

Delaware business: Black entrepreneurs find a place to grow in Middletown

1:12 AM, Jan. 6, 2011



Entrepreneur Andrea Patterson owner of Xanadu Salon left her career in Organizational Management after having owned the salon for 3 years, decided to become a part of the team full-time. . / Special to The News Journal/SAQUAN STIMPSON



Business Owner of Designer Braids & Trade, Inc an Independent Contractor of Xanadu Salon Marion Council-George (left) doing loc maintenance for her client Isaac Coleman at Xanadu Salon. Marion shares her time between Xanadu Salon (Sun. Mon. Tues and Occasional Wed.) and the other days you can find her in Brooklyn at High Tech Hair Salon . / Special to The News Journal/SAQUAN STIMPSON



Bronx native Mark Harper owns the Java House cafe, one of several black-owned businesses that have sprung up in Middletown. / Special to The News Journal/SAQUAN STIMPSON



Former banker Andrew Johnson (left) opened Atmosphere barbershop as banking jobs disappeared. About 28 percent of Middletown residents are black. / Special to The News Journal/SAQUAN STIMPSON



Jannie Weeks prepares chitterlings in the kitchen of Soul to Soul Cafe on Main Street in Middletown. Owner Milan Reid opened the restaurant as the economy turned sour for his mortgage company. / Special to The News Journal/SAQUAN STIMPSON

MIDDLETOWN -- Nine years ago, Milan Reid chased the American dream from Philadelphia to Middletown, where his children could ride a yellow bus to school and could play in their own backyard.

In Philadelphia, many students ride SEPTA to school and the city's rowhouses afford few safe play areas.

Four years later, Andrew Johnson moved here to buy his first home. The University of Delaware graduate supplemented income from a job with Bank of America by cutting hair in his basement.

A year later, Andrea Patterson left a career in organizational management and moved from Newark to Middletown to help her sister open a salon.

Today, Reid owns Soul To Soul Café on East Main Street, Johnson owns Atmosphere Barber Shop on North Broad Street about a block away, and Patterson owns Xanadu Salon, about a block east on East Main.

Since 2000, the town nearly doubled in population, and blacks now account for about 28 percent of its residents, according to an American Community Survey estimate.

"I never thought about Middletown before, but here I am," Patterson said.

"Middletown has so much to offer to me," she added.

In recent years, a relatively low cost of living, a thriving real estate market and easy access to four state highways lured many new residents to this central New Castle County town. Middletown boasted just over 6,000 residents in 2000, about 1,000 of whom were black. The average price for a house was about \$190,000 at the time.

"Back then, when we moved down here it was more bang for your buck, basically," Reid said, "This town was just, small."

About 12,000 people live in Middletown; about 3,000 are black, and the average price of a home has grown to \$275,000.

An emerging black community encouraged black entrepreneurs to open businesses in Middletown to fill specific needs that people once traveled to more urban places -- like Wilmington -- to fill.

"Just knowing that Middletown was going to be booming, I wanted to get in before it was too late," Johnson said. His barbershop has been open since August. He said he used to travel to Wilmington and Newark to run errands.

"It's unlike a lot of other areas in Delaware, it's very cosmopolitan," said Clayton Hammond, director of the Delmarva Black Chamber of Commerce.

"Middletown is literally Philly, New Jersey, New York, D.C., Baltimore," Johnson said.

Questionable job stability in a tough economy also forced many local entrepreneurs to re-evaluate their careers, and eventually find alternatives.

Reid had always wanted to own a restaurant, but owned a mortgage loan company in Middletown before opening Soul to Soul Café in May.

"The mortgage industry started to take a dive, so I needed to get out of that and get into something else," he said.

After eight years with Bank of America, Johnson left to turn his longtime secondary job into a career.

"It was always my dream but I was kind of scared to leave corporate America to go and do it," Johnson said.

Eventually, layoffs became more frequent at Bank of America, and Johnson felt that it was only a matter of time before he would be out of work. He made plans to open Atmosphere before he could be laid off and thrust into financial straits.

Patterson once scoffed at cosmetology, but saw it as a viable alternative after finding herself on shaky footing in the corporate world.

"I felt that I was going in, having to fight for my job every day," she said. "I just wasn't comfortable with that. And trust me, the fact that I ended up here took a lot of prayer."

Years of school made her qualified for her work, but not entirely happy with it. "I thought I'd be a corporate executive by now, doing my thing," she said.

Middletown's black business owners make a clear distinction that although their shops are black-owned, they do not serve an exclusively black customer base.

Building relationships with clients in Middletown's business community is a key to success if entrepreneurs hope to grow with the town, Patterson said.

A multicultural mindset in business marketing is equally important. The town was about 75 percent white in 2000, and now whites make up about 62 percent of the population as more Asian and Hispanic families also settle in the area.

At Xanadu Salon, Patterson only allows jazz, rhythm and blues, and neo soul music to play in the background. She has a strict policy against playing rap music. "So that whenever someone walks in from other cultures, they're not like 'oh, my God,' " she said, laughing.

Blocks away at Atmosphere, Johnson adopted a similar policy. The shop even offers continental breakfasts on Saturday mornings, and customers are made aware of Atmosphere's golden rule at the bottom of a list of prices.

"Absolutely No Profanity," the board reads in large white letters.

"It's a professional men's barber shop -- because I've seen the opposite," Johnson said. "You don't want to feel uncomfortable, you don't want guys eyeing you. When a single mom comes in here with her kids, she can just drop them off."

Economic conditions, growth and demand for specialized goods and services appear to have combined at a pivotal time for black business owners in Middletown.

"I'm really excited, for the first time in 20 years I'm truly excited for the possibilities of black entrepreneurship in Delaware," Hammond said.

For the most part, Middletown's black business owners are also optimistic about what the future may hold.

"The types of black folks that are moving in are progressive. I think these are the people that want something out of life -- that want to excel," Patterson said. "It only gets better from here."

BY THE NUMBERS

2000: 6,000 residents, including 1,000 black residents. Average house price was \$190,000.

2010: 12,000 residents, 3,000 of them were black. Average house price was \$275,000



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