

## Frederick Factor Season 2, Episode 1: The Opportunity Factor with Shana Knight of Soul Street

**Ashleigh:** Welcome to the Frederick Factor. My name is Ashleigh Kiggans, and I'm the host of Season 2. Everyone who's lived in, worked in, or visited Frederick, Maryland knows there's just something special about this place. One of those things is the incredible diverse community that continues to grow. Here on this podcast, we bring you Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs, and community leaders into the spotlight, share their stories with you, and find out: what's their Frederick Factor?

Today I am joined by the awesome, amazing community leader, Shana Knight.

**Shana:** Hello everybody.

**Ashleigh:** So for those who don't know, Shana has been a prominent figure in the Frederick County nonprofit industry for the last few years and has now started to take what she's learned in the nonprofit industry to a whole other level to help with the promotion of underrepresented businesses in Frederick County. So that includes our Black-owned, Hispanic-owned, any type of minority-owned, women-owned, veteran-owned. She has taken what she's learned and is pushing it all to the next level. So it's very nice to have you here.

**Shana:** Thank you so much for having me.

**Ashleigh:** One thing I want to know is: what brought you to Frederick County? What's your background of Frederick?

**Shana:** Sure. Well, actually I was born and raised in Montgomery County. I moved a lot back and forth at one point between Frederick and Montgomery County. In middle school, I officially stayed in Frederick for good. So, I've been here most of my life. I tell people that I really do consider myself to be from Frederick. Most of my memories are in Frederick. And then, I went away to school for four years. And I will say that I couldn't really appreciate Frederick when I was younger. And then going away to school and coming back and getting really started in my career is when I started to really just love and appreciate this community. And I bought my home here. So now this is home.

**Ashleigh:** Awesome. And also, you're one of the founding members of Soul Street, a nonprofit here. So, what inspired you? Obviously we all just went through these insane last two years of Covid and we have seen so many changes in our community over the last two years because of that. So what inspired Soul Street?

**Shana:** Yes, this is a story that is just crazy. So, it's 2020 -- I want to say it's June. And we had all just witnessed the murder of George Floyd. A lot of us were on lockdown if we were not essential. And a lot of people had time to really take in what was going on. The video was everywhere on social media. Everybody's talking about it. I think mothers especially were glued

to the screen as this man was crying out for his mom. They were able to take it all in and realize what was going on. And I think it opened so many people's eyes. Everyone was protesting all over the world. This wasn't the first time that this had happened, but it was a beautiful thing to see that people were coming together in unity, in support of Black Lives. Protesting was great -- it was a great way to show support. But then people were like, what can we really do? And a lot of people realized the power in supporting Black-owned businesses. That's absolutely pouring wealth into the Black community in just a huge way to make a difference that is sustainable. It lasts forever. And, because you know how the media works, things were resurfacing. I think it was around the anniversary of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Trump was about to go speak and that was a whole other thing. But I think that people started educating themselves on Black Wall Street and what that was and how horrible it was to see Black-owned businesses destroyed and people murdered. So a lot of people really wanted to just support Black-owned businesses.

And for me, I will say -- I was no expert on Black history. I'm biracial. So it was something that has always been a challenge for me -- trying to figure out my Blackness in the world. Especially because I was raised by a white mother. So I was educating myself along with it. And for me, I felt really connected to my Black side and felt -- I need to do more. So seeing those Facebook groups that we had, like the Frederick County Takeout groups and Shop Local and all the great groups out there. People were asking: "What are the Black-owned businesses?" And for me, I thought -- that's weird. Why can't we find them? Why aren't they visible? Where are they? They've got to be out there. So, I just kind of put out a message on Facebook like, "Who wants to start a Black-owned Farmers Market? We can get some Black-owned businesses together and they can sell their items."

Obviously a Black-owned grocery store would be ideal. We have Hispanic markets, we have Asian markets, we have co-ops. Why not work toward this type of goal? We need this. This is something that has existed before. So a lot of people responded. A lot of people, like I said, had time on their hands, and they stepped up to the plate. People of all colors responded. We got a big group together and we started dumping ideas back and forth and a Facebook chat. And eventually -- just like anytime something starts with a large group -- people kind of fizzle out.

And we had this core group of Black business leaders, business owners, real estate agents, non-profit leaders. It was a core group. It was almost like the perfect group, if you think about everyone's role. And we were like, "Okay, we're going to do this thing in August." It was the end of June, and we decided we're going to do a market in August, but we had an opportunity to do something on July 4th. So Leslie Ruby with PopUp Frederick saw what we were trying to do and she had her venue, but with Covid, she said: "Some of my vendors aren't sure, so if you want to use it, you totally can." And we were like, "Okay!" We had two weeks to throw a market together and it was hectic, but we poured our hearts and souls into this. And we got eight vendors together.

It was a hot day. It was a holiday -- 4th of July. And we could only have so many people at a time within the Sky Stage space. The space is outside, but it's like a building, so we can only have about 30 people at a time within the space. And we had people standing in line in the hot

heat and they waited and they each had their turn and all the vendors sold out. So for us, that was like, "Wow -- this is a confirmation that people really do want to support the businesses." But not only that -- it confirmed that the businesses are out there. After that market, people emailed us asking, "Hey, when's your next market? How can we get involved?" So the businesses are out there. <laughs>. And when you think about how they weren't represented, it's just crazy. So that's really how we formed and what we're trying to do. We are trying to help get representation for the businesses.

**Ashleigh:** That's an incredible story. And to think, a lot of those businesses have probably been established for years. And maybe they just didn't have the money to be in a brick-and-mortar expensive office store or expensive retail space or something like that. So this was a great opportunity to get everyone together. And now people know their businesses, and they know their websites. They can order online from them. They can find them at the different pop-ups. I know you guys have a pop-up at Common Market. It's really an exciting thing. So I guess you can almost say, that out of something very sad and heartbreaking came something positive, of people actually being "woke" to what was already there.

My background is very similar to yours. My parents are both biracial. I grew up trying to figure out where my place was. And I will tell you, it was one of those things where, when something like this happens, you really start to learn. And it was amazing to me how many people did not know about Black Wall Street and had no idea about Tulsa.

**Shana:** And then you look at Lake Lanier and you look at what Central Park was that was also a Black town. There's so many of them. So then you discover Black Wall Street and then you find out how many more there are that aren't talked about or covered in history books. It really makes you want to start something and protect it and also come together with other organizations because we're stronger together. I will also say that in addition to supporting the businesses that existed, we became like a safe space for people to start businesses. At our second market, a few of the vendors there were sharing their passion projects. I think they wanted to start a business and they didn't know where to start. They came to our market, they made money, and now they're doing amazing. So I think there are people out there who want to start businesses, but they just don't know how to get connected to the right resources.

**Ashleigh:** Yeah. And that's a good point because once again, it's very hard to find that research. It's really hard to figure out where to start. And [it helps] if you have people to help guide you through that. And I will say that it really wasn't just Black-owned businesses at this point, either. It was a lot of underrepresented businesses that started to get more [attention]. Social media was obviously an amazing thing for all of us throughout the pandemic. But there were other minority businesses like women-owned businesses and veteran-owned businesses that really started to come to the forefront. So, as far as looking at the pandemic and where we were and where we are now, what have you seen as the effects for underrepresented businesses?

**Shana:** So, when Soul Street started, I was in the nonprofit world supporting families that were considered ALICE. I was actually at United Way and we rolled out the ALICE Report. For those who don't know, ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. And it's just a fancy way of saying "working poor." And a lot of those families were underrepresented. So my passion there was helping those families. But if you look at supporting underrepresented businesses, that's another way of doing that because you making a big purchase for an underrepresented business might be that last check they need to submit for their child's college tuition so that child can be the first-generation college student. That is everything. I wouldn't be where I'm at right now without that.

Seeing what Black-owned businesses face and historically have faced, there are also other unique challenges that women face and that Hispanic businesses face. And it's not right. It's crazy to me because I think having a diverse economy is important. You need your businesses to reflect the people who live there. It's just more attractive. And one positive thing that came out of this pandemic is that people were more conscious about putting their dollars in those communities within those businesses, which is great. That's half of the job. But now it's also about getting these businesses connected to the resources to be sustainable. A lot of the small businesses and underrepresented businesses had to shut down because they didn't have what they needed to be sustainable in an emergency, like a pandemic. So there was a lot of that. But, there were also a lot of great grants that came out to try to help and that people qualified for, which is great. And the fact that people are more, like you said, "woke" to why they should support these businesses, it's just a huge plus. But we've got to keep doing that. You know what I mean? It's not a trend -- it's something that we have to do going forward.

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**Ashleigh:** Absolutely. Well, you know, the whole "DEI", which has been the buzzword of -- I want to say 2021, but really it was the buzzword of 2020. That's probably the buzzword of 2022. I've personally sat on a number of DEI focus groups. And for those who don't know, that's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. And I'm sure you also have [sat in on focus groups] as well.

**Shana:** Yes.

**Ashleigh:** And one of the things I always want to push is that, first of all, [DEI] is not something that's new. It's something that has been around for years and years and years. Everyone's just starting to now notice it. Make sure that we're continuing with this. Let's not forget about this in five years. Let's really continue. So, looking at, from when you first came here in middle school to where we are now, what improvements do you see that we have now that are going to extend out?

**Shana:** So let's start with businesses. It's cool to hear that since the pandemic, there have been more Black-owned businesses started than ever before. So people are starting businesses, which is great because maybe they are getting more connected to resources because more people want to help. Like, a lot of banks stepped up and they said they really are passionate about supporting minority and women businesses and things of that nature. I also see a lot more support from our government level. You hear a lot more government officials talking about wanting to support that, which is great. It should be a priority. It's an issue. And they're trying to find solutions. And you see programs -- like the Frederick County Office of Economic Development has an EmPOWER program, which is amazing. They offer mentorship, it's free, and they have resources and networking events. And to be able to have a special hub for underrepresented businesses in the county, that's something that all businesses should be taking advantage of. So I think that we are just really going in the right direction. I think just making sure we hold our officials accountable for the things that they say they're going to do is one thing that we all have to do.

**Ashleigh:** Yeah. That is very important. I think accountability overall [is very important]. I will say as someone who participated as well in the EmPOWER program -- I did their executive minority leadership program in 2020 actually during Covid. So we were not able to be in person. We sat in an auditorium -- everyone in a separate row. So we didn't get as much personal [attention]. But I will say it was a very nice, strong program to connect us. And then recently I did the mentor program where Shana was actually one of the mentees in the program. And I had the opportunity to sit with a number of underrepresented groups from all different types of backgrounds, all different industries. It was a great collaborative session. I would highly recommend, for those who haven't checked into the EmPOWER program, it's very welcoming -- one of the most welcoming groups. And you don't have to be already established. Even if you're new or just considering starting something [you can attend]. It's very special.

**Shana:** Absolutely. And another thing that I've noticed is that there's a lot more opportunities for businesses to have a platform to express their concerns. I know the Downtown Frederick Partnership did a focus group with underrepresented businesses, and that was great. That was one thing Soul Street helped with -- to sit down with Downtown Frederick Partnership and also bring in some of the businesses that they work with so that the two groups can connect. People could share their feedback, like, "Here's why I may or may not feel like I'm welcome in Downtown Frederick to do business." To see a lot of that going on, especially how the Chamber does stuff like that, has been nice to see.

**Ashleigh:** Great. So, bringing this back -- what do you think your Frederick Factor is? What do you feel that you are bringing to Frederick? I know what you bring to Frederick and for those who don't know, it's some incredible stuff. So what is your Frederick Factor?

**Shana:** I want to say connections and opportunities. My background was with a nonprofit that supported underrepresented families. I started really getting to know the ins and outs of the community. Basically, as a volunteer coordinator, when I started out, I would take groups to go volunteer at different nonprofits. Everyone's one car accident away from being ALICE or homeless. And if it happens to me, I know where to go for my next meal. I know where to go for clothing. I know where to go for medical care, X, Y, and Z. Having that knowledge and understanding what ALICE is in Frederick. More than 37% of households in Frederick County struggle to afford basic necessities. What can we do to support these families? And again, a lot of these families might be trying to have another stream of income. It could be a business that they're trying to start. And how can we help that business be successful? How can we help them? Because when you're ALICE, you've got to decide: "Do I pay my kids' fee for extracurricular sports or do I pay to keep the lights on?" Well, maybe supporting their business will allow them to do both. For me, the passion is real. It's deeper than just business. It's great to have businesses want to be here in Frederick, but it goes deeper than that. It's like you're really helping the families and when you do that, you're improving that overall big picture of who is ALICE?

The cost of living is only going up. You know what I mean? So to me, it's more so about the community piece and understanding that you're improving Frederick overall. I feel like my dream for Frederick is to see a thriving, diverse business community, where I can go down the street and get some Indian food; I can go support an Ethiopian establishment. I want to know that I'm living in a place that truly reflects the people who live here. And not only that, but where people are able to send their kids to school and buy a home. I was lucky enough to be able to buy a home through a great program. And that lays the foundation, honestly, in my opinion, to being able to focus on your business and establish yourself as a career person and make more money. Once you have a home, it's everything. So my Frederick Factor, I think, is helping people make connections and find opportunities.

**Ashleigh:** Well, as you said, "knowing your community" -- I think it's important to point out that it's not just knowing Frederick City. It's knowing and understanding all of Frederick County and, like you were saying, bringing that change to the entire county of Frederick so that the whole county can be reflective of what our community really is right now.

**Shana:** Yeah. And what they need. I love supporting Black businesses --- that's how I got started. But knowing all the issues going on with underrepresented businesses and being that person that can take their voice and help them take it to downtown Frederick or go talk to an elected official -- [that is powerful]. [I'm grateful to] be aware of what's going on, make those connections, and create opportunities.

**Ashleigh:** Well, I think that's the best way to wrap it up. Creating opportunities. Yes. Thank you so much for being here, Shana.

**Shana:** Thanks for having me.

**Ashleigh:** Until next time.

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