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Lakeysha Hallmon gives
entrepreneurs a big lesson
in economic empowerment

BY JENNIFER OGUNSOLA



Last November, Lakeysha “Dr. Key” Hallmon opened her first retail space, the Village Retail at PCM, which offers a curated collection of products from 25 Black-owned brands, including apparel, art, home goods, and beauty and wellness products.

She’s magical. It’s the kind of magic that has both the White House and a company like Target eager to partner with her, in their efforts to revitalize the Black community and ensure the success of Black entrepreneurs.

Lakeysha Hallmon, Ed.D., affectionately nicknamed Dr. Key, landed in Atlanta, the city often referred to as the Black Mecca, 11 years ago—filled with hopes that had been too big for Batesville, the Mississippi town where she grew up. “Being from a small town, you don’t get to see a lot of the things that you dream, or you don’t get to experience the stuff you see on television,” she says, walking into her newly opened 1,700-square-foot retail store. It’s located in bustling Ponce City Market, a popular 2.1 million-square-foot mixed-use development that’s home to big retailers, a fitness facility, local boutiques and restaurants such as Aisha “Pinky” Cole’s new Bar Vegan.

“I always knew there was something more,” Hallmon remembers. “Even if I didn’t have an opportunity to experience it firsthand, I knew that there was life beyond the cotton fields and the gravel roads. What had been etched in me forever, before I could even birth the Village Market, was that the village is the catalyst to get anything done.”

Hallmon’s sheer tenacity—which she cultivated during 15 years as an educator, starting as a high school English teacher and ending as a research specialist for the Georgia Department of Education—has transformed not only her life but those of hundreds of Black entrepreneurs she’s advocated for, partnered with and mentored. In 2016 the 34-year-old social entrepreneur launched the Village Market, a company that works to create opportunities for Black entrepreneurs through providing business development, facilitating connections to investors and

hosting a quarterly marketplace, where thousands of people shop from the featured businesses.

The marketplace became a huge hit, garnering attention from celebrities, politicians and major corporations. (In partnership with Target, ESSENCE tapped Hallmon in 2019 to curate the first-ever ESSENCE + New Voices Entrepreneurship Summit and Target Holiday Market.) The Black business owners who have participated in the marketplace generated an average of \$3,000 to \$6,000 in sales within five hours. “We’ve participated in several Village Market pop-ups, and each time we sold out of our products,” says Jermail Shelton, co-owner of Just Add Honey Tea Company with his wife, founder and CEO Brandi Shelton. “When we needed a mentor to assist us in scaling our business, there was someone inside the Village Market. We needed help finding investors—there was someone inside

the Village Market. Dr. Key has given us access to an amazing ecosystem.”

It hasn’t all been smooth sailing for the Village Market, however. While Hallmon was planning the first marketplace of 2020, the pandemic hit and everything was canceled. With the fate of so many businesses in her hands, she had to think quickly.

A Federal Reserve Bank of New York release cited a study by a University of California economist, which estimated a 41 percent decrease in the number of Black business owners across the country in April 2020, compared to a 17 percent decrease of white business owners, due to the pandemic. But even as this information was being released, Hallmon was busy creating the “Buy BLK in August” campaign, which helped

Black businesses sell \$1.8 million in goods—and that’s on top of the \$2.7 million generated in part by the Village Market’s seasonal marketplace.

Hallmon is now expanding her vision beyond her southern roots. White House senior advisor for public engagement Trey Baker asked the entrepreneur to facilitate a national listening session for Black businesses. “I selected 13 businesses across the country that represented different aspects of Black entrepreneurship, and we spoke directly to Ambassador Susan Rice and public engagement director Cedric Richmond,” Hallmon says. “When policies are being created for Black businesses on the national stage, I want them to see the plethora of Black businesses they should have in mind.”



“What I wanted to create were strong, viable Black businesses,” says Hallmon. She adds proudly, “Four and a half years later, we’ve circulated \$4.5 million in the city of Atlanta to Black entrepreneurs.”



The Culturist Union’s Ashley Elm

Steel Magnolias

Black women entrepreneurs are on the rise in the South

In 1995, André 3000 stood on the stage at the Source Awards and declared, “The South got something to say.” Today, Black women business owners in the South are saying it clearly. Despite persistent obstacles—being underfunded and shut out of access to capital, lacking resources, and facing racial and gender discrimination—they are fiercely shattering glass ceilings and forging their way to extraordinary success.

Atlanta is home for many of these women. By now you’ve heard of the force that is Aisha “Pinky” Cole, founder of the Pinky Cole Foundation and the vegan empire Slutty Vegan and Bar Vegan. Meanwhile, Jewel Burks Solomon left Google, started a company and sold it to Amazon. Now the managing partner at Collab Capital, she is back at Google—as the head of Google for Startups in the U.S. Ensuring that capital isn’t a barrier to other entrepreneurs, Solomon recently led the team responsible for the Google for Startups Black Founders Fund and awarded 76 Black entrepreneurs cash awards up to \$100,000.

Many of the recipients were Black women entrepreneurs in the South—like Courtney Anderson with Vibe Ride, Jasmine Crowe with Goodr and Tiffani Gatlin with Latched & Hooked Beauty. Ashley Elm noticed that Black creators didn’t have a place to gather in Savannah, so she will fix that by opening a coffee shop for them this summer. And over in New Orleans, the Crayon Case mogul Raynell “Supa Scent” Steward is making huge waves with her brand. —J.O.