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Interview: Talking Entrepreneurship with Rep. Nikema Williams



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On April 22, 2024, the Alliance for Entrepreneurial Equity hosted a roundtable in Atlanta to discuss expanding entrepreneurship with a group of policymakers, small business owners, and entrepreneurship advocates. Our goal was to explore barriers holding back entrepreneurs from starting and growing businesses, initiatives in Atlanta that were

helping entrepreneurs, and where local and federal governments can better help.

We were lucky to be joined by Rep. Nikema Williams who represents Atlanta in Congress and sat down with her afterward to get her take on why entrepreneurship is a priority for her and what she's up to in Congress. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Alliance for Entrepreneurial Equity:

Thank you so much, Congresswoman, for being with us today. You shared a lot about your priorities around closing the racial wealth gap and bringing more equity and opportunity into the city. Can you share a little bit more about your legislative priorities?

Rep. Nikema Williams:

I moved to Atlanta from Alabama because Atlanta was the place where you could go and start a business, grow, prosper, and create wealth—wealth that, that growing up in Alabama, I didn't see in the Black community. I got here, and people were thriving. I was able to get to know people who moved here just to start a business, who moved here for the opportunities that Atlanta represented for Black people.

But in my first year in Congress, I started reading headlines which said Atlanta has the largest racial wealth gap in the country. I wondered: how could Atlanta have the worse indicators for economic mobility?

I knew that I had an obligation to do something about this. So, I fought as a freshman member to get on the House Financial Services Committee—because if you control the money and have jurisdiction over the banking system, the credit industry, and the housing industry, that can literally change lives and create different economic outcomes for generations. I

made it my goal and my mission to close the racial wealth gap—and not just in Atlanta, but across the country.

I grew up in poverty. I grew up in a home with no indoor plumbing and no running water. So, all of this is personal to me. And I look at other people that I'm serving here in this district, and what can I do to help them. I meet with small business owners and entrepreneurs all the time. I do a lot of work with the Russell Innovation Center for Entrepreneurs and appreciate how they are helping people put their dreams and their hopes onto paper and grow those into actual businesses.

But we've got to do more than that. People need access to capital. And I'm on the committee that can make that happen. People need to be able to not just start a business, but to grow it and sustain it. I met with small business owners last weekend, and asked: What are you feeling? What are you hearing? What is translating from the work that we're doing in Congress to what you actually need? Because the only way to know that is to talk to the people who are living this experience every day.

“People need to be able to not just start a business, but to grow it and sustain it.” -Rep. Nikema Williams

We heard from someone today who maxed out her credit cards just so she could get initial access to capital. I heard from people last week who were saying they started their business, but then how do they keep up? Their dream came true, but then people wanted their product. How can they keep up?

That's why this year in Congress I've introduced the Minority Entrepreneurship Grant Act, which will be housed at HBCUs and Minority Serving Institutions across the country. People will be able to have access to grant funding at a minimum of \$250,000 so that they can have an influx of capital to grow and scale their businesses. And this is bipartisan legislation. You'll hear people tell you that it's not possible to do bipartisan work in this day and age, especially as a member who represents the deep blue district right here in Atlanta. But I'm in a periwinkle state, and I understand that everybody sees green.

I did a congressional exchange program with Congressman William Timmons (R-SC), and he spent a day in my district. We sat down and had lunch at a local small business, Mary Mac's Tea Room. We, along with the Urban League of Greater Atlanta, brought in entrepreneurs that were going through a program that I had helped fund through a community project grant my first year in Congress. Then I went and spent the next day in his district in South Carolina. And, as it turns out, the needs are the same—we're looking for those same opportunities for our constituents. People like to think that this is just a Black issue, or a rural issue, or an urban issue, or a blue state issue, or a red state issue. But these are issues that Americans are facing.

As a leader in this country, and as a member of the House Financial Services Committee, I understand my charge and my obligation is to make sure that I am introducing and passing policies that actually impact our ability to not just access to capital but grow and scale businesses—because small businesses continue to be the backbone of our economy.

“People like to think that this is just a Black issue, or a rural issue, or an urban issue, or a blue state issue, or a red state issue. But these are issues that Americans are facing.” -Rep. Nikema Williams

Alliance for Entrepreneurial Equity:

I want to ask you about Atlanta because, as you said, it has such a thriving community and diverse community of business owners. But there's also a massive racial wealth gap here. So, what really sets Atlanta apart? Why should business owners be coming to Atlanta to start pursuing their dream?

Rep. Nikema Williams:

Well, first, every member of Congress thinks that they represent the best district in the country, but I actually do. And this thriving ecosystem for entrepreneurs makes Atlanta great. Atlanta continues to influence everything.

In January, I was able to bring House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries down to Atlanta. And when you bring the leader of your caucus in, you want to make sure that you're highlighting big things that you're proud of in the district. One of our stops was to the Russell Innovation Center for Entrepreneurs so he could understand what we're doing right here in Atlanta. After that tour, Congressman Jeffries said, "we need this in other places." The Russell Center gives us a way to invest in small businesses on a number of levels. And they're partnering with Georgia Tech, with the AU Center, and across the city to make sure that entrepreneurs can come there, find a home, and have access to the technical assistance they need. So that they can access the things that are coming down from the Department of Commerce and all of these opportunities that the Biden-Harris Administration has made possible over the last three years.

Atlanta also has a mayor who's invested in this. So, we have the city leadership and are making sure that we can connect dots on multiple

levels. We have Invest Atlanta and we have my office and my team who works with Invest Atlanta and the mayor's office to make sure we're not working in silos. And that makes a huge difference.

Fifty years ago, Maynard Jackson made sure that he was intentional about how we built out the contracts at the Atlanta airport. And that has built Black generational wealth. We still have work to do, but there are so many people who are still at our airport—the world's busiest and most efficient—who continue to grow and thrive. There are opportunities for more entrepreneurs to come and grow their businesses in the airport. And that would not have been possible without the leadership and the forward-thinking of Mayor Maynard Jackson when he came into office 50 years ago this year.

So, as I continue to do this, we have created the opportunities on paper. And now we have to make sure that people know that they exist and that access to capital is there so that they can continue to grow and scale those businesses.

Alliance for Entrepreneurial Equity:

You mentioned that the Russell Center partners with universities, and the work that you're doing in Congress will also strengthen HBCUs. Your district has the highest number of HBCUs, and you are a third generation HBCU grad. Tell me about the role of HBCUs and how they're part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Rep. Nikema Williams:

I think back to my college days, and there's a hustle man on every campus. There is somebody who has the shirts ready for everything. There's the person in the dorm who, if you need to get your hair braided really quick, is there to make it happen. These are entrepreneurs. These are people with a business sense ready to find a way to make a way. We

even had someone on my floor, if you didn't have a microwave, she would charge you to come and use her microwave to heat up your food.

Everybody was making sure that they were forward thinking and creating wealth for themselves when we were just broke college students. We look at people who have that entrepreneurship spirit on campus and what they're doing now. My friend, Stacy Lee, is the person who literally charged people to use her microwave. After college, she moved to Atlanta and started a laundromat business and a laundry drop off service for businesses in Atlanta. Things that people are doing on campuses turn into this business-minded sense, this entrepreneurship spirit. That translates into our communities and serves the Atlanta area. A lot of that talent stays in the city because a lot of people come here and fall in love and don't leave. And so, we need to be able to make sure that there is access to opportunity.

Alliance for Entrepreneurial Equity:

That's fantastic. Thank you so much, Congresswoman, for spending time with us.

Rep. Nikema Williams:

Thank you so much.