

Advocating Economic Development



LORD ARHINFUL

» The Berkshire Black Economic Council (BBEC) is a newly incorporated 501 c(3) organization furthering economic justice in Berkshire County. Our mission is to aid and advocate economic development with respect to education, neighborhood revitalization, arts and culture, business ownership, social programming, environmental justice, recruitment, and retention of business in connection with Berkshire Black entrepreneurs.

This past September, BBEC hosted our kick-off event, a Speed Networking Expo at the Stationery Factory sponsored by Pittsfield's Economic Revitalization Corporation and Mass Growth Capital Corporation. The Expo showcased Black businesses and connected them with the larger Berkshire business community. Board members led the community through five speed networking stations. At each stop, Black business owners talked about the roadblocks that they face, as well ways to improve the business environment. The dialogue included questions and potential partnerships. It also pushed participants out of their comfort zones and brought about community growth.

This was the first and largest gathering of Black businesses in recent history. While Lord Arhinful took professional headshots of the business owners, the Black entrepreneurs explored each other's tables, mingled, and strengthened community bonds.

At the Expo, mannequins flexed "Read or Else" hoodies. Spirited Shears, Grice's Beauty Supply, and Ines Hair displayed hair and beauty products. Attendees learned that wigs from Dolc'e Rose Beauty Supply bring confidence to cancer patients of all races. A diversity of industries included an internationally certified martial arts instructor, Thomas Brown, stationed next to Hayford Osafo's Integrity Tax Services &

BBEC President A.J. Enchill on advancing economic justice in the Berkshires

Bookkeeping and The Clinton Church Restoration. Ann's Beauty Supply and Kingsbread, a mother and son who share a North Street storefront, shared their story with guests. D Banks Landscapes and Property Care, Designs by Jennifer Owen, Paparazzi by Cassandra Pugh, and Drum to the Beat by Otha Day and other generous businesses donated prizes to the winners of the scavenger hunt activity. The aroma of Smokey Diva's sliders filled the space. In a room of mask-wearers, smiles peered out.

During the speed networking, Williams College brainstormed a campus partnership with the International Cultural Market in Pittsfield to bring Fufu, a West African staple, to campus. As a Ghanaian-American who grew up eating Fufu, to be in Dalton, a predominantly white community, talking about my family's culture—for the sake of economic development—made me realize that the Berkshire Black Economic Council was fulfilling a community need by bringing people together. It is always easier to do business with someone whom you have built a personal connection with. For example, after the formal networking was completed, participants vibed to performances from local artist Sample The Cat and Brownskin Band from Syracuse.

The BBEC has built a directory of over 65 Black businesses, and it

continues to grow. These Black businesses have families and spend—by choice and by necessity—at all kinds of Berkshire businesses. To create a truly inclusive economy, we will need to partner, to program, and to deliberately invest in Black businesses. To recruit and retain recent graduates, young families, and the visitors we work so hard to attract, we need to make a habit of spending at Black businesses for growth and sustainability.

Next, BBEC will host a webinar on the benefits of Minority Business Enterprise certification. This certification presents opportunities to access government grants and contracts, training workshops, pitch contests, and business partnerships. Next year, we will unveil our website redesign by Mungy Studios. BBEC secured \$50,000 in state funding to create a fellowship position. The fellow's primary responsibility will be grant writing and reporting. We are looking to the community for people who believe in our mission and want to use their resources to advance economic justice. If you are interested in applying for the fellowship or learning more about our organization, email us at contact@berkshirebec.org.

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