It’s exciting to see that we’re on the right track to have some equitable things happen in this country and change it for the better.”
While many cannabis equity operations have been killing it during the pandemic, it’s been more difficult to join their ranks.

BY JIMI DEVINE

While many cannabis businesses have found wild success during the pandemic, supporting new cannabis entrepreneurs from the communities hit the hardest by the enforcement of misguided weed laws has been a bit trickier than in the past.

The idea of equity in the cannabis industry has spread east from California after the equitable form of the concept first went through its growing pains in Oakland, and is still going through some fine-tuning in L.A.

But now, as the movement to empower those communities in an industry that they once found themselves incarcerated for at disproportionate levels grows, it’s facing a pandemic. This current state of the world is draining the coffers of many organizations looking to get their foot in the door. But those who had jumped through the necessary hoops to exist in this moment? They’re doing pretty awesome – just like everyone in the industry who hasn’t used the pandemic as an excuse for bad business plans. Sure, there were operational challenges of the bat, but if you have a mechanism to get decent weed at a reasonable price to people’s door, you’re probably doing well.

While the conversation around equity in the cannabis industry is stronger than ever, how executable is the idea at this moment? Not very. The pandemic has proven more difficult in the permitting aspect of the industry with delays costing people more and more as they continue to pay rent on facilities they hoped to get licensed.

At the moment, people are talking more about equity in cannabis than ever – all the way from L.A. to D.C. But we haven’t had a lot of new faces to talk about over the last year.

One of the folks that’s helped or inspired a lot of equity applicants across the U.S. over the last few years is Amber Senter. Her advocacy with Supernova Women and tangibly supporting equity brands through her Breeze Distribution has been huge.

Senter spent much of the year working to open a commercial kitchen via the EquityWorks! Incubator. It will provide infrastructure to equity brands on the come-up. For smaller edible companies finding their way in the world, building out your own commercial kitchen is a foolish use of resources when you could rent a certified kitchen and use the other cash to help grow the company.

Senter was quick to note things haven’t sucked for folks who were well positioned going into the pandemic. “Yeah, business has not been bad, that’s for sure. It’s been good, though permitting has been a bit of a challenge,” Senter told L.A. Weekly.

“Dealing with the city, you know, local government and hopping through all the hoops required to get different sign-offs for our facilities, that’s been challenging. Definitely.”

Though she had her own trials and tribulations when securing a permit during the pandemic, she also generally has eyes on a lot of folks going through the process. We asked what it’s been like watching those entrepreneurs she’s provided support and advice hit the roadblocks despite putting their best foot forward.

“People have definitely been hitting brick walls a lot and I’ve been trying to really help them break down those walls. A lot of it has to do with engaging with the government and not being able to go into places in person and talk through stuff,” Senter said.

Senter noted outside the biggest issues that permitting presents, there are other factors complicating growth for startup cannabis businesses as lockdown continues. Things like in-store demos and in-person staff training simply aren’t a thing anymore. They’d traditionally been a key tool for anyone trying to elbow their way into more coveted spaces. You could add to Senter’s take on consumer education that a lot of the times the big dog dispensaries have decades-old relationships with vendors. It’s tough to get on their radar if people aren’t asking for them.

We asked Senter if it had been easier for equity permit holders to get a permit this year, would the snowball of progress be even bigger? Despite the hurdles faced be so many, did it actually slow down the cause?

“You know, I don’t think so,” Senter quickly replied. “I think everybody was sitting at home, actually paying attention. There were no sports, so people were forced to see the ugly side of what black and brown America faces every day. And they saw and they were appalled.”

On occasion, Senter had to deal with the awkwardness of people in the cannabis industry of all places, announcing their newfound awareness for the complex relationships between communities of color and law enforcement. While shocked at the obvious much of the time, Senter tried to give folks the benefit of the doubt.

“There were so many distractions before that they just didn’t see it, you know. And now that they’ve seen it, like oh my gosh, we have to do something about this,” she said of those moments of the early summer dialogue around police brutality that in turn fostered more support for equity programs. “The issues with a lot of the equity programs that I’m seeing outside of the bubble that I’m in, there’s no funding, you know? How can we provide any type of support whatsoever without any extra money behind it? What do you?”

One common practice in various time zones is equity programs getting scapegoated as a result of wider issues attached to various state and municipal well-intended equity programs with little funds in the coffers. Senter concurred with the sentiment and spoke to the amount of lip service equity operators have seen in recent years.

“It’s lip service until they start putting dollars behind it,” Senter said. “Otherwise, like I said, how did they expect these things? How can you provide support if it doesn’t come in the form of money? All support is money, especially from the government. These equity programs need funding. Then there’s some of the crazy stuff I’m seeing, like in Massachusetts with the lawsuit. What is that? Blatant racism playing into equity programs, you know?”

Senter savagely went town on the Commonwealth Dispensary Association’s lawsuit attempting to derail the effort to protect the Massachusetts delivery permits for equity licenses and give them a head start when the delivery opens up. One of the reasons delivery is a popular option for equity operators getting into the industry is it provides the lowest bar for entry.

“You want to sue, because the equity program they’re trying to set up to do what it’s supposed to do? This is insane,” Senter said about the legal move. “This is insanity. So, I think that I really don’t know what to say about Massachusetts. Really appalling. What happened out there is gross and atrocious. And those people ought to be ashamed of themselves for even being any kind of part of that whatsoever.”

Senter is a lot more chipper when speaking on the potential for the “EquityWorks!” Incubator being run through the kitchen. The plan is to provide low-cost commercial space to cook, mentorship, and revenue via Breeze Distribution’s connections to shelf space. One of the trickiest parts is getting that initial wind into the industry is it provides the lowest bar for entry.

“It’s really pretty awesome. We meet with the operators twice a week on Thursdays and Fridays. Fridays is a two-hour Q&A so anybody can just pop in and ask any old question from anywhere from licensing, compliance, R&D, to branding, marketing to data and market trends,” Senter said.