



## SMALL BUSINESS SUPERSTARS

# CONTINUE TO RISE



➤ Tamara McConnell is coming off one of her busiest times of the year. Her private bartending business, Breathe Beverages, was booked nonstop over the holidays. “Holiday gatherings, private parties, corporate events, pop-ups, you name it, we were doing it,” she said. But she likes the busy schedule and helping her clients have a memorable experience. “I love gathering. I love entertaining people. I love just to see people together enjoying time and space with each other.” ➤➤➤



McConnell has more than 20 years' experience in the hospitality industry. Her full-time position is Immediate Needs Coordinator for Loews Kansas City Hotel, working her way up at different KC hotel chains after starting out as a server's assistant. As her resume grew, so did her expertise and her passion to work with clients in a more intimate setting. Five years ago, McConnell started Breathe, creating a personal beverage service that focuses on intimate gatherings.

Breathe has been growing since day one thanks to great customer feedback and robust word of mouth recommendations. However, when McConnell was recognized in early 2022 as one of the KC Chamber's Small Business Superstars, she saw a big increase. "In the first 30 days of being a member of the Chamber, I received more than 15 inquiries for service. All of them were referrals from inside the Chamber from being a Superstar," she said. "I didn't know the magnitude of what getting that recognition would bring."

McConnell was honored as a Small Business Superstar by the Chamber in 2022 - the second year of the program. It began in 2021 when Small Business Director Vicky Kulikov wanted to



celebrate as many of KC's small businesses and entrepreneurs as possible, especially women- and minority-owned businesses. As COVID created unprecedented challenges, Kulikov wanted to let small businesses

know they belonged. "That was always the point of the Small Business Superstars initiative," she said recently. "To connect with different businesses and people from different backgrounds and let them know that they belong here."

That goal aligns with the Chamber's strategic imperative of inclusive prosperity - increasing economic opportunities for all. For too many generations, parts of Greater Kansas City had been overlooked and underserved, creating difficult conditions for small business owners. Since the launch of the Small Business Superstars program, hundreds of minority-owned businesses have been given access and have experienced that same sense of belonging in the KC business community.

In 2021, about 1,100 small businesses were recognized. That number grew to 1,200

in 2022, and exploded to 2,162 in 2022, putting McConnell in good company. "We've grown tremendously just by the reputation the Chamber has in the community to build up minority-owned and





women-owned businesses. A lot of the inquiries I received were from people specifically looking for women-owned vendors or Black-owned vendors. I don't know if I would've seen that without that Chamber connection."

She's not the only one recognizing the impact of the Superstars program. Startland News is entering its third year serving as the media partner for the program and the Small Business Celebration. When the partnership began, it was during the first year of the Superstars program by design. "We tend to forget that we're also a small business," said the outlet's Executive Editor Austin Barnes. "We began as a startup seven years ago, so we've had a lot of the same growing pains as the small businesses we've been covering. For us to partner with the Chamber is also validation for us as a small business."

Over the years, Startland News has been intentional about inclusive coverage of startups, entrepreneurs, and minority-owned small businesses. Barnes has seen firsthand how the Small Business Superstar program is creating more inclusivity in the business community. "This program removed a barrier to entry for many of the minority-owned businesses that need to benefit from the Chamber's resources, programming, and opportunities," he said. "Creating this program and removing that barrier has been tremendous for our community. This program has made it so accessible for small businesses to find the value and benefit of being part of a chamber."

As part of the Superstar program, Superstars could join the Chamber and enter the Small Business Celebration, which culminates in the naming of the Small Business

of the Year. The Superstars' impact on the Celebration was evident at the Small Business Showcase at Union Station. Of the 55 booths there:

- 37 percent were minority-owned
- 74 percent women-owned
- 33 percent minority women-owned



Several Superstars even made the finalist group of the Top 10 Small Businesses, including Parrish & Sons Construction, KD Academy, and RK Contractors.

The third year of the Small Business Superstars program begins in early January, when the Chamber will start accepting submissions. "I fully expect to see the number of Superstars triple this year," said Barnes. "This program and the Small Business Superstar stickers that you see in storefronts resonate with people. It's a sign of recognition and pride." ▾