With February being Black History Month, we think that this is an especially appropriate time to share stories of area Black-owned businesses.

For the entire month, the San Diego Business Journal is dedicating a special section in each issue to tell these inspiring stories. In each issue we will feature stories of businesses in various local industries. This week we begin with stories about Black-owned businesses in the media, real estate, restaurant, consulting, beverage, nonprofit, technology and education sectors.

Black business owners will be celebrated on Feb. 25, in association with the Central San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce, as we host a virtual panel and awards event. The panel will be moderated by Mitch Mitchell, VP, state government affairs & external affairs, Sempra Energy. The panel will also feature Mike Fasulo, CEO, Sony Electronics; Mark Stuart, CEO, San Diego Foundation; Caroline Winn, CEO, San Diego Gas & Electric; and Doug Winter, CEO, Seismic.

We hope these stories will not only inform, but build an increasing awareness of Black-owned businesses in our community.

Barb Chodos
President and Publisher

Jay Harn
Editor-in-Chief

Letter from the Publisher and Editor
**Creating Well-Rounded Students**

**Nonprofit:** Foundation Gives Young Men Tools to Succeed

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**By Natalie Rocha**

Ke’Aun Dent is working towards his pilot’s license, while also exploring acting and pursuing a small business called Ke’s Kitchen, where he sells homemade cakes made from his family’s recipes. Dent is finishing up his senior year at San Diego High School, online, and in the fall, he is headed to Morehouse College to pursue a degree in international business. From his budding business to his college prospects, he said his preparedness is in no small part thanks to the Blue Heart Foundation.

“I just want to do business and I want to ultimately like get in a position of power where I can create jobs and job opportunities for people who look like me,” Dent said.

Sadler explained, was to show these high school age boys that they don’t have to wait to become an entrepreneur. Sadler, who started her small business in 2014, has impacted roughly 8,000 students through the STEAM Collab. While she was growing up in Detroit, Mich., Sadler said she learned a lot from informal education spaces and now she aims her services at collaborations with museums and after-school programs.

What started with Sadler tutoring students in math outside her full-time engineering job turned into a business venture that has received local recognition and a spot in the business accelerator Program Connect All at the Jacobs Center. Using her degree in Aerospace Engineering, her MBA and her skills as a dancer, Sadler’s work is centered on elevating equity in education through Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) curriculum which encourage students to creatively solve problems.

Sadler said they’ve adapted their curriculum to toggle between live and virtual offerings. This year, with support from Black Tech Inc, the upcoming project challenges students to build and program an interactive, exercise mirror — similar products retail for over $1,000 — that they can keep after the project.

**Multitude of Opportunities**

Morris explained that a few weeks out of each month are dedicated to STEM, because it offers his guys common sense, critical thinking skills and confidence. He added that “boys get bored” so he tries to offer a multitude of opportunities that will appeal to his students and create well-rounded people. Additionally, each week includes other activities such as virtual, “culinary therapy” that teaches students the importance of mindfulness through cooking. The 28 boys in the program can also participate in Step practice and reconnect with an assigned mentor who checks in on each young man’s well-being.

For Blue Heart students like Dent, he’s taken to heart the lessons he’s learned in the program and Morris’ mentality to “hunt” and take every opportunity that comes your way. “I like to not limit myself to like certain things, I just want to explore everything,” Dent said. “And that’s when you really find what you love to do when you explore a little bit more.”

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**The STEAM Collaborative**

**Founder & Executive Director**

Jasmine Sadler

**Blue Heart Foundation**

**The Blue Heart Foundation**

**Founder: 2013**

**Founds: Tracy Morris, April Ray**

**Headquarters: Mira Mesa**

**Business Description:** The Blue Heart Foundation is a non-profit organization that focuses on under-served youth ages 13-19 in the greater San Diego County community.

**Notable:** The Blue Heart Foundation offers “culinary therapy” as a program to help the students practice mindfulness through food.

**Contact:** 619-410-7944, theblueheartfoundation@gmail.com

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**The STEAM Collaborative**

**Founded: 2014**

**CEO: Jasmine L. Sadler, MBA**

**Headquarters: Mission Valley**

**Business Description:** The STEAM Collaborative increases the number of diverse children – of all genders and cultures – pursuing Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math, alongside artistic endeavors.

**Notable:** Jasmine Sadler is both a trained ballerina and a market scientist by trade.

**Impact:** Since the STEAM Collab’s founding, about 8,000 students have been impacted by this program.

**Contact:** jasmine@STEAMcollab.com, 619-512-5670, @theSTEAMcollab

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**Group photo of Blue Heart Foundation students at the college signing day event to celebrate their accomplishments**
Determination, Faith and Grit

REAL ESTATE: Carla Farley First Black Woman to Head Realtor’s Association

Carla Farley formed her own real estate company, Corban Realty Group – in 1994 after working as an agent for Century 21.

“I thought well, you have a broker’s license, just be your own brokerage,” Farley said. She also has become a key voice for the San Diego Housing Commission, acting as its chair.

In 2019, the National Association of Realtors named her its 2019 Woman of the Year.

Farley was born and raised in San Diego, and her mother was a homemaker.

“I wanted to be a lawyer, but I ended up in real estate,” she said.

Mentors

Farley said she learned a lot from her mentors.

“Before it was Barrio Logan, it was just Logan,” Farley said.

A graduate of Lincoln High School and San Diego City College, Farley has also been active in the communities in which she lives.

Grit

In becoming president of the Association of Realtors, Farley hopes to serve as a role model for others.

“It’s a very unique little niche,” Farley said.

“People ask me what is the one thing that you can really say real estate has been a rewarding career. It’s the ability to work with people in the day,” Farley said.

Satisfaction

Farley handles all sides of real estate deals, including probate sales – handling property that goes through probate court.

“I have to have some tough skin. Y ou have to have some tough skin and some grit. YOur grit has to be a little bit more.”

The initiative is called the 8(a) Business

ClemTech LLC

 Founded: 2013
 CEO: Clement Johnson
 Headquarters: Carlsbad
 Business: Knowledge management and information management
 Revenue: $1.7 million in 2019
 Employees: Five
 Website: www.ClemTechLLC.com
 Notable: As a Marine, Johnson founded an artillery training school in the Las Pulgas area of Camp Pendleton, which stands today.

Contact: (858) 816-5558 or services@ClemTechLLC.com

CELEBRATING BLACK ENTREPRENEURS

SPECIAL SECTION

FEBRUARY 1, 2021

Photo courtesy of ClemTech LLC
GROWING DURING LOCKDOWN

RESTAURANTS: Coop’s West Texas BBQ Increases Revenue as Owner Adapts

By MARIEL CONCEPCION

Last March, just days after the global coronavirus crisis hit, Coop’s West Texas BBQ Inc., the Lemon Grove comfort food mainstay, was ready to shutter its doors.

“It was the Friday after the first case was announced and we let all our employees go – we were getting ready to close,” said Brad “Coop” Cooper, owner and CEO. “But something kept tugging at me over the weekend: my main three people have been with me since I opened up and I know they depend on this money to feed their families. My daughter depends on it. I depend on it. Something just told me, ‘if you close, you won’t be able to open back up again.’”

On Sunday, I asked God to give me a solution and let me know what to do. And on Monday, I told my daughter, ‘how about you and I go in there on Tuesday and see what happens?’ We went in that day and it was the busiest we’d been since Christmas.”

Within hours, Cooper had called his employees back to work. Coop’s BBQ has been reopened for pick-up and delivery through third-party services like UberEats, DoorDash and Postmates. As a result, its revenue is projected to increase from $1.3 million in 2019 to $1.5 million in 2021.

How it All Started

Cooper, who grew up between San Diego and Texas, launched Coop’s West Texas BBQ in 2007. He was subconsciously inspired by both his mother and father, who ran separate food businesses while he was growing up. In the 1990s, Cooper had his first foray in running his own food place, when he and his sister opened a restaurant in North Park. But that was short-lived for Cooper, who moved back to Texas shortly after it opened due to the passing of his first wife.

At that time, his father was running a small BBQ restaurant in Texas. That’s when Cooper developed an affinity for the style of food.

For over a year, Cooper stayed in Texas, learning the craft from his father that would later, unbeknownst to him, become his own livelihood.

When he returned to San Diego, he enrolled in nursing school and launched his medical career at Kaiser Permanente hospital. That, Cooper said, is when he began honing his BBQ skills and testing his own recipes among his work friends.

“He first won the landlord over with a plate of BBQ brisket and ribs, collard greens and yams, he said.

Local Black Community

Today, Cooper is one of the most respected BBQ men in town and Coop’s BBQ is a fixture not only within the local Black community, but all of San Diego County. In 2016, Coop’s made Yelp’s “Top 100 Places to Eat in the Nation” list. He said people drive from places like Poway, Orange County and Eastlake to have a taste of his West Texas flavor.

Inspired by his success, Cooper opened a second concept, Da Chicken Coop, in 2014 (it remained opened for a year and then reopened in 2018 as a chicken and waffles spot). That location is also doing well, he said.

Tara Leigh Cooper, general manager at Coop’s and daughter to Cooper, said it is consistency that makes Coop’s stand out among other BBQ operators in town.

“Consistency is major in the restaurant industry as it keeps our loyal customers coming back,” she said, adding that since the beginning of 2020, Coop’s hours have been modified to 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. “Reconstructing our business for take-out and delivery only has changed the game for us completely. It allows us to focus on our products and customer service. The fact that we have customers trying their best to make it within the five hours we are open is impressive. It shows we have the support of the community and beyond, since we have drivers from L.A. I always tell the staff: you serve one great meal along with some great customer service, it will return tenfold.”

Later this year, Cooper hopes to launch the first Coop’s West Texas BBQ online store, through which he will sell packaged, fully cooked meats. He also plans to broaden the Coop’s brand by developing a franchising model by Q4.
Mike Roberts, founder and chief apprenticeship officer at San Diego Code School, has a passion for helping underrepresented people break into the technology sector.

To support this mission, he launched a Black-owned school in 2018, focused primarily on helping companies build high-performance engineering teams and bringing together individuals who are often overlooked during the job process.

San Diego Code School helps its graduates land high-paying tech careers.

Coding Bootcamp
During its first year of operation, it offered a 16-week bootcamp and low-cost alternative to earning a lengthy computer science degree similar to other coding schools in the region. It taught students in-demand software development languages, honing in on the most essential skills to get a job in the current market.

San Diego Code School
FOUNDED: 2018
CEO: Mike Roberts
HEADQUARTERS: Escondido and Chula Vista
BUSINESS: Provides software apprenticeships
EMPLOYEES: 12
WEBSITE: www.sdcs.io
NOTABLE: Roberts operates the only Black-owned Code School in the region.
CONTACT: (619) 320-8378

Mike Roberts
Founder
San Diego Code School

Janice Brown said the encouragement of one federal judge changed her life and it gave her the confidence to eventually found her own firm, Brown Law Group.

As a leader she humbly recognizes that she does not know everything, but takes everything as an opportunity to learn.

Early in her career, Brown worked at a firm where the leadership wasn’t as flexible and one day after court, a federal judge called Brown back to her chamber. The judge went out of her way to acknowledge Brown’s talent and she encouraged her to find other opportunities that would foster her growth, rather than stifle it.

“That was a big risk on her part, because she doesn’t know me,” Brown said. “She took a risk that I would take the advice legitimately and still to this day I thank her and I stay connected to her because she had confidence in me. When someone like a federal judge has confidence in you, that changes how you perceive yourself. So, I try to do that to other people because I understood what it meant when she did that for me.”

While at the U.S. Justice Department, where she started her career, she was awarded “Outstanding Trial Attorney” and “Trial Lawyer of the Year” awards in under three years.

She founded her San Diego firm, Brown Law Group in 1999 and has served local corporations and Fortune 50 companies headquartered throughout the U.S. for over 20 years.

Merger with purpose
Back in October, Brown Law Group merged with Meyers Nave, a firm that serves businesses, public entities, nonprofits and P3s throughout California. The merger not only expanded Meyers Nave’s reach to San Diego, but it also builds on its commitment to fostering diversity in its overall practice.

At Meyers Nave, Brown is a principal in the firm’s Labor and Employment Practice, Workplace Investigations Practice and Commercial Litigation Practice, a rapidly growing field of law in California. Janice and her team bring exceptional experience and depth in high-impact employment litigation, both in Southern California and statewide,” said David Skinner, managing principal at Meyers Nave. “By joining forces, Meyers Nave and Janice’s team are uniquely qualified to meet the increasing demand for high quality labor and employment services on challenging and complex matters in the private and public sector.”

With more than 35 years of experience in trial, arbitration and appellate experience in state and federal courts Brown was drawn to the complex and people-oriented practice of employment law. She primarily represents companies with a pro-active and relationship focused approach that ensures employers are educated on the ever-changing labor laws.

Brown said the decision to join Meyers Nave was one of the best choices she’s made. She knew she wanted to sell her firm eventually, but what really attracted her to Meyers Nave was the diverse leadership.

“It felt like a place that I could be myself in,” Brown said. “What I’ve come to realize is the more yourself you are, the more…almost like magnetic, you are, because you’re comfortable in your own skin. So I knew I needed to go someplace where I was comfortable in my own skin.”

Skinner proudly shared that 60% of the firm’s attorneys are comprised of women and minority attorneys and eight of the firm’s practice group leaders are women and/or minority attorneys.

“What works for us at Meyers Nave is ‘hard-wiring’ diversity and inclusion into every aspect of our business,” Skinner said. “This is not just a core value. It is a key part of our strategic planning, business development training, recruiting and retention — including our summer diversity fellowship.”

Building Business
Brown said another benefit to joining Meyers Nave was that it allowed her to continue working on her business venture called Beyond Law.

She helps lawyers not only build their own book of business, but understand how to manage a network of clients that will grow their career and ultimately their confidence. Also, with this understanding she said that her experience founding a minority, woman-owned business has been a strength in her career in more ways than one.

“To be an entrepreneur, to have a business you need to be resilient,” Brown said. “Because you’re gonna have people say no. And so, if people say no. You have to be comfortable with overcoming it.”

Brown Law Group
FOUNDED: 1999 (Merged in Oct. 2020)
PRINCIPAL: Janice Brown
HEADQUARTERS: Downtown San Diego
BUSINESS DESCRIPTION: Meyers Nave attorneys provide regulatory, transaction and litigation legal services in California for businesses, public entities, non-profit organizations and P3s.
NOTABLE: Janice Brown is the immediate past Chair of the San Diego Economic Development Corporation, where she championed economic inclusion.
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: Meyers Nave has six attorneys and four professional staff members in San Diego.
WEBSITE: meyersnave.com
CONTACT: 800-484-3659 or brown@meyersnave.com

San Diego Code School page 17
BRINGING CRAFT BEER TO THE SOUTH BAY

BEVERAGES: Chula Vista Brewery Only Black-Owned Brewhouse in San Diego County

**CELEBRATING BLACK ENTREPRENEURS**

**Special Section**

**SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL 15**

**FEBRUARY 1, 2021**

**By MARIEL CONCEPCION**

Chula Vista Brewery is the only Black-owned brewhouse in all of San Diego County. **Owner** Timothy Parker, launching the brew business was not only about representing for the African American culture, but bringing craft beer to the underserved area of South Bay.

“I always loved beer,” said the Chicago-native, who opened the 2,700 Chula Vista location in 2017 following a 20-year career in the United States Navy. “I was traveling the world and drinking beer all over the world. I was also a home brewer, and I saw a gap in craft beer in the Chula Vista area. When I retired, I wanted to do something I would love and enjoy. I always joke the gap in craft beer in the Chula Vista area. **Opening a Second Location**

Inspired by the success of Chula Vista Brewery, which makes roughly $1 million in revenue and 500 barrels a year on a five-barrel system, Parker is opening a second location in March – this time a brewpub in Eastlake, a neighborhood in Chula Vista.

At about 7,000 square feet, Chula Vista Brewery of Eastlake will not only serve all the craft creations Chula Vista Brewery of Eastlake, a neighborhood in revenue and 500 barrels a year on a Brewery, which makes roughly $1 million in sales.

Opening a Second Location

When I retired, I wanted to do something I would love and enjoy. I always joke the gap in craft beer in the Chula Vista area. **Other New Developments**

The upcoming food and beverage place is not the only new development for Chula Vista Brewery. In response to COVID-19, Timothy Parker said the company completely switched over to a canning system last year. It purchased a crawling machine as well as a canning machine, both of which are stationed at the original location, he said.

The company typically cans a whole tank of its liquid production and, through a self-distribution model, sells product to about 30 locations, mostly within the Chula Vista area. This includes local liquor stores, said Parker, a move that has allowed the company to grow and expand its footprint.

Additionally, Chula Vista Brewery recently partnered with Brooklyn Brewery, also a Black-owned brewhouse out of New York City, to fund technical education and career advancement for Black, indigenous and people of color in the brewing and distilling industries. Proceeds from The Michael James Jackson Foundation, named after a renowned brew and whiskey writer, will go toward eight scholarships, said Parker.

**Chula Vista Brewery**

**FOUNDED:** 2017

**OWNER:** Timothy Parker

**HEADQUARTERS:** Chula Vista

**BUSINESS:** Brewery

**REVENUE:** Roughly $1 million in 2019

**CONTACT:** 619-616-8806

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**CREATING A RESOURCE**

**MEDIA: Company Figures They Are On the Cusp of Something Big**

**By RAY HUARD**

Virgin Barnet and Daniel Christian figure they’re on the cusp of something big. About a year ago, the two cofounded an informal social networking business that slowly evolved into a more formal organization that they have branded as Come Through Media.

“I always loved beer,” said the Chicago-native, who opened the 2,700 Chula Vista location in 2017 following a 20-year career in the United States Navy. “I was traveling the world and drinking beer all over the world. I was also a home brewer, and I saw a gap in craft beer in the Chula Vista area. When I retired, I wanted to do something I would love and enjoy. I always joke the gap in craft beer in the Chula Vista area.

**Opening a Second Location**

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At about 7,000 square feet, Chula Vista Brewery of Eastlake will not only serve all the craft creations Chula Vista Brewery is known for (including the Humble, an IPA, and Gueirita, a blonde ale), it will also have a full kitchen serving Tex-Mex BBQ. Additionally, the indoor/outdoor venue will increase the company’s brewing capacity to 1,500 barrels thanks to the addition of a 10-barrel system, said Parker, as well as its overall profit.

**Culture and Diversity**

“What makes our brewery stand out is our rich history, rich and full of culture, and so is our brewery,” said Timothy Parker.

**Opening a Second Location**

When I retired, I wanted to do something I would love and enjoy. I always joke the gap in craft beer in the Chula Vista area.

**Other New Developments**

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**CREATING A RESOURCE**

**MEDIA: Company Figures They Are On the Cusp of Something Big**

**By RAY HUARD**

Virgin Barnet and Daniel Christian figure they’re on the cusp of something big. About a year ago, the two cofounded an informal social networking business that slowly evolved into a more formal organization that they have branded as Come Through Media.

“It’s a work in progress,” Barnet said, but among other things, she said the company will be a resource for companies who need stock images and video of Black families, workers and individuals to use in advertising campaigns and other presentations.

**Come Through Media**

**FOUNDED:** 2021

**CO-FOUNDERS:** Virgin Barnet and Daniel Christian

**HEADQUARTERS:** Normal Heights

**BUSINESS:** Media

**EMPLOYEES:** 2

**WEBSITE:** joindemetherough.com

**NOTABLE:** Come Through originated as a small mastermind group for creatives, newly pressed entrepreneurs and community organizers.

**CONTACT:** Via their website: https://joindemetherough.com

Although it sounds simple enough, Barnet and Christian said finding stock photos of Black people has been a struggle for companies who want to project an image of diversity because most of the images available to advertising agencies and others don’t include them. “It’s a niche with little competition, she said. “We want to create a resource library that reflected people of color a little more.”

“We're trying to touch on the B-roll (video) of people of color doing normal things.”

With a background in advertising and website design and a bachelor’s degree in art, digital media and design from the University of California Santa Barbara, Barnet is the creative director and brand manager of the fledging company.

“Through Come Through Media, we create, Barnet said she was a designer for an advertising agency based in Hillcrest.

Christian, a videographer with a background in music production and video editing and job experience in sales and property management, is the company’s co-founder and production lead. “As it grows, the company will continue with its original social networking business, but Barnet doesn’t like using that phrase to describe the company.

Although the primary purpose when Barnet and Christian started was to bring together people with similar interests, “We want to give people a platform to share their story and not have it be seen as just a poster,” Christian said.

“Common denominator is people who are working on something they care about and they want to be better.”

Christian said. “They come to us because they want to have these conversations in a place that feels safe to do so.

Although the primary purpose when Barnet and Christian started was to bring together people with similar interests, “We want to give people a platform to share their story and not have it be seen as just a poster,” Christian said.

“We've been doing a lot of webinars,” Christian said. “It really turns into a community of people who can help connect with each other.”

For instance, COVID led some people to try going it alone as entrepreneurs with their own business.

In response, Come Through Media put together a session on financial literacy for business owners.

Come Through Media also has been helping people in branding their business, Christian said.
Leadership development and digital marketing are among its specialties. Invested Advisors also provides marketing and communications. Invested Advisors wants to grow with its clients and be a partner. Almost five years into her business, Sargent can look back on a number of successful projects. She has won 10 contracts with the California Army National Guard and has done work for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management in Louisiana. The latter is a federal agency that shares information on the health of the environment in the Gulf of Mexico to parties as diverse as the environmental community and the oil and gas industry. Another client has been the city of Oceanside, which promoted workforce training classes available through MiraCosta College.

A Varied Market

Sargent spent 25 years leading market and sales departments at commercial and private banks. “Banks attract business and consumers from all walks of life,” she said, so she had to be strategic in how to attract a wide variety of clients.

“We feel like we can come to the table with more solutions than a creative firm, and we’re more entrepreneurial than some of the larger consulting firms,” Sargent said. Instead of being a firm that pops in and out of a client’s operations, Invested Advisors wants to grow with its clients and be a partner.

Almost five years into her business, Sargent can look back on a number of successful projects. She has won 10 contracts with the California Army National Guard and has done work for the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management in Louisiana. The latter is a federal agency that shares information on the health of the environment in the Gulf of Mexico to parties as diverse as the environmental community and the oil and gas industry. Another client has been the city of Oceanside, which promoted workforce training classes available through MiraCosta College.

A Varied Market

Sargent spent 25 years leading market and sales departments at commercial and private banks. “Banks attract business and consumers from all walks of life,” she said, so she had to be strategic in how to attract a wide variety of clients.

The result is Smith, “Toxic organizational communication, has a very detrimental impact on employees as well as organizations. This communication can lead to patterns of bullying, harassment, sexual harassment, aggression, escalated conflict, threats, discrimination, and violence.” To date, CommSafe has partnered with more than 45 leading companies and organizations across the US. Notable clients include UCLA Medical Center, Westfield Group, Clorox, Descom, Illumina, and Walt Disney.

Smith, a Black-owned technology company that specializes in conflict and violence prevention. CEO and co-founder at CommSafe Ty Smith said he got the idea for the company after realizing there was no leading solution that provides a systematic way to become aware of violent-related issues in real time.

“I founded CommSafe because there were no systematic way to identify these issues as they arise in real time,” said Smith. “Toxic organizational communication, has a very detrimental impact on employees as well as organizations. This communication can lead to patterns of bullying, harassment, sexual harassment, aggression, escalated conflict, threats, discrimination, and violence.” To date, CommSafe has partnered with more than 45 leading companies and organizations across the US. Notable clients include UCLA Medical Center, Westfield Group, Clorox, Descom, Illumina, and Walt Disney.

CommSafe AI

A New Start

Grateful to be back on U.S. soil again, Sargent can look back with a sense of satisfaction. “We’ve been in business for four years,” Sargent said. “Most businesses don’t make it through five.”

Staying Nimble in a Changing Market

Invested Advisors had a separate division dealing with corporate travel. That work abruptly came to an end when the world started dealing with the coronavirus pandemic. Sargent compared her situation to being in a twin-engine jet, and having one engine fail in flight. She was able to keep going with the strength of the other engine.

“We have managed through a global pandemic and grown the operation, despite losing the meetings and events side,” she said. Today, Sargent can look back with a sense of satisfaction. “We’ve been in business for four years,” Sargent said. “Most businesses don’t make it through five.”

Crystal Sargent Taps Skills Honed in the Banking World

CONSULTING: Crystal Sargent Taps Skills Honed in the Banking World

Crysta...
ClemTech
− from page 12

Development Program. The news that Johnson got was that the government had extended his 8(a) certification. He would be able to use that status until at least 2025.

According to the SBA, the government limits competition for certain contracts under the 8(a) program. Businesses certified as 8(a) businesses are able to compete for set-aside and sole-source contracts. The government also provides resources for participating businesses, such as financial education and opportunities to join forces with other businesses.

The 8(a) program is “a definite advantage,” Johnson said.

ClemTech is also certified as a Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business, which provides certain advantages of its own.

From Marine to Federal Contractor
ClemTech is a knowledge management and information management business. Johnson founded it in 2013 after a career in the U.S. Marine Corps and subsequent

Code School
− from page 14

Finding early success, 92% of its students obtained employment within 6 months of completing the program.

For example, one of the school’s first graduates was hired by RedHat, a multi-billion dollar software company, within three weeks of graduating.

Transferring to Apprenticeships
When the pandemic hit, Roberts quickly pivoted the company as an apprenticeship-based software development program.

Roberts said it now helps identify talent for companies and serves as a key facilitator for junior and entry-level talent.

The Code School works with companies that have a commitment to offer 2 months of experience to its students to develop their talent using their platforms.

In particular, apprenticeships receive 2,000 hours of experience with San Diego Code School, 14 weeks of classroom training, 38 weeks of hands-on experience as a member of a development team, Salaried employment opportunities with its clients, and on-going training and mentoring.

To date, it has partnered with several technology companies including ServiceNow, NewRocket, and Kizen to help more non-technical people land a career in coding. The company offers hourly wages for apprentices up to $20/hour.

“It’s more important than ever to have code schools around to build up San Diego’s tech talent, considering that tech giants are moving in. The markets will tighten up more and more, and senior engineers will get more valuable.”

MIKE ROBERTS

CommSafe
− from page 16

Preventing Threats and Violence
Formerly called Vigilance Risk Solutions, CommSafe has introduced first-to-market Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) tool that allows organizations to get ahead of threats and violence in the workplace before they happen.

Its technology works by analyzing communication in real-time and flags toxic rhetoric — similar to the algorithm of an email spam filter — that would threaten the integrity of a safe communication space or violate shared company policies.

In particular, it uses algorithms that can “track tone of voice,” and can pick up when a message is insulting, according to Smith.

In addition to alerting management of an issue, it also provides “next step” recommendations. For example, the system would suggest customized coaching for well-meaning employees to help them increase their communication awareness and sensitivity.

“Deterring or capturing toxic interactions early before they further escalate or deepen their harm allows organizations to focus on building a positive, inclusive culture while protecting employees,” said Smith.

“There is an enormous hunger for this type of tool, whether employees are in the office or continue to work virtually,” he added.

$53B Market Opportunity

The physical security market in the U.S. is valued at roughly $53 billion. A high growth market, it’s projected to grow at 9% year-over-year up till 2025.

Before the pandemic, CommSafe provided its clients primarily with web-based training courses and has since pivoted its business to become 100% SaaS company.

Focused on developing its CommSafe AI software, it plans to release its beta version to several customers in Q1 2021, with the full version slated to be released to the market in Q2 2021.

More than $1 Million Raised

To date, the company has raised over $1 million in pre-seed funding from investors. In addition, CommSafe was accepted into the La Jolla-based EvoNexus, the region’s biggest tech startup incubator to help scale its software.

“Raising money as an African-American founder is hard, doing it in San Diego is like almost mission impossible,” said Smith. “The fact that we’ve raised over 1 million in investor funding is something I rarely put myself on the back on.”

“At times it’s been disheartening and frustrating, but it’s also taken to — I don’t know — I’ve done hard things before and keep going,” he added.

Since founding CommSafe, Smith has assembled an executive team that includes ex-military and law enforcement veterans, as well as experts in conflict and violence prevention.

Smith’s service to the nation spanned 20 years, during which he led operations during six combat tours to Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Afghanistan.

He earned a Master of Business for Veterans from the University of Southern California, Marshall School of Business, where he currently serves as a member of the Marshall Business School Board of Counselors. Headquartered in La Jolla, the company currently employs 10.

“I was so scared out of my wits, but I was happy to have three square meals a day, a place to sleep and something to do that could possibly better my life,” Johnson said.

Johnson did well in the Marines. In fact, he excelled. He served in Kuwait and Iraq. In all, he spent 24 years in the service. After retiring from the Marines as a major general, he worked for several defense contractors. That part of his life included a period at Marine Corps Central Command in Bahrain.

The information technology skills he picked up formed the foundation for a college degree. In 2017, Johnson received a master of science in information and knowledge systems from Columbia University in New York City. He also holds a master of science in management and project management from Colorado Technical University.

Today, Johnson serves military and commercial clients, and pays it forward.

Potential business owners call his company from time to time, interested in learning what the Small Business Administration can do for them.

“We’re definitely open to help individuals get started in business,” Johnson said.

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In honor of Black History Month,
The Community of Business celebrates

BLACK-OWNED BUSINESSES
in SAN DIEGO