



STARTING A Business

By Dexter Merritt

I recall as a teen-ager hearing my father say, "You can be whatever you want to be. Decide what you want, dedicate yourself to attaining it and your mother and I will dedicate ourselves to helping you achieve it." The words sounded good, however, I had not given any consideration to what contributions I wanted to make in this life. At that time, my primary concern was finishing high school and hanging out with my friends. Even as I prepared to go to college, I did not know what field of study to pursue. Of course, I had been exposed to numerous employed people. Some of them were teachers, doctors, clerks and blue-collar workers. They were all in honorable professions and seemed to genuinely enjoy their jobs. However, I had no interest in any of these professions. Was something wrong with me? Surely, by now, I should have known what I wanted to be or do with the rest of my life. Eureka, that's it! Why should I limit myself to the career paths that other people have chosen? Why not create my own?

I have always been touched by the pervasiveness of drug use, homelessness, crime, teen-age pregnancies and many other issues confronting our communities. For me, it appeared as though we were at the point of no return. More than 50 percent of marriages end in divorce, and there is a high correlation between the number of young black males in college and those incarcerated — even our commitment to high moral values and principles has weakened. I was compelled to do everything I could to educate and assist in providing a better quality of life for all African-Americans.

As so many people have said, "One picture can say a thousand words." I

wanted to use art as a medium for communicating in a positive and creative manner those major issues facing blacks in the 90s. I have the profound belief that art is not simply a financial investment; but most importantly, it is a cultural investment. It can be a teaching tool for today's youth and tomorrow's leaders.

Numerous galleries do not carry African-American art. Some of them say they do not have a large enough clientele that will buy it. There are others that will sell black art; however, they do not want to sell art that conveys a positive message to African-Americans. One gallery owner said he only

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marketed art that was like memorabilia; he was only interested in art that reminded him of yesterday. For him, yesterday meant when women and people of color did not have equal rights under the law. Although it's important for us to be educated about the past, I believe we must also look to the future with a positive frame of mind. That's why it's still important for us to keep positive black images alive.

As a small business, I had to learn the industry. It was necessary to find out who my customers are, what they like and how to best market to them. I spoke with businesses that were already successful in the art industry. That helped

me to understand what I should and should not do. I tried to deliver a product that would exceed their expectations.

As a new business, I have faced numerous challenges. There have been some people who did not share our level of optimism about Positive Black Images, but I believe it's important to keep our dream alive. As with so many other African-American-owned businesses, we have not been able to obtain the necessary funds to expand our business. If a business is not able to obtain the necessary capital buildup, an infrastructure that leads to profitability and high levels of customer satisfaction can be difficult. It's still important for us to keep our dream alive.

We should all have a vested interest in improving the quality of life for each other. African-Americans spend millions of dollars a year on products and services. Only a small percentage of the businesses in the United States are owned by African-Americans. As a race, we have buying power. It's imperative that we patronize one another. Of course, there will be problems. Most African-American-owned businesses are first generation businesses. Usually, they are financed on personal funds and start out being operated on a part-time basis. It takes a unique blending of time, knowledge, access to capital and resources to achieve profitability and a high level of customer satisfaction. There is always room for progress however. African-American-owned businesses and consumers must support and be tolerant of each other as we grow and learn. I believe it is our best opportunity to seize the future for our community, race and especially our children.