

With grants, Celtics and others aim to boost Black-owned small businesses

12 companies get first wave of \$25,000 grants from the team's foundation, Vistaprint, NAACP

By **Angela Yang** Globe Correspondent, Updated June 30, 2021, 9:52 a.m.



Tambo Barrow, the owner of of Bred Gourmet in Dorchester, was the recipient of a \$25,000 grant. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

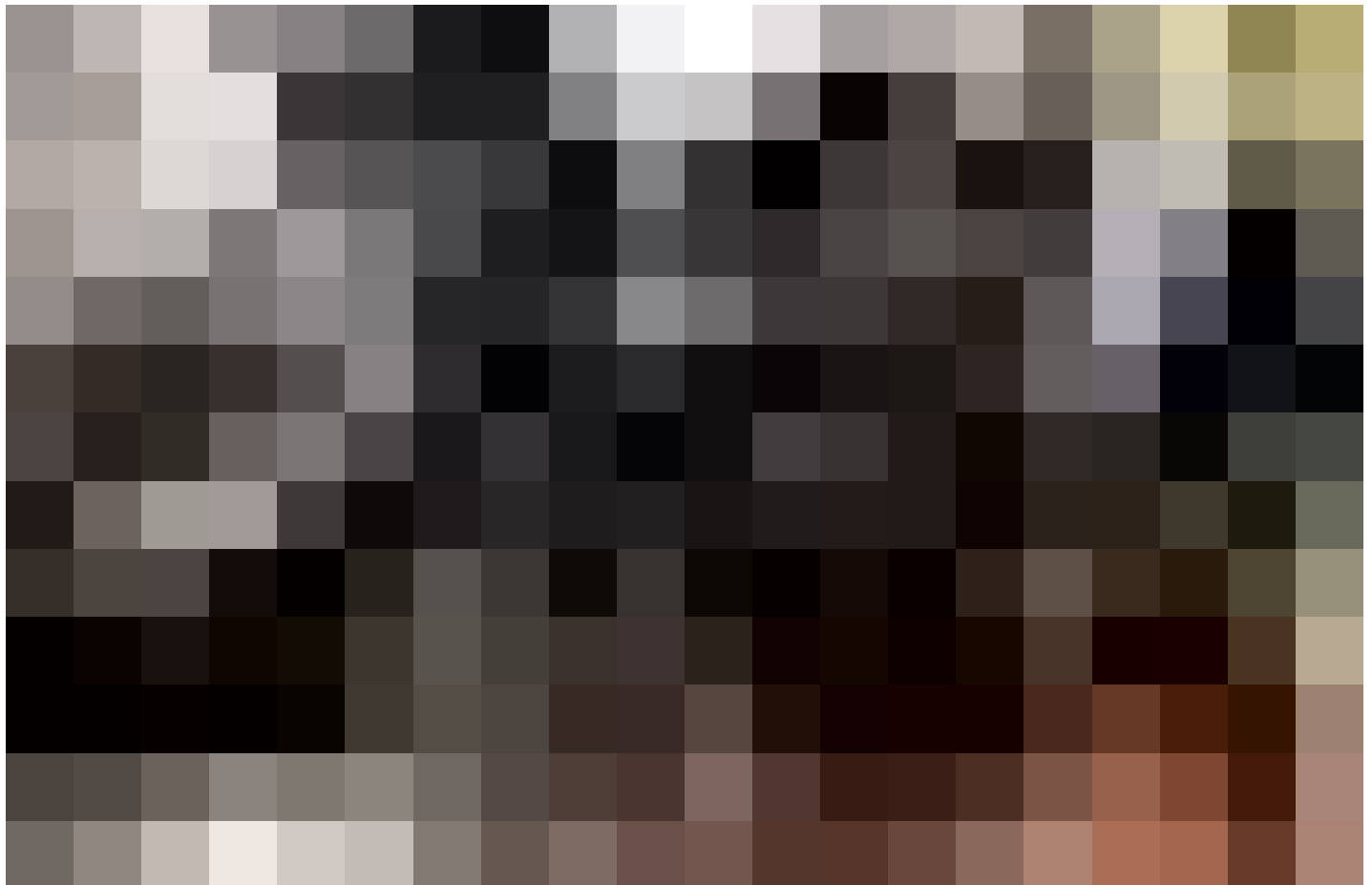
Dianne Austin was battling breast cancer when she searched in stores across Boston for a wig that looked like her natural curls. There weren't many options for Black women like her. So she launched her own business, Coils to Locs Wigs, to fill the gap. She was just

getting started when the pandemic hit and business dried up.

Now, she has won \$25,000 to help her continue her mission.

Austin is one of the first recipients of a new \$1 million program called Power Forward Small Business Grants and — launched by Vistaprint, the Boston Celtics Shamrock Foundation, and the NAACP to aid Black-owned small businesses in New England.

“[We selected] those businesses that we thought really showed not just the most need, but the highest impact: making the biggest difference in their community by providing a valuable service or creating jobs,” said Celtics president Rich Gotham.



Sherlonda Bernard is one of the team members at Bred Gourmet in Dorchester. The business was the recipient of a \$25,000 grant aimed at helping small Black-owned businesses. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Winners learned the news via surprise visits from Celtics center Tacko Fall, president of basketball operations Brad Stevens, and mascot Lucky the Leprechaun. Austin thought she was getting on a call for a final-round interview, but a few minutes in, Lucky broke

the news.

“I tried to stay composed,” Austin said. “But once that Zoom call ended, I was dancing around the room.”

Austin said she'll use the \$25,000 to build a website, to reach more customers and more easily set up deliveries. She'll also hire a business development expert to expand hospital partnerships across the country.

But, Austin said, the grant is also a vote of confidence, a sign she's on the right track.

“Sometimes people don't understand why it's important to be able to find a wig that is culturally sensitive to the wig wearer,” Austin said. “It's a way for the wearer to feel like themselves as much as possible, to have some control over their lives.”

Since February, the Celtics and Vistaprint have received nearly 600 applications from across New England. Black-owned businesses with 25 employees or fewer are eligible. They're still reviewing applications, and taking new ones, said Emily Whittaker, Vistaprint's president for North America.

These sort of grants are valuable, said Segun Idowu, president of the Black Economic Council of Massachusetts, because Black entrepreneurs have historically had less access to venture capital and are often charged higher interest rates on bank loans. Few programs in the region have doled out five-figure sums to small businesses, and \$25,000 could be a lifeline.

To Idowu, the \$1 million initiative is a signal that Black entrepreneurship is on the rise. These awards are not just grants, he said, but investments.

“If the Celtics and Vistaprint and the national NAACP were able to find us,” Idowu said, “we should not be hearing from local business owners and policy makers and corporate leaders that Black businesses and entrepreneurs cannot be found.”

In her previous career as a broadcast reporter, Kristen Pope, who runs the virtual journalism training program On-Air Academy, said she became highly aware of which stories are prioritized and which are neglected. Her goal, she said, was to create content that's representative of the voices that are heard less in mainstream media.

Pope started Pope Productions in 2014 more as a passion project than as a business. She didn't know how to make it profitable, she said. Five years later, she launched On-Air Academy as a training course focused on journalists of color and has since placed trainees at news stations around the country.

She had never applied for a grant before and said she was in "utter shock," when she learned she'd won \$25,000. She plans to update her online curriculum and website, as well as upgrade the camera and microphone she's been using for seven years.

"I'm still giddy," Pope said. "I feel like I'm reliving it every time I talk about it."

Another recipient, Bred Gourmet in Dorchester, plans to use the proceeds to replace employees lost over the past year and pay for marketing to bring back customers.

"In the seven years that we've been there, we've always tried to do right, especially by the community," owner Tambo Barrow said. "And we've always prided ourselves in providing a great product. Getting noticed for that is always a great feeling."

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