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BUSINESS

Buy Black movement finds it still has work to do in D-FW



Photos by Tom Fox/Staff Photographer

Sisters Deidra Keener (right) and Yolanda Bledsoe own 2 Sisters Sweet Creations in DeSoto. They turned their business from a part-time gig at home into a storefront full time in September 2021.

U.S. HOUSE

Money, lobby power at play

As Texans rise to key leadership positions, former aides can be key connections

By EMILY CALDWELL
Washington Bureau
emily.caldwell@dallasnews.com

WASHINGTON — Every election has winners and losers, and government watchdogs say when it comes to the revolving door between Capitol Hill and the lobbying powerhouses of K Street, the biggest beneficiaries could be the small army of former aides to four U.S. House leaders from Texas that is lining up to take advantage of potentially lucrative connections.

In a town where access is paramount and typically translates to power, former chiefs of staff and advisers to Republican lawmakers with new high-ranking positions just became much more marketable.

KAY GRANGER'S trailblazing rise to national political power, 18A

Texas' four rising stars in the House are:

■ Kay Granger of Fort Worth, new chair of the House Committee on Appropriations that controls more than a trillion dollars a year in spending and could provide the most reliably lucrative connection for a well-connected lobbyist.

■ Michael McCaul of Austin, who heads the House Foreign Affairs Committee that oversees national security, military deployments, arms control, international economic policy and will be deeply involved in deliberations over China security concerns, including fallout from the balloon incursion over the U.S. that captivated Americans for days.

■ Roger Williams of Willow Park, just west of Fort Worth, the new chair of the House Small Business Committee, which has oversight over the Small Business Administration and is responsible for protecting the interests of

Opening doors to prosperity

By ARCELIA MARTIN
Staff Writer
arcelia.martin@dallasnews.com

Yolanda Bledsoe and Deidra Keener were deliberate about who they hired to build out their DeSoto bakery, 2 Sisters Sweet Creations. They signed Black contractors for a majority of the shop's needs, such as for flooring, uniforms and establishing their LLC.

Even though Black people make up more than 15% of the Dallas-Fort Worth population, Black businesses are disproportionately underrepresented. As a way to correct economic inequities Black businesses face, consumers have been pushed time and time again to buy Black.

Major retailers like Target and JCPenney brought on more Black brands and new social media accounts surfaced dedicating themselves to listing Black-owned firms following the killing of George Floyd and as COVID-19 shuttered businesses.

The call offers support to Black business owners, whose companies disproportionately earn less than their peers and, in the early months of the



Bledsoe and Keener credit much of their success in building up a steady clientele for their bakery to the West Wall Street initiative at Friendship-West Baptist Church.

"Where you spend your dollars is power. It's about building power, and power gives you the ability to effect change."

Frederick D. Haynes,
pastor of Friendship-West Baptist Church

pandemic, saw higher rates of closure.

Outside of corporate initiatives to buy Black, there are community-level functions like one supported by the Rev. Frederick D. Haynes, pastor of Friendship-West Baptist Church. Haynes has hosted West Wall Street events since 2016 at the Oak Cliff megachurch, a recurring shopping market where the public can discover Black brands, like 2 Sisters.

"It was very successful for us," Keener said of the first West Wall Street event in 2016. "We were able to get lots of customers from there, people who are still our customers to this day."

West Wall Street gave Bledsoe and Keener a platform. It allowed them to establish a customer base and move their pastry project from a part-time gig to a full-time storefront in September 2021. Nearly a year and a half later, the sisters are almost busier than they can manage.

Bledsoe and Keener's business took off as Haynes pushed his community to shop Black brands. But Keener said

See BLACK Page 12A

See FORMER Page 18A

Mostly sunny



Metro, back page

NATION & WORLD

New high-flying object downed over Canada

A new "high-altitude airborne object" has been spotted and shot down over Canada's Yukon territory. 4A

METRO

Life-saving victory secured for Dallas pets

Thanks to the animal-welfare folks at Operation Kindness, Dallas has scored a victory for all its furball citizens. 1B

ARTS & LIFE

Director transformed Dallas theater

Adrian Hall, a force at Dallas Theater Center in the 1980s, dies at 95, leaving a legacy. 5E

BUSINESS

Area home market bouncing back?

Real estate agents around North Texas say they have seen an influx of interested buyers. 1D

VALENTINE'S DAY

What does science have to do with love?

Research explains what ignites romance, how to sustain connection

By ADITHI RAMAKRISHNAN
Staff Writer
adithi.ramakrishnan@dallasnews.com

As Valentine's Day approaches, love seems to be everywhere, sewn onto teddy bears and piped onto heart-shaped cakes. Some people can fall in love at first sight, or, according to Netflix's *Love Is Blind*, without seeing each other at all.

What does science have to say about it?

It's impossible to bottle meet-cute butterflies in a test tube or put that first-kiss feeling under a microscope. But by un-

IF A BOX OF CHOCOLATES and flowers won't cut it, we pulled together four of the most outrageously lavish Valentine's dates around Dallas. 10A

covering what love means to different people — scientists who study love on the brain and D-FW couples who know exactly what it feels like — it might be possible to understand it.

Brittany and Edwin Engram first locked eyes at a Tyler, the Creator concert in 2012. Edwin thought Brittany was cute right from the start, but neither was brave enough to make the first move.

See SCIENCE Page 10A



Brittany Engram

Brittany and Edwin Engram first met at a concert in 2012. Edwin recalled liking Brittany "from first sight." They've now been married for eight years and are parents to a son.





Photos by Tom Fox/Staff Photographer

Deidra Keener (right) puts out cartons of deluxe sweet potato cookies as her sister Yolanda Bledsoe waits on a customer at their bakery, 2 Sisters Sweet Creations, in DeSoto. Keener said she struggled to secure funding for the bakery from financial institutions and got nowhere with the Small Business Administration.

Black businesses underrepresented in D-FW

Continued from Page 1A

alone, the message is insufficient.

"It's a good first step," Haynes said. "If it's the last step, then you know it's almost tweaking a problem as opposed to actually addressing it."

The goal of the movement is to generate and maintain wealth among Black communities. But local leaders said the consumer-driven initiative falls short in addressing the root issues of the nation's economic inequities and how they play out in Dallas.

Tré Black, chief executive officer of On-Target Supplies & Logistics, a regional logistics firm in Dallas and son of prominent business leader Albert Black, said while there's plenty of reasons to celebrate the Buy Black movement in the U.S., there is more work that needs to be done to bring the Black community closer to economic equality and more prosperity. "I think it moves the needle, but just not enough," Black said.

Representation

Black people make up more than 15% of the area's population, but are disproportionately underrepresented as business owners in Dallas-Fort Worth.

Black-owned businesses make up just north of 3,000 of the roughly 123,000 employer businesses, or about 2% of ventures across Dallas-Fort Worth, according to data from a 2021 U.S. Census Bureau American Business Survey. It reflects the national average of 2% of American businesses being Black-owned.

More than half of Black-owned firms across the U.S. brought in less than \$100,000 in revenue in 2020. In the first few months of the pandemic, 41% of Black-owned shops closed their doors, compared to 17% of white businesses, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Less than a third of Latino-owned businesses and 13% of white-owned businesses brought in less than \$100,000 in revenue.

The following year, the rate of Black businesses earning less than \$100,000 climbed to nearly two-thirds, according to a Small Business Credit Survey from the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.

Matt Houston, a business professor at the University of North Texas and a board mem-



Bledsoe laughs with first-time customer Vaughn Carter as she stocks the shelves in the bakery. After nearly six years of filling orders at home, the sisters moved into a building on North Hampton Road in 2021.

ber of Dallas' Black Chamber of Commerce, said support from corporate institutions is important for Black-owned firms. The investment allows businesses to employ more people from their communities and expand wealth, he said.

Black-owned brands tend to remain small in size. Across the country, 96% of Black-owned firms employed fewer than 20 people in 2021, according to the Federal Reserve System's 2022 Small Business Credit Survey report.

FinishLine Tax Solutions is a local outlier. The Plano tax resolution firm started as a two-man shop more than six years ago and now employs more than 70 people, half of whom are people of color, co-founder Scott Curley said. It was crucial to Curley to offer opportunities for employment to his community to share financial stability.

Tré Black said a shortcoming of corporate Buy Black initiatives are their near-exclusive partnerships with single-digit employee start-ups. To make a larger impact, corporations ought to work with more mid-size companies, Black said.

"These initiatives are not creating robust workforces," Black said. "They're not creating employment pools that really are good for communities."

Welcoming wealth

Target committed to spending \$2 billion with Black-owned businesses by 2025. In comparison to 2020, the retail giant has increased the dollars spent with Black companies and suppliers by more than 50% and doubled the count of Black-owned brands to more than 100.

JCPenney overhauled its beauty department by adding more than 70 brands representing Black and Brown founders.

"By creating a fully ownable beauty experience, JCPenney can quickly adapt and respond to our customers' wants and needs," said Michelle Wlazlo, JCPenney's executive vice president and chief merchandising officer.

It's not entirely selfless on the sellers' part. Adding more retail options that appeal to Black shoppers, grants the retailers access to underserved markets eager to support brands that cater to their interests.

Advocates and skeptics alike question its efficacy in practice, arguing the messaging is mostly posturing, rather than creating tangible change in Black communities.

Black influence in retail is expected to continue growing alongside the group's buying power, which is projected to reach \$1.8 trillion by 2024, according to a 2022 Nielsen IQ report. In Texas, Black buying power led the nation with \$148 billion in 2020, followed by New York and Georgia, according to the University of Georgia's Selig Center for Economic Growth annual report.

Over a quarter of Black Americans say they purchase from Black-owned brands frequently, according to a Morning Consult survey. For Black people under 35, that share jumps to 40%.

Spending by Black shoppers has increased 5% annually over the last two decades, according to a McKinsey report. In 2019, it totaled around \$835 billion. Black spending outpaces the 3 percent growth rate

from white households, in part due to faster population growth among Black Americans.

But the group struggles to secure business from one of the largest customers in the world. The federal government spends billions on products from lightbulbs to runways, however minority-owned small businesses received less than a tenth of those contracts in 2020, according to the U.S. Small Business Administration. Black-owned firms made up less than 2%.

For Michael Carter, the founder of Black Wall Street USA, a group working to establish prosperous Black neighborhoods, increasing the rate of Black bonded contractors is a priority for creating greater economic equity in Texas.

In southern Dallas, Haynes said he and his parishioners talk about an economic blockade on their side of I-30. "When it comes to procurement opportunities from city, county and statewide contracts, we're often on the losing end."

Texas spent more than \$3.3 billion in purchases related to heavy construction, building construction, special trade and professional services in fiscal year 2021, of which an average of 11% went to state-certified historically underutilized businesses, according to the Texas Comptroller. The state said its goals are to increase its contracts with minority-owned firms to an average of 23% across sectors.

Black Wall Street has specific benchmarks for Texas. They hope to increase Black-owned businesses by 10% through 2025 and increase the

Black-owned businesses

Black-owned firms made up roughly 2% of employer businesses across the area in 2020. Hispanics owned more than 9,000 Dallas-Fort Worth businesses, but they are not shown here because federal statistics record ethnicity separately from race.

Number of firms by race of owner:

White	98,396
Asian	20,759
Black/African American	3,056
Native American/ Pacific Islander	9

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau Annual Business Survey

Staff Graphic

employment by Black businesses by a third.

When Carter started Black Wall Street, he began with a vision: A little girl walks outside her house and across the street she sees Black enterprise, she looks to the left, Black enterprise, to the right of her porch, Black enterprise.

He's working to create districts in the spirit of Greenwood, a district in Tulsa, Okla., that came to be known as America's Black Wall Street. Its success was destroyed more than a century ago in the Tulsa Race Massacre, in which hundreds of residents were killed and more than 1,250 homes were burned by a white mob. Estimates suggest property damage from the massacre totaled north of \$200 million in 2020 dollars.

West Wall Street at Friendship-West Baptist Church is one of countless homages to Greenwood's legacy of Black enterprise.

"Where you spend your dollars is power," Haynes said. "It's about building power, and power gives you the ability to effect change."

About four-in-10 Black adults say that having all businesses in Black neighborhoods owned by Black people would be an extremely or very effective strategy to overcoming inequality, according to new data from Pew Research. In DeSoto, more than two-thirds of ventures are Black-owned.

"DeSoto represents a modern day, middle class, wealthy, Black community that came about because of need and necessity," Carter said. "Our goal is to increase that vision of Greenwood in Texas and all over."

More than two-thirds of DeSoto's population is Black and the median household income in 2021 was nearly \$80,000, higher than both Dallas' and Texas' median incomes.

"DeSoto, of course, has great possibilities," Haynes said. "We know the money is there. But the question is, will

the opportunities be there? Will the investment be there? Will the access to capital be there?"

Capital needed

Trying to transition her bakery to a brick-and-mortar business, Keener said she struggled to secure funding from a variety of financial institutions and got nowhere with the Small Business Administration.

"We've gone through some very difficult times because we had to build everything up from ourselves," Keener said.

A lack of access to capital in southern Dallas and among Black business owners is repeatedly listed as a leading barrier to achieving economic equality.

Along with creating more financial opportunities for minority founders, Black said other changes that would help bridge the wealth gap include entrepreneurship education in public schools, increasing diversity on boards of directors and job skills training to improve growth trajectory for minority employees.

Institutions like the Dallas Black Chamber of Commerce have traditionally served as a meeting hub for Black business founders more than 800 members. The chamber is working to support smaller, digital and grassroots initiatives to point people toward Black businesses.

"It's providing healthy ecosystems for Black businesses across Dallas," Houston said.

Since opening its doors in DeSoto, 2 Sisters Sweet Creations can no longer run as a two-person shop. They're looking to hire staff to fill the growing number of orders. Work has caused them to miss out on a few West Wall Street events, but in December, the sisters were able to join in again.

"It was like a homecoming," Bledsoe said.

Twitter: @arcclitmartin