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Interviews with Entrepreneurs: Episode 1 (Second Chances)

Imani Augustus, Director of the Alliance for Entrepreneurial Equity

In our first episode of Interviews with Entrepreneurs, we chat with Ché René Houston and Marc Parham from Atlanta, GA. They discuss the importance of second chances in business, different resources to tap into, and more.

Ché René Houston, [Ché René Macarons and More](#)

Marc Parham, [Urban League of Greater Atlanta](#)

Imani Augustus, Third Way

Transcription

Imani Augustus

Okay, well, thanks so much for being on with us. We are joined by Marc Parham, who is the Director of the Entrepreneurship Center for [the Urban League of Greater Atlanta] and we also are joined by

Ché Houston who is based in Atlanta as well, and is the CEO and founder of Ché René Macarons. So thanks so much for being on with us guys.

I want to dive right into the conversation and hear a little bit from you, Ché. Can you tell us a little bit about your business? What inspired you to get started and tell us about your entrepreneurial journey up to this point?

Ché René

Okay, so my inspiration for starting my business is the fact that I've been baking, decorating cakes and doing desserts for over 27 years. And I was doing that on the side, just as you know, a side hustle. But I always knew that I wanted to have my own business. And so I looked at everything that I knew how to do -the wedding cakes, dessert tables, everything. And I was just like, I want to narrow this down. And so after learning how to bake the macaron, I fell in love with it, you know, and I just was like, okay, but what's gonna separate me from the rest. And so what separated me from the rest was the fact that I didn't have just any French macarons mine are French macarons with southern finesse. And the southern finesse is the fact that I make flavors like peach cobbler, banana pudding. I mean, these are homemade southern desserts. And so you're going to find that type of flavor in each and every one of Ché René macarons.

And as far as my entrepreneurial journey at this point, it has been a journey. And I'm gonna tell you, like I said, I didn't know how to run a legit business. So I tapped into the Urban League of Atlanta. And they pretty much helped teach me how to be a legit business owner, how to step into being a CEO. And so although there's been many challenges, just learning how to do all of the back end work, and staying on top of the Marketing, the branding, getting myself in circles, getting myself in rooms. It's been a challenge. But the thing is, is I pressed on, I've continued to do it. And as of today, we are internationally known, we ship all over the US. And we are actually in our process of hiring people who are transitioning back into society after a life of addiction and home insecurity-Just as myself. We're all about second chances. And we're all about bringing Paris to your door.

Imani Augustus

That's great. Thank you so much. Marc, I want to bring you in. And Ché mentioned when she was thinking about starting her business and feeling a loss at where to begin, she turned to the Urban League, which has been on the ground and has entrepreneurship centers all over the country who are working with these entrepreneurs on their business, teaching them and training them up and what it

looks like to professionalize their business. Can you talk about what the Urban League in Atlanta does to this extent?

Marc Parham

Yeah, the Urban League of Greater Atlanta's entrepreneurship program is one of 13 nationally

known entrepreneurship centers throughout the United States. What our mission is, is to really help people cultivate their ideas. You know, they want to go into business for themselves and they don't know how. So we have different tracks where they can come in and learn. We have a track a startup track, when they come in and learn how to evaluate that idea to see if it's really going to work for them and generate money. It is not just something that they feel good about doing. We really want to get people to generate businesses that generate revenue. Then we have a growth track where people that have gone out there and they have tried it and they like what they're doing, and they would like to grow their business so we help them get funding. We have a lot of relationships with funders and different people that can help them. I'm sorry, I'm just gonna adjust my coat here, to help them get funding, get contract. And then we just our program is really strong. We provide one-on-one coaching. We have coaches in Marketing. We have coaches in taxes. We have coaches in, you know, financial. We have coaches in business plan. So we try to match them up with a coach to help them achieve their dreams of starting a business.

Imani Augustus

That's fantastic. And you mentioned one of the, I think the major things for any entrepreneur when it comes to starting and growing their business, which is helping them access capital. Can you talk about, you know, especially for minority entrepreneurs, how big of an issue that is?

Marc Parham

It's a very large issue, because a lot of our minority business owners and stuff, don't have the credit and financial background to go to a major bank. All right. So there are a lot of organizations that are there called CDFIs, community development, investment vehicles, that financial institutions that lend money on not such a strict level as a bank, they allow you to collateralize your car, you know, they're not looking at your credit score, they're looking at your credit history, they're looking at did you write a business plan? Do you have financials? Do you have projections? They're looking at more your character, as well as how well is your plan, thought out. All these CDFIs require a business plan. They require financials, but they are more lenient. So we have a tendency to put our first people into those agencies. And then when they're ready, we teach them how to go to a big bank, Wells Fargo, and a Wells Fargo and a lot of the big banks now have programs where they're working with small businesses that may not have the credit background to go through the big loans. But it may start I have organization bank, and they started \$500. You know, so there are a lot of people that are coming to help the community get funding.

Imani Augustus

Yeah. And Ché, was that your experience that you kind of had to have this entire background information to approach a bank? And can you tell us did you start off with a CDFI? Or a traditional bank? And loans? Or what did that financing process look like for you?

Ché René

Okay, well, in my situation, and I'm sure, you know, I'm not unique to anyone out there. But as far as my situation, I here I have a business and it's growing. I have from my I'm three years in, and my first year, I finished out at almost \$3,000. Coming into the third year, and I'm at \$31,000, right? However, because of my history of you know, having challenges, I messed up my credit, I messed up my credit, my credibility. And so therefore, I had to start out rebuilding my personal credit. And in that rebuilding my personal credit, without any guidance, I filed bankruptcy. So this bankruptcy is on my credit. Although there's nothing else on my credit, I pay all my bills on time, I have this business that is growing like tremendously, and I have been out of my I have been living a wonderful life for almost the past seven years. - my employment, I've been on my job for four years, and everything has just been going really good, but however, when I have been in a situation where I'm able to approach getting a loan, the bankruptcy stops, the bankruptcy stops the loan every time. And so I'm like, you know, here I am a company that's about second chances. And I'm giving people a second chance to live a better life and to have employment. But however, I'm unable to get a second chance because of this bankruptcy. So it becomes a little challenging. But however, I know that I'm going to keep pressing, and I'm gonna keep asking questions, and I'm gonna keep going until I get some answers and the assistance that I need. But that is the roadblock that I'm approaching. Over the past few weeks of trying to secure a loan is the bankruptcy doesn't matter the fact that I have money in the bank, how much I've grown the business, how much revenue I'm pulling in at that bankruptcy is really hurting me.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, and it seems it would seem to me that you're doing everything right. Like you said, you grew your revenue from that first year from just \$3,000 to two years later, \$31,000. So, in that process of growing that business and growing that revenue, what steps did you take to what steps would you did you do right like, what's kind of working for you as you aim to grow your business? You know, when setting aside the capital needs that you have, how did you take that \$3,000 and turn it into \$31,000?

Ché René

Well, I'm gonna tell you that I'm not afraid to open my mouth. I'm not afraid to talk about my business, anywhere I go, I make sure that I put myself purposely in, in circles, where I'm gonna be in circles with the CEOs or the assistant to the CEOs and to, you know, give them ideas about gifting, corporate gifting, just going to events. And, you know, it really was just getting involved with different organizations such as the Urban League, that one connection has led to another connection that's led to another connection. And the thing is, it's not about transaction for me, it's about relationships. And so even if

these people did not purchase anything in the first year, the fact that over that year or two, I have built relationships with them. So then when they do have that big event that comes up, they call me.

And as a result of me having top quality service, my product is absolutely amazing. You know, I mean, it's get addicted to it really quick. And, um, and then me, you know, my energy, you know, what I'm saying? And just what I bring to the table, what Ché Renee is about, is how I've been able to continue to grow this business.

Imani Augustus

Yeah. And Marc, would you agree with that, that the networks play a really big role, and talk about how the Urban League helps with the networks?

Marc Parham It's really not about who you know, it's really about who knows you, and you get out there and you start networking and meeting people, you'll find that there are always exceptions to the rule, you will find that there are bankers and funders out there. And then once they hear your total story, it may look like this on paper, but when they meet, like Ché and see her energy, and they taste her product, they may rethink, you know, because they're basing their loan valuation on paper, you know, looking at that bankruptcy, but they don't know anything about her. So it is about relationships. And that's what we try to encourage, you know, we have Ché speak at different things. We took her to Washington couple months ago, you know, so we try to expose our business owners to relationship building.

Imani Augustus

Yeah. And you mentioned coming to Washington, I want to bring in a little bit of the government role, and what you see, Marc, as what government can do to promote and support minority entrepreneurship?

Marc Parham

Well, one of the things that they are doing is, all the CDFIs are funded by the government. So they're, they're giving money to these lending institutions and say, We want you to lend it in the minority community, we're gonna give you a little leeway on it. They're not even keeping them tied to you know, the big issue with lending to small businesses startups is are you always gonna get your money back. So you have to charge a higher interest rate. But they'll pay for coaching, the government pays for lending, and they pay for coaching. So the government is involved in it. They the government gives us the Urban League, we get funding from the government to provide training and coaching to small businesses. So in that way, the government is involved in trying to take a very active role in helping small businesses in minority communities grow.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, well, we're gonna wrap it up with just one more question to each of you. And Marc, I'll start here. You know, we talk a lot about helping businesses start, but also scale. So I want to throw this question to you, would you rather create 1 million new businesses and minority community or help 1 million current businesses grow and what?

Marc Parham

Wow, I'm gonna have to say, help them grow. I mean, there are a lot of small business owners out here, they don't even know they can grow. They've been out here doing it for years, They've been cutting grass, a lot of our businesses and service based businesses even hand holding it down for many, many years. And don't know that if they just do their paperwork and get ready, we can scale them up. So I like to take the ones that have already put in the effort and show they have the staying power to be an entrepreneur, I'd rather take them and show them how they can increase their revenue and grow and scale their businesses.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, that's excellent. And Ché, I'm gonna come to you with this question. Can you share one specific accomplishment or success story that you are really proud of? And can you speak about like how that came to be? And any any closing words from you

Ché René

Okay, one of the biggest successes for me was obtaining—and it's kind of a two part success. But I obtained a wholesale partner in Atlanta. And one of the senior contributors of Forbes went in that location, and tasted my macarons and was like, who is the person behind this? And so she reached out to me. And it's funny because I thought it was a hoax. I was like, okay, Forbes is reaching out to me? So I did all this research to look for her on social media on LinkedIn, and I messaged her, I said, Hey, I don't know if this is really you. But you know, just in case, it's not someone is out here acting like you. And I said, I just want to let you know. And she emailed me back, she was like, Thank you for the thorough follow through. She said, But yes, it is me. And I was like, Oh, my goodness. And so from there, she thought she was just going to be doing a story on how did I decide to do this macaron and ended up getting a story that's about current issues that are going on today, which is addiction, home insecurity and mental health challenges. And she was just like, whoa, we have an entire story here. And so I ended up having an interview with Forbes and my story was released not only about the addiction, but becoming Atlanta's Macaron Maven and the CEO of Ché René Macarons, so that was, that was a big one.

Imani Augustus

That's incredible. Well, congratulations. And we're wishing you all the best success. If you have any social media, we will definitely share that with you. Do you want to share your social media with us here?

Ché René

Yes, everything is Ché René Macarons and that c h e r e n e m a c a r o n s, and that's across all social media, including my website.

Imani Augustus

Oh, great. Well, we're gonna send some customers your way. Thank you so much Ché. And Marc

thanks to the Urban League for everything that you guys are doing and supporting our entrepreneurs.