Mentorship program connects alumni with businesses affected by pandemic

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Since April, the Freeman School's Albert Lepage Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation has been connecting alumni volunteers with small businesses facing the challenges of COVID-19.

The Lepage Mentorship Program matches entrepreneurs and small business owners with Tulane alumni experts able to help them change their strategies or re-imagine their services in response to the pandemic. Over the last six months, 30 Tulane and Freeman School alumni have donated their time to assist more than 60 companies adversely impacted by COVID-19, sharing their knowledge and experience in the areas of strategic growth, operations, finance, marketing, technology and innovation.

When Tulane alumni Brian Egwele (BSM ’01), Allison Piper (MBA ’00) and Erik Frank were asked to participate in the program, they embraced the opportunity. As experienced business professionals, they had each provided consultation and strategic planning services to clients for over a decade. Through the Lepage Mentorship Program, they found they could offer more than just advice. They could convey hope.

“As a professional business coach, I work with entrepreneurs to grow their businesses every day,” says Frank, director of sales and innovation with Refreshment Solutions, the largest full-service vending, coffee and micro-market provider in Louisiana. “And the work that I have done with the companies through the Lepage Center has been some of the most rewarding. I leave every session feeling energized that mentees leave the conversation with actionable steps and renewed optimism.”

Each participant receives a one-on-one mentoring session to assess their immediate priorities. From there, they work to develop a plan for moving forward.

“In just a one-hour call, the entrepreneurs share their current situation and problems, select a specific problem to address, and we develop a specific plan with action items for next steps," says Piper, founder and CEO of Blue Catalyst Group in Houston. “This hands-on real-time assistance program has been an incredibly valuable service to the greater New Orleans entrepreneurship ecosystem.”

DeeLightful Cupcakes and Claiborne Avenue Productions are two of the businesses participating in the program.

DeeLightful Cupcakes



Dwynesha Lavigne

Dwynesha “Dee” Lavigne is the founder and owner of DeeLightful Cupcakes, a gourmet cupcake and confectionary treats bakery. Due to the pandemic, Lavigne found herself without a baking facility or connection to her customers. After learning about the Lepage Mentorship Program thought JEDCO, one of the Lepage Center's community partners, she reached out for help with how to shift gears quickly.

“Working with the Lepage Center and being paired with a knowledgeable mentor has been a great tool in transforming my business and taking it to the next level,” says Lavigne.

Freeman School alumnus David Heikkinen (MBA ’98) serves as Lavigne’s mentor. They’ve been working together to build the company’s online presence and expand its product offerings. Heikkinen is the founding partner and CEO of Heikkinen Energy Advisors.

Claiborne Avenue Productions



Al Moten

Nothing speaks more to the essence of New Orleans than its culture, and Al Moten has captured a lot of it through his film company Claiborne Avenue Productions. As COVID-19 ravaged the country, the film industry began to shutter and Moten needed to determine how he could re-employ his services.

“After consulting with my mentors, Erik Frank and Brian Egwele, my small business (Film/TV Production) has taken a turn for the better in the midst of the pandemic," says Moten. “They gave me ideas and suggestions that have benefited me greatly, and they both have been a blessing to the growth of my business.”

The Lepage Mentorship Program is still available to entrepreneurs or small businesses that are in need of assistance. Past participants are also invited to continue to take advantage of the program’s services. Applicants can submit a request to the **Lepage Center Mentor Request Form** or email Rosalind Butler at **rbutler4@tulane.edu**.