

DOWNTOWN  PARTNERSHIP  
OF BALTIMORE

Testimony of

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President of Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, Maryland

“National Small Business Week: Celebrating Our Main Street Champions”

Before the

U.S. House of Representatives Small Business Committee

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Good morning, Chair Velazquez, Vice-Chair Mfume, Ranking Member Luetkemeyer, and Members of the Committee. My name is Shelonda Stokes, and I'm honored to serve as President of Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, Maryland ("Downtown Partnership"). I also have the distinct pleasure of being a small business owner for more than 20 years and I serve as a member of the National Women's Business Council.

I thank the Committee for its leadership and commitment to advancing economic opportunities for all Americans through your work on behalf of small businesses. Your efforts and foresight over the last nineteen (19) months are making the difference to countless small businesses and their employees as we continue to navigate a health and economic crisis unlike anyone has seen in at least five (5) generations. But for you, many members of the Downtown Partnership and their employees would be former members - out of business and mere bystanders to the economic recovery we are creating.

## **ABOUT DOWNTOWN PARTNERSHIP OF BALTIMORE, MARYLAND**

Downtown Partnership of Baltimore oversees a 106-block business improvement district in the heart of Downtown Baltimore, providing services that make the area a clean, safe, and vibrant place for businesses, residents, and visitors. We are proud that many of our staff members are returning citizens, who we support with full benefits and a \$15/hour starting wage.

Industry-leading companies as well as a talented workforce choose Downtown Baltimore to live, work and play. We're proud of our recognition as a leading destination for medicine, education, and tourism. We also boast the fastest-growing residential Census Tract in Baltimore (Tract 401) and is home to thousands of entrepreneurs and independent businesses. Although small in geography, just one percent of the City's total area, we are its largest economic engine, with jobs and tax revenues that support residents across Baltimore neighborhoods.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, my team and I have been busy adding new tools to support our community. These include business impact surveys, a retail gift card program that gave restaurants and retail businesses cash up-front for rent and other business costs; grant funding to

artists; a free meal program; and virtual marketing efforts to promote small businesses.

During the shutdown, I served as co-chair to the mayor's "Small Business Recovery Task Force," which coordinated the City's economic response to the shutdown. We helped channel Federal relief funds, reduced business fees, and streamlined permitting for things like outdoor dining.

In my capacity as both President of Downtown Partnership and co-chair of the Business Recovery Task Force, I can attest to the need for Federal support that exists and the integral role your leadership has played. This Committee's efforts have sustained our community and thousands like it across the country.

Federal stimulus and assistance provided a substantial infusion of resources to state and local governments to help us turn the tide on the pandemic, address its economic fallout, and lay the foundation for a strong and equitable recovery. I see that being the case for the foreseeable future which is why I'm honored to sit before you today.

### **BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC GROWTH – THE DOWNTOWN PARTNERSHIP BOOST PROGRAM**

In a normal year, small businesses experience high rates of failure, particularly Black-owned firms. The pandemic has exacerbated those rates. Pre-COVID, Black-owned businesses had less than half of the investment at start-up than other types of firms. Forbes reported last year, despite emergency government relief funding, minority-owned businesses were losing more revenue and relying more on personal savings to stay afloat.

As we recognize Small Business Week amid this elongated pandemic, I would like to highlight a new program we created to help correct this imbalance. It's called BOOST, which stands for Black-Owned and Operated Storefront Tenancy. BOOST was created to fill main street storefronts that were left empty by the pandemic, accelerate the growth and success of minority businesses, and serve as a catalyst for making Downtown Baltimore reflective of the demographics of our City.

We launched the program in February and have selected five Black-owned retail businesses to participate in the first cohort. Each organization will receive up to \$50,000 in grant funding, below-market rents in beautiful storefronts, and robust training in the areas of technical, legal, accounting,

and marketing. We designed BOOST to have a multiplier effect on the health and wealth of our city and its citizens. This is not about simply "checking a box." BOOST is designed to overcome systemic failures that prevented minorities from building generational wealth by combining operating capital and business management tools.

BOOST is a perfect example of the benefit of public private partnerships. In addition to public support, sponsoring corporations include title sponsor, Fearless, a \$40 million minority-owned company headquartered in Downtown Baltimore, along with other giants like Baltimore Gas and Electric, M&T Bank, and the T.Rowe Price Foundation. Our program is simple and scalable. It can use private investment to leverage public funding or vice versa. When combined with other Federal and NGO programs, BOOST improves the return on investment because the businesses are more likely to succeed and grow over the long term. When they do, they typically hire from within the community and create generational wealth.

#### The BOOST Class of 2021 Winners are:

- The Black Genius Art Show – a multi-media creative space and fashion brand;
- Codetta Bake Shop - a café and bakery specializing in creative desserts;
- Elite Secrets Bridal - a bridal design house and boutique;
- NKVSKIN – a natural beauty company featuring both products and services; and
- Media Rhythm Institute - a hip-hop-inspired media space with a café and educational studio<sup>1</sup>.

#### **CONCLUSION**

It is an honor to appear before this Committee, and I extend my sincerest appreciation for your work. You are stewards for thousands of small

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<sup>1</sup> More information on our Winners is found in the Appendix to this written testimony.

businesses struggling to put themselves on the map. The resources that flow through this room are an economic lifeline.

As we recognize Small Business Week, Downtown Partnership doubles its resolve to grow small businesses and do so in a way that reflects the people we serve. Our communities are built on small, locally-owned businesses and, despite globalization, I believe this is where our economic future lies. When this Committee supports main streets, the investments stay in the community. Your work is saving jobs and small businesses. It is also establishing the foundation for our post-COVID economy. During this Small Business Week, I join you in recognizing and supporting American Small Businesses of every shape, size, and color.

## APPENDIX: BOOST 2021 BUSINESS BIOGRAPHIES

### **The BOOST Class of 2021 Winners**

#### **The Black Genius Art Show**

The Black Genius Art Show is multi-media creative space and fashion brand owned by Bryan Robinson.

Robinson is an educator and multifaceted media artist born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland. Under the motto “Create Everyday,” Robinson has created hundreds of original illustrations, a collection of garments featuring his unique characters, and has an assortment of animated projects in the pipeline. Robinson currently works with school-based programs, universities, youth groups, galleries, art initiatives and community-based organizations throughout Maryland. Through BOOST, Robinson will be opening a Gallery space called Genius Guice Studios in Downtown Baltimore, a fully functional art house with amenities. A one stop shop to see, wear, create and experience art. More details coming soon.

[Website](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Facebook](#)

#### **Codetta Bake Shop**

Codetta Bake Shop is a café and bakery specializing in creative dessert items owned by Sumayyah Bilal and Christopher Burgess.

As a bakery, Codetta specializes in traditional American-style desserts such as cheesecake, cupcakes, buttercream cakes, ice cream, and other delicious treats. Through BOOST, Codetta is expanding to a full-service eatery serving breakfast, lunch, and brunch. Their menu will consist of a combination of sweet and savory items made with high quality ingredients and expert cooking techniques, available for purchase by the local weekday workforce as well as weekend brunch clientele. Codetta seeks to become a touchstone of service, atmosphere, and high-quality food for the Downtown Baltimore community.

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## **Elite Secrets Bridal**

Elite Secrets Bridal is a bridal design house and boutique owned by LaTonya Turnage.

Elite Secrets Bridal was founded in 2015 with a goal to change the bridal industry. Elite Secrets storefront is currently located in Baltimore's esteemed Mount Vernon fashion boutique district. Founder LaTonya Turnage has been a driving force behind the company's philosophy of combining expertise and excellent service with style and grace. Elite Secrets leaves pretense to the side, focusing on bringing the best designers and emerging bridal gowns from all over the world to Baltimore Brides. Through BOOST, Elite secrets will open a second location that specializes in showcasing local bridal designers.

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## **NKVSKIN**

NKVSKIN is a natural beauty company featuring both products and services owned by Nikia Vaughan.

This direct-to-consumer natural beauty brand offers a complete line of facial skincare products to improve the skin's appearance and treat common concerns such as acne, hyperpigmentation, and eczema. The Company started in 2018 with a simple facial oil product and has since grown and matured both its product line and skincare educational program. Founder Nikia Vaughan is a recognized servant leader and community advocate with a natural skincare certification and an anticipated 2021 esthetician license. Through BOOST, NKVSKIN will open a retail location Downtown.

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## **Media Rhythm Institute**

Media Rhythm Institute is a hip-hop-inspired media space with a café and educational studio owned by Deverick Murray, Jimmie Thomas, and Tiffany Welch.

As an educational incubator, Media Rhythm Institute develops the next generation of media and entertainment industry professionals through STEM-based workforce training, academic achievement and industry

opportunities. Through BOOST, MRI plans to open a centralized creative entrepreneurial hub for emerging artists. Focusing on music, media, and wellness, this creative mixed-use space will highlight local art through a retail, production, and performance lens.

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