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The San Diego Business Journal, County of San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce (SDBCC) and the Community of Business recognize Black History Month by celebrating Black-owned businesses and leaders.





**Message from Donna DeBerry
President and CEO
County of San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce**

During Black History Month, on the heels of Martin Luther King Jr Day, we often find ourselves referring back to Dr. King's words in search of comfort and resilience and to celebrate our progress as a nation. It's tempting to feel complacent with our achievements when we look back on our history and see how far we have come. However, what we should be looking to celebrate is our potential to thrive in the present and the future. Against complacency, we can turn again to Dr. King's words as guidance on how to shape a more just and prosperous future.

Dr King described a vision wherein all the people of the world can share in the wealth of the earth because human decency will no longer permit poverty, hunger, and homelessness. With access to a historic abundance of wealth and resources, we have the chance to create positive change and lean into an inclusive future, wherein all are uplifted from poverty, hunger, and homelessness. Let's seize the opportunity before us to create economic growth and prosperity for all people and businesses in San Diego County.

The tips below can provide companies with concrete ways to help Black-owned businesses flourish:

1. **Support community organizations** - From my work with the County of San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce, I know that supporting community organizations can be one of the best ways to bolster Black owned businesses. CSDBCC and organizations like it act as a localized, centralized platform for Black-owned businesses to navigate the available resources and opportunities. Community organizations such as CSDBCC can provide grass roots insight into local needs as well as local talent.
2. **Mentor Black businesses and professionals** - When you're at the table, you have the chance to look around and see who doesn't have a plate yet. When you have access to what you need to succeed, you have the chance to look around and see who could benefit from your acumen, from your knowledge, from your network and pull them up behind you. People become energized for their own success when they receive the boost they need to help them advance.
3. **Partner with Black organizations** - A diversity of thought and experience is an asset to any enterprise. These partnerships are an opportunity for enrichment on both sides. Underrepresented groups do have valuable things to contribute to public life and to the success of any company. Don't lose out by continuing to overlook opportunities to collaborate with Black organizations.
4. **Help Black owned businesses access capital** - You need to have money to make money. The documented generational wealth gap puts Black-owned businesses at a distinct disadvantage because every business needs capital to start and to grow and Black entrepreneurs tend to begin their enterprise with less capital. Even a comparatively small grant from a corporation can have a transformative impact on the success of a developing business.
5. **Create an inclusion initiative at your organization** - Attract, recruit, and retain people from underrepresented communities at every level from executives to support staff. Not only is it just and uplifting, but because diversity is vital to any thriving organization. Remember that retention is impossible unless each employee is treated with respect and consider appointing a Diversity Officer to ensure your company acts equitably.
6. **Champion local initiatives for fair housing and anti-homelessness** - The days of considering homelessness a personal failing should be long behind us. No one can reach their full potential without confidence that they will have a safe and stable place to live.

If you'd like to support Black businesses in San Diego, and you're still not sure of where to start, contact the County of San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce for more guidance and information. You can email us at info@sdblackchamber.org or find us on Twitter at [@CSDBlackChamber](https://twitter.com/CSDBlackChamber). Join us in our mission to create generational wealth through business enterprise, education, employment, and investments and together we can bring the spirit of Black History Month into the present and the future.

CELEBRATING
BLACK
ENTREPRENEURS

WHAT'S INSIDE:

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| Business

Casper Jiu Jitsu Academy Powers Through the Pandemic

By KAREN PEARLMAN

Once an on-field gridiron stand-out for **Arena Football League** teams in Montana and Texas, **Ron Casper** is now building future martial arts stars in Linda Vista.

The San Diego native and first-degree black belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu runs the **Casper Jiu Jitsu Academy** where he helps students train and condition, gain strength of mind and body, and learn how to use martial arts in close combat for self-defense.

“I can’t speak highly enough about Jiu Jitsu,” said Casper, 40. “It’s the most mental and physical thing you can do. And if you like to study, it’s incredibly challenging and so rewarding. It can be hard or easy.”

Jiu Jitsu is an ancient fighting technique with roots in Japan that keeps those who practice it flexible and agile. Brazilian Jiu Jitsu developed later and added other ground fighting and grappling positions.

New England Roots

Casper grew up in the New England area and graduated in 2005 from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth, where he played defensive back for the Corsairs football team. He also ran the 55 meters indoor and 100 meters and 200 meters outdoors for the school’s track and field team.

He ended up back in San Diego in 2005, trained as a boxer and in the martial art/combat sport of Muay Thai and attended his first Jiu Jitsu class in 2009. He studied, stayed with it and opened his business in late 2019, just a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

With the health emergency, state and county protocols forced gyms to close, then allowed them to set up with proper social distancing and reopen.



Ron Casper sparring at his Jiu Jitsu Academy with Eric Schneider.

Photo by Karen Pearlman

During that time, Casper’s student attendance dropped from 50 to eight.

Fighting to Keep Gym Open During COVID

“It was definitely one of the hardest things that I’ve ever had to do, working my way through the pandemic to keep the gym open,” Casper said. “It was super hard. But it was also one of the best things that ever happened.”

He said during the closures and related low student turnout, he created 400 unique videos. He said he had previously been outsourcing his videomaking but taught himself how to create content, which opened his eyes to becoming a better businessman.

He said he did not apply for government funding and instead concentrated on building up his personal training business.

Casper said he has always pushed himself, with a strong work ethic learned from his parents, which he shares with his students.

“Every day on every level there are small battles, small victories,” he said. “I always say, ‘The goal in everything is to get 1 percent better every day.’ I tell people in my class that right here on the mat you’ll learn more about yourself than anything else. Jiu Jitsu helps you with life.”

The son of an African-American mother and white father, and raised with several other mixed-race family members, Casper said he has “never seen color.”

He said the most difficult part of growing up was not having to deal with taunts of “not being white enough or not being Black enough” -- though he heard that often -- it was the plight of his mother. An athlete her entire life, she was a standout runner on the track & field team for the University of Minnesota.

Drawing Inspiration from His Mother

But his mother was struck with Multiple Sclerosis when Casper was a child. He said she became a paraplegic when he was a teenager. Casper said he never saw his mother walk. She died at age 43 in 2001, when he was just 19.

“That still pains me to this day,” Casper said. “But my mom never gave up, she

fought the whole time. She believed in me and everything I did, I did to make her proud. And I still do. I run marathons for her, and when I’m out there running, I have time to talk to her daily.”

He said his father, an engineer, is still alive and remains his hero -- and vice versa.

“My dad is definitely my biggest fan,” Casper said. “My parents grinded it out and always pushed me to do better. My dad always made health a priority. I’ve been hearing him say, ‘Your health is your wealth’ since I was 4 years old.”

Casper said his job is his passion, and although “football is No. 1, and if I could play another down, I might,” that teaching Jiu Jitsu is the closest thing to it and something he will do forever.

“My dad said, you’re living your dream and he’s right,” Casper said. “My students, sometimes they will tell me they’re having a bad day and do I have any uplifting stuff? I get to talk to them and help them. That’s good for my soul.”

“Everybody in my academy knows about me, they know about my mom. I want to have that same connection with them that I had with her, to keep helping the kids and the community.” ■



Ron Casper
Owner
Casper Jiu Jitsu
Academy



Ron Casper finishes a workout.

Photo by Karen Pearlman

CASPER JIU JITSU ACADEMY

FOUNDED: 2019
PROPRIETOR: Ron Casper
STUDENTS: 50
LOCATION: 6913 Linda Vista Road, San Diego
WEBSITE: <https://casperbjj.com/>
NOTABLE: A black belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Ron Casper played professionally for several teams in the Arena Football League, which lasted from 1987-2019.

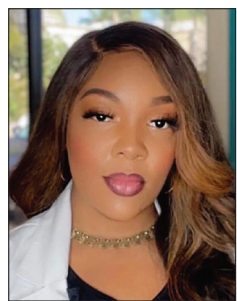
The Formula Skin Lab Brings Diversity to Beauty Space

■ By KAREN PEARLMAN

Stephanie Johnson started in the beauty industry with hopes of running a makeup studio. “Skincare wasn’t my first love,” the 39-year-old business owner admits.

But go figure – Johnson is doing a beautiful job running **The Formula Skin Lab**, a boutique skincare and facial spa in the Bankers Hill/Hillcrest area of San Diego. Johnson bravely opened the business during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 after working as an educator at a cosmetology school the previous two years.

The Formula Skin Lab is a skin and beauty bar that specializes in professional treatments including facials, microdermabrasion, acne correction, ethnic skincare, hyperpigmentation removal, hair waxing, microblading and more.



Stephanie Johnson
Owner
Formula Skin Lab

She said the company uses a professional grade vendor for some of their items but that she does have her own product line and formulations.

The business provides corrective care solutions for melanated skin and offers niche educational classes to beauty professionals.

Johnson said her typical customers are women between the ages 25 to 40, who stay an average of two hours. She said those who visit are “business owners, entrepreneurs, professional women... and mothers” coming for facials, massages and waxing.

“They love coming to get a break away from their husbands, their children, their work,” she said. “We think a lot of the time they come to relax, but a lot of times they just want to talk. We listen. We are also what I call skin therapists.”

Bringing Diversity into the Beauty Space

While she said her client base is 99 percent Black, with Latina and Asian women following, she is working toward expanding the business’s demographic and has been aiming from the start to “bring diversity into the beauty space.”

“There’s not been a lot of representation over the years for brown, black, Asian, Indian and Middle Eastern skin,” she said. “We want to welcome everybody. We fill a void, but everybody is welcome.”

Women aren’t the only ones who are seeking skin and body treatments. There is also a growing number of men who want to enjoy a break from the stressors of the days and weeks.

“The men are really loyal, some come every two weeks,” said Johnson, who prefers to go by ‘Steph J.’ “One time a woman called us and said, ‘My husband loves your products. He wants to come in this week.’ We actually set up a same-day appointment. Men are starting to come back without their wives. They get a break they didn’t know they needed till they got one!”

Johnson is originally from Connecticut, later studying mass communications while attending Benedict College in South Carolina with plans to become a journalist. She made her way to San Diego with her best friend in 2014.



Stephanie Johnson is the owner of The Formula Skin Lab. Her clients come to 'get a break.'

Photo by Karen Pearlman



Stephanie Johnson at her San Diego business.

Photo by Karen Pearlman

Roots in the Fashion Business

She said she was working in the fashion business, falling into makeup, which took her to skincare and opening her business in 2020. Through the Covid-19 pandemic mandated closures, re-openings and shut-downs, Johnson was able to transform the

business’s back area as a way for her and her staff to see more clients.

Johnson said she never applied for government funds that were specifically geared toward keeping small businesses afloat during the COVID pandemic. “I just made it work,” she said.

Johnson will be moving her business in the next few months because her building is being turned into a condominium building but for now The Formula Skin Lab remains in the location where it originally opened two years ago.

Johnson said she is tight with the business-savvy Black San Diego community. She credits the Black San Diego group (ourbsd.com) as giving a strong voice and platform to Black-owned businesses in San Diego. The group has a strong Facebook page presence, with more than 42,000 members.

“That platform really helps keep the Black community closely knit,” she said.

Johnson said she does a lot of networking in the community and that her main goal is to mentor young black youth, help minority students get into the industry, especially since most don’t get the opportunity to get into big spas to learn and grow their craft.

“In 2022, I plan to bring a full curriculum, to fill the void,” she said. “There is no education on melanated skin tones in textbooks. I want to help existing estheticians learn more about minority skin, help to elevate the experience.” ■

FORMULA SKIN LAB

BUSINESS: Skin care boutique and spa

FOUNDED: 2020

PROPRIETOR: Stephanie “Steph J” Johnson

EMPLOYEES: Six

LOCATION: 3333 Fifth Ave., Bankers Hill/Hillcrest, San Diego

WEBSITES: <https://linktr.ee/Formulaskinlab> and The Formula Skin Lab By Steph J In San Diego CA | Vagaro

NOTABLE: Spa owner Stephanie Johnson originally was considering being a journalist and studied mass communications in college.



Courtesy Eder Photography

The exterior of SIP Wine and Beer in Escondido.

SIP Wine and Beer's Tasting Room Supports Minority-Owned Brands

By KAREN PEARLMAN

It's been about six years since **Cassandra Schaeg** opened **SIP Wine and Beer** in Escondido as a place for people to get together, connect and enjoy conversation over some adult beverages.

Her tasting room champions wines and beer made by women and people of color, from New York to Oregon, and some locally sourced.

The 42-year-old entrepreneur said one of the initial reasons she moved forward on the venture was because she didn't see "a whole lot of people who look like me" – a Black woman – in the wine and beer tasting business.

She trailed the early grapevine-focused path mostly alone with just a few allies and supporters.

"The wine and beer industry is largely a white, male industry that shuts out people of color," Schaeg said. "It's also expensive to get into, leading to a lack of diversity."

But she said the wine and beer worlds are beginning to open up, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous [and] People of Color) brands are growing tremendously.

"People are being very intentional about where they're putting their money these days," Schaeg said.

Even through the COVID-19 pandemic -- when Schaeg admits she was "terrified" as the venue was closed and opened again -- Schaeg and SIP Wine and Beer's three employees have continued to serve a loyal clientele on Fridays and Saturdays. The venue continues to bring in new customers looking to enjoy camaraderie while supporting minority brands and enjoying freshly made charcuterie boards.



Cassandra Schaeg
Founder
SIP Wine and Beer

Hosting 'Fresh Glass' Docuseries

Now Schaeg is adding a new activity to her busy career. She has just begun partnering with local public television station **KPBS** to host a six-episode docuseries called "Fresh Glass."

"Owning a business is definitely difficult, and being a woman and Black is a barrier," Schaeg said. "So as a whole to evolve from a concept to a storefront to now a television show is crazy! It's like 'Huh!'"

The "Fresh Glass" reach is expected to far surpass even the busiest weekends at SIP Wine and Beer.

Schaeg and Theresa Hollies, a multimedia writer and producer, co-created **Fresh Glass Productions LLC**, with the plan to highlight wineries, breweries and restaurants that are owned by women and

persons of color. She said interested organizations and companies who want to support Fresh Glass can visit the website www.freshglassproductions.com

Connecting with Winemakers and Brewmasters

"These shows will be about adventures that I take connecting with winemakers and brewmasters and will eventually have a national reach of 50 million viewers," Schaeg said. "It all aligns with helping other entrepreneurs, highlighting women and BIPOC innovators. If you have a passion for wine, beer, food and adventure, here it is."

She said her goal as a business owner – and for the docuseries – is to "lift the fog" and show that there "are people like me out there, that we are not anomalies."



East Coast born, but raised in San Diego and Temecula, Schaeg said her career background is steeped in the social service realm. She also worked in corporate America, where she said she learned to speak her mind.

Through her travels over the years, Schaeg realized that in the wine-tasting world, "I didn't see a lot of people like me – and that sparked an interest."

She moved to Escondido in 2014, formed SIP in 2015 and opened the venue's doors in 2016. She calls Escondido "a charming city," but that it was in need of change and new businesses with new business owners.

"I wanted to do something different and change the general perception of the wine and beer business," she said. "I wanted someone who does look like me exploring wine, topics, grabbing bottles of wine and hanging out."

Schaeg graduated with a bachelor's

degree in social science from Cal State Chico and has a master's degree in public administration from National University.

She said being a voice for others has been a recurring theme in her life and that women and persons of color are important as models for future entrepreneurs.

"I have said, 'If you don't see yourself in this space, be the person in the space.' We need to see women as inspirations." ■

SIP Wine and Beer

FOUNDED: 2015

FOUNDER AND CEO: Cassandra Schaeg

EMPLOYEES: 3

LOCATION: 131 S. Orange St., Escondido

HOURS: 5 to 10 p.m. Friday; 2 to 10 p.m. Saturday

WEBSITE: <https://sipwineandbeer.com/>

NOTABLE: Founder Cassandra Schaeg will be co-hosting a new six-episode docuseries on KPBS called "Fresh Glass."



Photo by Karen Pearlman

Neisha Young at Hairtopia Salon in San Diego.

Neisha Young Offers Classy Cuts at Hairtopia Salon

■ By KAREN PEARLMAN

Neisha Young was 14 years old when she told her grandmother that she wanted to cut her hair for her.

"You can't cut my hair," her grandmother said, believing that Neisha wouldn't know how.

The proposed haircut conversation continued with a chorus of "Yes I cans," from Neisha and "No, you can'ts," from her grandmother.

And of course, in the end, grandma relented, saying, "Well, I'll make you a deal, you can cut it, but if you don't do a good job, there's going to be trouble!"



Neisha Young
Owner
Hairtopia Salon

Neisha said her grandmother was a no-nonsense woman who said what she meant and meant what she said. And in the end, Neisha did cut her grandmother's hair — and did it well.

"My grandmother would take me with to get a haircut at Supercuts, and I watched them closely," Young said. "They always did the same steps, the same system. That's how I knew."

Now, nearly 35 years later with a master's cosmetology degree to her name, Neisha Young runs her own hair salon, **Hairtopia Salon**, in downtown San Diego. Her single-seat salon is one of more than a dozen hair and nail salons plus beauty and cosmetics supply shops on the bottom floor of 1281 Ninth St. in the Phenix Salon Suites.

"Cutting hair always came naturally to me," said Young, a native San Diegan who



Photo by Karen Pearlman

Young works on client Chenntel Henry's hair.

grew up in the southeastern part of the city and attended Lincoln High.

Young opened the doors to Hairtopia in 2018, but her very first customer, the one Young said inspired her, was not there to celebrate. Her grandmother passed away in 1997 and never got to see how far Young has come.

"I like that it's intimate in here," Young said of her cozy salon that includes a soft, comfortable couch with fluffy pillows, a coffee cart, wine and wine glasses, a giant pair of scissors on the wall and simple phrases like "Be humble," "Pray More, Worry Less" and "Dream Big."

"I'm very one-on-one with my clients," Young said. "It's empowering to be able

to have someone sit in your chair and you are making them feel good about themselves. I have clients that I've known for years and I'm still super close to them."

"When you think about it, no one else in your life gets such close contact with you, other than someone who does your nails, or a doctor. They can talk to me about anything, they are that close and connected."

COVID Temporarily Closes Hair Salons

Young provides haircutting and color services to about 60 regular customers who come weekly or every other week. She said some of her clients fell off the radar at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,

but most have returned as Hairtopia, like all hair salons, was allowed to re-open.

Young said she knew something was amiss months before the pandemic began in the U.S. because many of her products come from China and Japan, and starting in December 2019, she either wasn't able to get them or the shipments were delayed for months.

She said COVID-19 forced her shop to close for 270 days. "I felt like the bottom had been pulled out from under me. A lot of us were worried," Young said of many of the other salons in the Phenix suites. "If you didn't have a little cushion, you were thinking, 'Oh my God.'"

Since the pandemic began, Young said she has been able to secure nearly \$25,000 in two rounds of federal funding to help businesses like hers stay afloat.

Young said she has deep connections to the Black San Diego community and is proud of where she comes from. But she added that it can be challenging to run your own business when you are a Black woman.

"You're judged automatically because of your skin color, which is sad, but true," Young said. "A lot of people don't take us seriously because we are in such a weird place with race right now. As a Black woman, I make sure I'm a step ahead of everything that is going on. I make sure that I go the extra mile. I always strive to be a little bit better." ■

HAIRTOPIA SALON

FOUNDED: 2018

OWNER: Neisha Young

ADDRESS: 2814 Ninth Ave., San Diego

WEBSITE: <https://www.styleseat.com/m/v/neishayoung>

NOTABLE: 48-year-old owner Neisha Young has a twin brother who is six minutes older.

The Bright App Connects Personal Trainers with Fitness Seekers

■ By KAREN PEARLMAN

You might think **Nerissa Zhang** prescient. Six months before COVID-19 became the underlying factor in nearly every aspect of life, the fitness-focused Zhang started an online app that allows personal trainers to connect with fitness seekers -- and vice versa -- called **The Bright App**.

Zhang said she realized many years ago that people who want to work out, especially women, needed an alternative to becoming members of a gym. So she took the plunge Sept. 13, 2020 and launched her online venture.

By the middle of 2020, with the pandemic closing gyms and forcing people to stay at home, the app's popularity soared -- from 12 clients to more than 3,000 -- and now The Bright App has 8,000 users, with no end in sight.

The Bright App empowers instructors to grow and maintain their private practices, providing a back-office tool for trainers, to help them with leads, sales, scheduling and billing. With the technology, trainers are able to instruct clients from anywhere in the world.

On the user side, The Bright App clients get a convenient and private one-on-one physical fitness experience with personalized training from a vetted professional by digital means.

More Efficient Lives

"Tech disrupts the way we live to make

our lives more efficient," said Zhang, a former elite trainer who had a large clientele in her hometown San Francisco and was running some of the top fitness facilities in the area, helping train more than 360 weightlifting and powerlifting athletes among others.

Raised in the California Central valley near Merced, Zhang returned further north to study business at San Francisco State. She dabbled in the catering business, worked in the daycare industry and sold real estate. She said she found her way into the fitness world after working for a restaurant, at which she said she found herself gaining weight.



Nerissa Zhang
CEO
The Bright App

"I got a trainer myself, and never looked back," said Zhang, 34, who now lives in Carlsbad with her husband of six years, **James Zhang** and their three children. James Zhang is The Bright App CTO, and has a solid background on the tech side, including the sale of his first startup when he was 25.

James Zhang has sold more than 50 apps on iOS, Android and the web. He is also the builder of the first version of **Google Assistant**, which runs on 1 billion devices.

When the couple was still living in Northern California, he said he was a "computer geek" and in front of a screen all the time when he started noticing that his gym-owning wife was spending an inordinate amount of time on her cell phone on Sundays.

She told her husband she was doing back-office work, trying to organize details for the gym. He said he realized then there was no app for either gym owners or consumers for personalized one-on-one training.

Furthermore, James Zhang said trainers often needed help with writing emails to clients, and that there were billing apps and scheduling apps, but nothing that put everything all together, that could do things like move cancelled workout sessions on calendars.

He said that the app was borne of that need, and that once the pandemic hit, he and his wife realized that not only could the app apply to in-person training needs, but also to the online world.

Light Bulb Moment

"The light bulb went on," James Zhang said. "It opened up so much."

He said the app also allows for a kind of matchmaking, far different from a gym experience where there may be just a handful of trainers and clients often are put with a random trainer who may or may not fill the person's specific needs.

"We provide a full service," he said. "We give them a list and ask them for information in a detailed onboarding survey. We're building into this a lot of data, like **Yelp** with its thousands of reviews. There's no other place that offers this, live one-on-one training in which the trainer develops a relationship with the client. Talking

with a trainer helps build trust and that's where it's at."

Nerissa Zhang said she wanted to give trainers another way to earn their livelihood, especially after the pandemic started and put 400,000 trainers out of work, closing 50 percent of gyms, many of which remain shuttered, she said.

"I love what I did but my goal has always been to help trainers make a living, so they don't have to leave the field," Zhang said. "I realized trainers didn't always make enough money working at the gym.

The gym did all the hard work, the heavy lifting, and trainers had to give away 75 to 80 percent of their income.

"It doesn't seem right for trainers, who provide people with a valuable service. I'm a fixer, too, and wanted to give trainers a way to make more money, and the way to do it is through technology." ■



James Zhang
CTO
The Bright App

THE BRIGHT APP

FOUNDED: 2020
CEO: Nerissa Zhang
CTO: James Zhang
HEADQUARTERS: San Diego
EMPLOYEES: 12
WEBSITE: <https://www.getbright.app/>
NOTABLE: The Zhangs left San Francisco so their two oldest competitive soccer-playing sons would have more opportunities to play in the San Diego County area.

CELEBRATING BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2022



The San Diego Business Journal in association with the County of San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce (CSDBCC) is proud to honor the Top 50 Black Leaders of Influence. Nominations will be accepted for Black Business Leaders who work for private and public companies, nonprofits, government agencies as well as owners of businesses. A panel of independent judges will select the Top 50. Honorees will be published in the February 28 publication and get the opportunity to attend the winners cocktail reception in March.

DEADLINE: February 9, 2022 @ 5pm

NOMINATE NOW at [SDBJ.COM/BIZEVENTS](https://www.sdbj.com/bizevents)