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Community Foundation
FOR SOUTH CENTRAL NEW YORK

COMMUNITY News

BIPOC Artisans Get a Boost in New Boutique

TENISHA RIVERS-HILL started making one-of-a-kind floral wreaths to keep her spirits up during the pandemic. Before long, she was selling her creations online, through an Etsy shop called All About Floral Wreaths & Bows.

"I hadn't intended to sell them locally," said Rivers-Hill. She knew she faced competition from a slew of other wreath-makers in greater Binghamton, where she lives. But Rivers-Hill also knew that her wreaths stood out from the crowd. "I make them three-dimensional, so they give the feeling of a garden," she said. "I take pride in the placement of the materials."

So, eventually, Rivers-Hill decided to take the leap into brick-and-mortar entrepreneurship. Starting this fall, customers can buy her wreaths at the Shoppes on Clinton, a multi-vendor boutique on Binghamton's Clinton Street, founded as a small business accelerator by the Koffman Southern Tier Incubator.

The Community Foundation has supported the Shoppes on Clinton with two grants, one for $9,000 and the other for $19,800.

The Shoppes on Clinton is a collaboration between the Koffman Incubator and Carolee Constable, who owns 85 Clinton Street—site of the boutique—plus two adjoining buildings. They will develop the new store together, with the goal of fostering entrepreneurship among local people of color. They hope to hold a grand opening in mid- to late September.

Clinton Street is a good location for the shop because it's the sort of commercial artery that is going through a rebirth in the U.S., said Ebony Hattoh, associate director, equity and justice at the Koffman Incubator. "Revitalization on Main Streets is a big thing, from the White House on down," she explained. Downtown Binghamton has seen a good deal of new development, and Johnson City and Endicott are going through similar transformations. "The future will be the ancillary streets, and Clinton Street would be one of those."

Constable used to run a restaurant on Clinton Street, and she hopes to further enliven the area with businesses in her other two buildings, Hattoh said. Plus, Clinton Street's many antique stores make it a magnet for shoppers from across south-central New York. "In the summertime it's a high traffic area, with all the benefits that go along with that," she said.

Like Rivers-Hill, other artisans going into the boutique were already selling products

online or at events such as craft fairs. "One person makes candles that are shaped like food," said Hattoh. "One person has a skin care line." One vendor makes t-shirts that highlight Black historical figures and messages of empowerment, while another makes shirts with humorous, cannabis-centered imprints.

Each merchant will rent a small space in the shop from Constable, who will serve as the wraparound business owner. She will hire a shopkeeper to handle sales, and she will manage other day-to-day details.

Creators who join the program don't just get spots in the boutique. They also get a 12-week course in entrepreneurship, taught by Hattoh, focused on the nuts and bolts of running a storefront business. For example, Hattoh has advised them against complicating one's inventory with too large an assortment. "What can you get on the shelves to sell that you can replicate quickly and repeat that sale over and over again?" she asked.

Each participant is developing a business plan and a pitch deck, positioning them to seek financing from banks in the future. The course also covers marketing.

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Group Delivers Food, Fun and Radiance

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FOR SOME TIME, Sana Wakefield had been feeling that she needed to give something of herself, to help shine a light on places that needed brightening. But after spending time out and about, talking with all sorts of people, she started to think about her efforts in a new way.

"When you do something just out of charity, are you building community?" she asked. "Are you really making an impact on that person, or are you just giving them something?"

Wakefield chose a more complex kind of philanthropy, the kind that aims to produce lasting change. In 2023, she—along with Samira Wakefield and N'Daisha Williams—created the GloryShines Foundation, a nonprofit devoted to empowering lives. With a special focus on unhoused families in Greater Binghamton, GloryShines does a lot of giving, but always with an eye toward building.

GloryShines has received two grants from the Community Foundation. One, for $5,000, has helped it hold occasional food delivery events, providing hot meals to unhoused people who are staying in hotels or motels.

Families end up in those accommodations because they don't have access to affordable housing, and the community lacks homeless shelters for parents with children. Without kitchens in their lodgings, families can't prepare their own meals. "And they're usually in an isolated area, where the nearest place to eat might be a McDonald's," said Wakefield, chief executive officer (CEO) at GloryShines. "No grocery stores, no playgrounds for the kids."

One of GloryShines' most recent delivery events took place last June, in conjunction with Father's Day and Binghamton's Puerto Rican Day parade. A local restaurant catered a Puerto Rican meal for 150 families.

Different restaurants provide meals for the various themed events, and there's always an emphasis on quality. "Any time we do the food, it's important that it be something we would want, or that we would want to have with our families," Wakefield said. "Let's make it special. Let's let glory shine."

The Community Foundation also provided $15,000 to support activities for unhoused women and their children. "We're taking the ladies to get their nails done," Wakefield said. The group is assembling backpacks with school supplies for the kids. And from time to time, they hold big community-building events.

For instance, GloryShines took a group of families to Midway Lanes in Vestal for a free day of fun. "Everyone bowled and they had free laser tag, bumper cars and pizza," Wakefield said. The event also doubled as a birthday party for a child in the group.

This summer, GloryShines hosted "Grills on Wheels" for families staying at the Knight's Inn in Endwell. "We grilled shrimp kebabs, chicken kebabs, steak, hot dogs, burgers, you name it," Wakefield said. Families decorated shirts with puffy fabric paint, kids had their faces painted and got toys to take home, and an ice cream truck dispensed free treats. "It was so emotional," Wakefield said. "Kids were saying it was the best day of their lives."

The organization's board—Wakefield, Wakefield and Williams—plus a couple of other major supporters do much of the work it takes to run GloryShines. But they also get a lot of hands-on help from two local groups, We Outside 607 and I.C.A.N. (Indigenous Community and Neighbors). "These are community-based volunteer groups that involve themselves in giving community support," Wakefield said.

Since the establishments that take in unhoused families are often far from those families' friends and relatives, community-building activities and celebrations are especially important. Enjoyable meals and activities can also encourage unhoused people to believe that better days are coming.

"I want them to feel that they're not forgotten," Wakefield said. "People care about them, and they can have the great things in life." When you know that you're worthy of not just things you need, but of things you desire, that promotes good mental health and well-being," she said. "That's what GloryShines is really about, inspiring people and changing circumstances to reflect that within themselves."

"Before, I had no game plan," said Rivers-Hill. "I knew I had to save receipts and do my bookkeeping. Now we're learning how to find the ideal customers."

For example, in a customer discovery exercise, each entrepreneur interviewed 20 people to gain insights about how to bring their products to market. One thing Rivers-Hill learned in her interviews is that men generally don't care about décor. "But they notice when there is none," she said.

The Koffman Incubator is using much of the Community Foundation's support to renovate and develop 85 Clinton Street and install a security system and signage. The money will also help the Koffman Incubator support the merchants with a year of marketing and advertising, Hattoh said. "And before we get to the point where we're hands-off, after six months, they will sit down with a business adviser twice to do a self-assessment, to see if they're on the right track."

Vendors will most likely understand their chances for success before they get into the shop, Hattoh added. "But we provide this as an extra support."

Rivers-Hill had to overcome a lot of uncertainty before committing to the Shoppes on Clinton. "I tried to think of ways to make it not work," she said. "Now, I've decided to think of ways to make it work." Support from the Koffman Incubator helped her gain the courage to move forward, she said.

And she's already making plans for the long term. "I want to stay at the shop and expand," she said. "I love my full time job. But after I retire, in the next ten to 12 years, I'd like to do this full time."

Coalition Tackles Homelessness

IF YOU DON'T have secure housing, the long distances between municipalities in rural New York make it hard to find assistance. For instance, consider the Village of Afton, at the southern end of Chenango County.

"We are a good half-hour ride from Norwich, the county seat, where the Department of Social Services and all those helpful organizations exist," said Judy Hinman, a local business owner and secretary of the Greater Afton Area Chamber of Commerce. "Let's say somebody just split up with their husband and can't afford their house anymore. They know they're becoming homeless and they don't have a job. They have a hard time getting to Norwich to seek help."

4TownsForward, a coalition of four communities in the Interstate-88 corridor, recently started an initiative to address the problem of rural homelessness. The Community Foundation has supported this effort with a grant of $1,250.

Chamber of Commerce leaders, local government officials and school superintendents from Afton, Bainbridge, Sidney and Unadilla created 4TownsForward several years ago. Their aim was to team up on efforts to promote economic growth and tourism.

They started small, sharing information on the membership of all four chambers and coordinating their holiday parades to avoid overlap. In 2023, the group took on a more ambitious project, launching the Southern Tier Music Fest at the Sidney Municipal Airport. After a big success, the group held the second annual festival in 2024.

4TownsForward started to focus on homelessness in 2023, forming a committee to tackle that issue and using the Community Foundation's grant to host a meeting in July. Called the Rural Homelessness and Poverty Summit, the meeting brought together leaders from the four communities, along with people from local churches and from nonprofits such as United Way, Catholic Charities and Opportunities for Delaware. "Everyone shared what their roles were and what they knew to be the situation, and how rural homelessness is different from city homelessness," Hinman said.

Since then, the committee has continued the discussion in several more meetings. "We know that homelessness is a huge issue. It's very confusing, because you have mental health components, as well as drug and alcohol abuse," said Himan. "There's such a variety of things to discuss and problems to work on."

4TownsForward's committee on homelessness has decided to work toward three major goals:

Prevention: This effort involves seeking ways to keep people from becoming homeless in the first place.

Intervention: "We're looking to understand what immediate relief we have available for people who are dealing with homelessness, and what we can do to assure that they find the help they need," Himan said.

One intervention the group hopes to explore would give unhoused people safe refuge from severe winter weather. "There is literally not a warming station between Oneonta and Binghamton," Hinman said. "We're looking at putting one in Afton at the Town Hall Building. And I know Sidney is working on figuring out where they can put one."

Communication: 4TownsForward is promoting collaboration among organizations that address different aspects of homelessness and poverty. It will also inform those at risk of homelessness about where to find help. For example, the person operating the local 211 service volunteered to put together a flyer with housing resources for distribution throughout the community.

In addition, the group will try to help the community at large learn more about the issue. "A big problem when you have this situation of homelessness is that everybody says, 'Yeah, we should do something, but not next door to me,'" Hinman said. "We feel that we need to educate people."

Besides creating solutions for individuals who need help, Hinman said she hopes this initiative will start to restore a sense of empathy in the region. She knows that unhoused people who also struggle with addiction or mental health can often strike community members as unpleasant or scary—a blight that residents expect public officials to clear away.

> *"Trying to keep it human is a big part of what we're doing."*
>
> –Judy Hinman, local business owner and secretary of the Greater Afton Area Chamber of Commerce

"I try to go to community meetings and remind people that that addict is probably someone's brother or father," Hinman says. "Trying to keep it human is a big part of what we're doing."

Foundation Explores Impact Investing Opportunities

AT RECENT BOARD and committee meetings, we've been introduced to the concept of "impact investing," an approach in community philanthropy that goes beyond our more traditional granting.

Repeatedly over the past year, our nonprofit partners have told us about the challenges they face accessing capital while they wait for reimbursement from the state and federal governments. Community foundations across the United States have been exploring vehicles such as bridge loans, loan guarantees, equity investing and community development projects to diversify their menu of community assistance opportunities, which support the growth and capacity of service providers in the region.

To that end, we recently put out a survey to assess the need for these types of investments. More than 40 nonprofits responded, and we are currently analyzing the data so that the Impact Investment subcommittee of the Board can continue the conversation and recommend a course of action.

If you would like to learn more about impact investing, contact Executive Director Tina Barber for more information, tbarber@donorswhocare.org.

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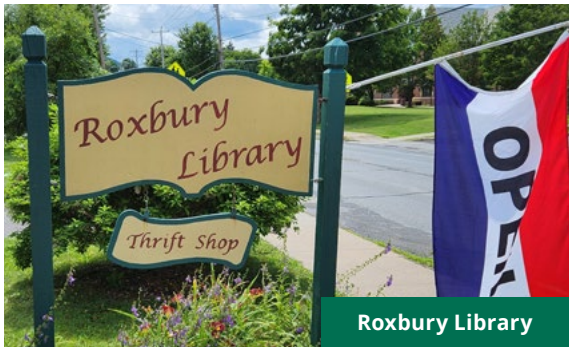

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