

“Incubate With Us:” York County Couple Rolls Out Welcome Mat for Would-Be Entrepreneurs

By [Susan Corbett](#) Peninsula Chronicle

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Photo by Susan Corbett

YORK – There is a whole lot of creation going on inside a nondescript storefront in a shopping center on Lightfoot Road in York County.

You might find Sierra Johnson, head-to-toe in safety gear, cooking up products specifically formulated for Black hair in the lab. Or Betty Lewis, showing off the “cash clutch” she designed, a handbag/wallet specifically made to help with budgeting. RonJeanna Harris has the books she’s written (and the moisturizer she manufactures) for sale on shelves in the “front of house,” the retail space the boss here calls her “co-merchandising” area.

Need a 3-D printer? They have one. A vinyl cutter? Sewing machines? Want to learn how to pilot drones or create apps for Virtual Reality headsets? You can do all of that at [Make ‘Ur Merch](#), a makerspace owned and operated by

Lawrence and Ti’Juana Gholson, who opened this business in November 2022.

The Gholsons also have experience operating co-work spaces for small businesses and start-ups. The new makerspace is a platform for their bigger idea – giving entrepreneurs the tools they need to build sustainable businesses.

“What we’re trying to tell people who are starting out is, instead of getting into debt by getting your own lease, rent shelf space here instead of an entire building,” said Lawrence Gholson. “Incubate with us while we sell your product.”

The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) is behind their efforts and on February 24 staff from Richmond and the Regional Administrator, John Fleming, based in Washington, DC, came to an open house for a tour and a discussion of the Gholsons’ plan to help fledgling entrepreneurs.

“There are not many Black-owned makerspaces in the country nevermind in Williamsburg, so we are happy to support them especially since they have a vision,” said Carl Knoblock, district director for the SBA in Virginia. “They want to go bigger.”

In addition to making creative space available, the Gholsons offer a fee-based business boot camp based on what they call the team model. Participants learn the fundamentals but also hear from a community of other professionals dedicated to their success: bankers, lawyers, insurance agents, accountants, and marketers. Lawrence Gholson, who is president of the York-James City County-Williamsburg chapter of the NAACP, relies on his own business contacts to offer their expertise.

“When the people you are working with look like you, it gives you confidence that you can do it, too,” Lewis said.

The boot camp also includes a discussion on protecting one’s mental health.

“Being a small business owner, especially a Black small business owner, is a lonely road and it’s a hard road,” said Ti’Juana Gholson.

Like a lot of startups, most of the Gholsons’ “founding merchants” had an idea and no place, except maybe their own kitchens, to execute it.

“Right now, a lot of these people, they’re making their products at home,”

Ti’Juana Gholson said. “They are manufacturers and we want to give them a place to do it.”

Johnson, for example, has a full-time job but spends one day a week on her side hustle: trapkink.com, a line of hair care products based on the “science of black hair care.” She drives to York County from Norfolk to use the makerspace facilities and get all her manufacturing done in one day.

“It allows me to practice good manufacturing processes,” Johnson said. “The day I come here to make my product, I am in full gear – like a HAZMAT suit – because I want to do everything the right way.”

As part of her business boot camp training, Johnson met with a certified public accountant.

“After that, I had to figure out what my all-natural ingredients actually cost,” she said. “That helped me understand why I needed to charge more.”

Last year, Johnson’s hair care line earned her \$10,000.

“She represents why we do what we do,” Ti’Juana Gholson said.

Make ‘Ur Merch also has a textile room for apparel makers that includes long tables, fabric cutters, and sewing machines, a setup most new businesses would not have room for at home and which could set a startup back thousands of dollars before its first sale.

“If you don’t have the money for that, you can try it out here before you make that big investment yourself,” Ti’Juana Gholson said.

Ti’Juana Gholson’s expertise is in financial literacy. She is the author of *Girl, What You Gonna Do With Your Money? A Business Woman’s View of Why Money Matters for Women*. She has adapted the book for kids and for teens. She and her husband have made it their mission to share what they know about building a successful business with others who have good ideas but need resources to put them into action.

“The playing field is not level. That’s why we’re here,” said Lawrence Gholson. “We want to help you learn not only how to start a business but how to sustain your business.”

The makerspace shop is located at 410-E Lightfoot Rd, Williamsburg or you can find out more about their offerings at makeurmerchshop.com.