

Frederick Factor Season 2 Episode 9: Shana Knight of SOUL Street (Part 2)

Ashleigh: Welcome to the Frederick Factor. My name is Ashleigh Kiggins and I'm the host of Season Two. 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 Frederick's underrepresented business owners, entrepreneurs and community leaders into the spotlight to share their stories with you and find out: what's their Frederick Factor?

I have, again, with me today, Shana Knight, the Senior Business Development Manager for Diversity and Inclusion with the Office of Economic Development for Frederick County. So, welcome. That was a mouthful. <laugh>

Shana: Thank you. Yes, it is. <laugh>

Ashleigh: So I wanted to bring you back on because, well, number one, we had such a great response to your first episode. Thank you for being my guinea pig and my first guest. But also at that time, you had just started your position with the Office of Economic Development for Frederick County. So you really were kind of getting your feet wet. Now it's been about a year, I think, since we've recorded that first one, and obviously a lot has changed. So now that you're in your position, first of all, how are you liking your position?

Shana: Oh, I love it. That is a timeless episode, so thank you for allowing me to come on [so I could] actually share that with people so they can learn more about SOUL Street. Yeah. But yeah, where I'm at now is great. Everything aligns and I'm super happy. I love working with the county.

Ashleigh: Well, you've taken it by storm. It's great to have someone in that position who is really kind of pushing the resources available and trying to connect the diversity and inclusion part to the economic development part too, as well. And what better person than someone who helped co-found SOUL Street -- where you got to do the markets and things like that too as well. We're going to touch on SOUL Street, but first let's talk a little bit about economic development. So I talked to a lot of my clients -- most recently I was with another business owner, a diverse business owner -- and we were talking about the different resources available -- grants and things like that. Is there anything you can share that's available for those?

Shana: Yeah, Absolutely. So I'll talk about the EmPOWER Program that I manage with the county. So that actually rebranded before 2020. Just to be clear, the county has been doing a lot of things for underrepresented businesses since like 2015. But we took that program that we had in the past and we rebranded it so it just kind of fit the needs of the world today. Especially, obviously, underrepresented businesses. And that is the EmPOWER Program. I like to tell people it provides an umbrella of resources for underrepresented businesses. We do one-on-one meetings, so I'll sit down with the business, hear them out, what is it that you need, make the connections for them, kind of walk with them throughout their journey as well. So each meeting looks different depending on what the business needs.

We also do a monthly networking program. So I love to go out to the different businesses in Frederick County that are owned by underrepresented individuals, and we'll host our networking event there. And the owner can speak and just empower the crowd, share their story about how they got started, talk about their challenges and how they overcame them. Also just answer questions as a seasoned business owner at that point. So that's how we do our EmPOWER Monthly networking. And then we have our mentorship program. So basically it's an 8-week program where we select about 10 to 12 underrepresented business owners. And we'll get together each week -- each week covers a different topic. So we'll talk about things like access to capital, building a relationship with the bank, commercial real estate -- the list goes on -- but super relevant topics that are important. And what we'll do is we'll work with local business leaders and business owners to lead the conversation and present on those topics.

We like to keep it at a small group because it really does help the mentees have the opportunity to follow up with the business leaders outside of the EmPOWER Mentorship Program. So that really does create like that mentorship piece, which is what we wanted. The education is huge, but that mentorship piece and the connections are so big. And then we also find -- organically this just happened -- but we'll end a cohort and we'll find that all of the mentees are like best friends. <laugh>

Ashleigh: <laugh>

Shana: So we see them all together at the Chamber events. They're always together, they stay connected. They support each other's businesses. So it really does create that sense of community. So that's our mentorship program. And we just recently started a new initiative -- a partnership with the local bank to do a virtual mentorship accelerator program. Very similar, but it's just virtual. It allows us to meet the businesses where they are. Not every business can dedicate an hour every Friday morning for eight weeks.

You know, they've gotta open up shop. So, the virtual is another great option that's held in the evenings on Wednesdays. And it's 10 weeks, along with a pitch at the end. We're about to wrap it up this month. It's going really well. We have like 40 people in that program. It allows for more people as well. That's the power of being able to do things virtually. So those are our two mentorship pieces that we have. And then, aside from that, we help with marketing. Do you know how to write a press release? If not, we have a free tool that will teach you how to do that.

We also love to highlight underrepresented businesses and what they're doing. So we do spotlights. We'll highlight a certain heritage and highlight that business. The list goes on. We love to just uplift and promote businesses. And then to that visibility piece, we also have an Underrepresented Business Directory. A lot of times, people are looking for minority businesses to work with. So anyone who registers themselves and they have to identify themselves as underrepresented and under what category, they can do that and they'll be in our system. They're visible. People can find them -- they can work with them. And it is a tool that we do find is used pretty often.

****Sponsorship Message****

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Ashleigh: So that, I mean, that's a ton. <laugh>

Shana: Yeah.

Ashleigh: And I don't know if people actually know about all of this and about all these opportunities available. Now to be in the mentorship program, do you need to be in a certain stage of your business or can someone who's just starting out -- can they join that type of a program?

Shana: So, starting out for our pilot program -- which you were a mentor for -- that really was for any stage. So you could have been a startup or a growth stage business. Going

into our second year of the in-person mentorship program, we felt the need to really focus on growth stage businesses. And, our virtual accelerator is doing that as well. However, we do also have resources in the community that focus on startups. Like ShePitch is one. We partner with the Chamber. I sit on the ShePitch committee. There is opportunity for the startups to get the education and build their pitch, as well as growth stage. So I'm not gonna say that going forward, we won't allow growth-stage [businesses] in our mentorship programs. There's always opportunities. We're always looking for ways to support everyone from the beginning all the way to the end.

Ashleigh: Now, as far as business plan writing, do you guys have the resources to help? I mean, writing a business plan -- I've done it myself. I've read other clients' business plans, I've helped clients write their business plans, and it's a very daunting part of starting a business. Do you have resources available for people who want to learn the proper way?

Shana: Absolutely. So going back to the one-on-one meeting, that might be the very first question I'll ask someone: "do you have a business plan?" Because if not, then we need to just stop -- hold the breaks. <laugh> I'm gonna connect you to my girl Karen, with the Maryland Women's Business Center, or Brian with the Maryland Small Business Development Center. Those are our partners that we work with in our office very closely, and they are amazing. They're a wealth of knowledge. I even tell people to work with both, if you can, just to get extra eyes. But we have templates. I know that Brian has his own process for writing a business plan. I know Karen has her own process for writing a business plan. And then I'll look at your business plan. So that's where we like to send people because you shouldn't have to just get a template and do it alone -- even though you can find a template and it looks pretty easy. But it is, like you said, a daunting process. So having someone ask questions along the way, having you think about your business in ways you never thought about it before, identifying those blind spots. Just to say it, if anyone's listening, the Maryland Women's Business Center in the Small Business Development Center is a great way to start.

Ashleigh: Perfect. Good. I mean, yes, you can Google and find any template, but when it comes down to really the nitty gritty of marketing saying, well, I know this is needed. I tell clients all the time -- the way landlords even look at business plans. They're like a bank. If you're going to present to a bank to get a loan, you've gotta have a business plan when you're going to rent a space. And projections are always tough. Because you do really have to do a lot of market research to understand your business and I think every business owner should do it. I mean, even every five years or so, rewrite your own business plan and look at it because it does make you take a little bit of a deeper look at your business And it really kind of gives you that path forward.

Shana: Exactly. What's that saying? "Fail to plan, Plan to fail" Yes. Same thing with business. You need to have something to guide you. And it is absolutely crucial when talking to anybody. If you don't have a business plan, we've just gotta start there. That's step one.

Ashleigh: Yeah. A hundred percent. Now where would people go to learn more about the programs and opportunities available?

Shana: Yeah. So for the EmPOWER Program, the website is www.discoverfrederickmd.com/empower.

Ashleigh: And we will put a link in the bottom of the show notes too, so you don't have to rewind this episode to keep hearing it. So, kind of switching gears -- now, once again, I know SOUL Street has a ton going on right now. Do you wanna talk a little bit about what's upcoming this summer?

Shana: Yes, sure. Okay. So I think to the public, it doesn't look like there's a ton going on because... drumroll please! We're becoming a nonprofit! So we have formed an amazing board of directors, wait 'til you all find out. We will announce that soon. And we've been really busy working behind the scenes with that. I just want to shout out to the local consultant that we've been working with: Michelle Newsom Smith, the Word Woman, LLC. She's been amazing, very informative. I've learned a lot. Our team has been working so hard to stay visible and to continue to support businesses. In the meantime, we've been doing a new initiative called the Soul Street Takeover Events, and we're doing them monthly. So the idea actually came from Jarad. You know, that boy's a genius. <laugh>

Ashleigh: <laugh> That would be our DJ genius that we interviewed in one of our episodes as well. From Benefactor Events.

Shana: He's awesome. He's so good when it comes to ideas. But when we were having our markets, we realized -- we're serving black-owned businesses, but there's a group that we're missing and it's those who already have brick and mortar spaces. So how can we go out and support them? And he had the idea, why don't we just like, take over -- we will go out, we'll make it a big deal on social media and tell everyone to come out on this day. He'll spin some tracks or he will send one of his DJs and people can come out. And we did B Anderson's last month, so people come out and buy a plate -- and you know how we get down! <laugh>

Ashleigh: <laugh>

Shana: We started dancing in the middle of the floor, you know, the Cuban Shuffle. But we had a blast. So, this time we're going to BK Juices, which -- they started out with us at SOUL Street and now they're in a physical location, which is so awesome.

Ashleigh: And they're located right off of Market Street, Downtown Frederick on North Market.

Shana: Yes. 343 North Market Street.

Ashleigh: Okay. And that's right at the corner of Fourth Street and Market Street, I believe?

Shana: Correct, yes.

Ashleigh: So you said you'll be doing these monthly?

Shana: Yep. We'll be doing them monthly. And then we are also partnering up with Black Frederick. They are bringing an amazing, huge cultural Black festival to Carroll Creek on August 26th.

Ashleigh: Oh wow.

Shana: We're going to work with them to bring some vendors out. We're really excited that they're making this effort happen. This is something that we think is really needed in Frederick and we are working on some market dates. I know people have been wanting to know. But, as a team of volunteers, we really wanted to make sure that we position ourselves to better serve the Black community. And that direction, for us, is becoming a nonprofit. So it's been awesome. And we're going into year three. We'll be celebrating our third year on July 2nd -- or July 4th. Sorry about that. But yeah, so, we're really excited.

Ashleigh: And I guess, so if anybody wanted to keep tabs on all the events, follow SOUL Street on Facebook?

Shana: Absolutely. So our website is www.mysoulstreet.com. We'll have events there or at "mysoulstreet" on everything. So Facebook, Instagram, and we always post there as well.

Ashleigh: So anything else that you want to add before we wrap up? I appreciate you coming back again. Appreciate you sharing all these resources. Because I think, as I started going through a lot of these interviews and conversations and, really starting to talk -- even to people outside of the interviews in the community -- knowing where these

resources are and knowing what's available [is so important]. And I thought it was very important for us to bring you back in so we could really talk about that resource factor of where to find these things. Because, like I said, I just don't think people realize all of the opportunities available.

Shana: No, I mean, I just thank you because that's exactly what this platform is doing. It's shedding light to those things. And even though my episode was filmed a year ago -- it's so timeless. And I think that's how every episode has been. It's super timeless. So this is just a really great resource for our community.

Ashleigh: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for being here, Shana.

Shana: Thank you for having me.

Ashleigh: And this is Ashleigh Kiggans closing out Season Two.

You've been listening to The Frederick Factor. Want to find out more about our diverse community that makes Frederick so special? Visit our website at www.frederickfactor.com. 'Til next time.