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Women-Owned Businesses Thrive in Beverly/Morgan Park

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By Kristin Boza

It's no secret that some extraordinary businesses call Beverly/Morgan Park home. Many of these businesses, from hair salons to clothing stores to restaurants to fitness studios and more, are owned by women. The entrepreneurial spirit is strong within this group of women who all found a way to fulfill a need within the community.

RMH Interiors + Design, 1800 W. 103rd St., is a unique lifestyle brand creating beautiful interiors for functional living. "Our

approach is to use and reinvent existing pieces, working them into a fresh vision that captures a client's lifestyle," owner Robin Harmon said. "We also have a 3,800 square foot showroom featuring new and vintage furniture, clothing, global art and one-of-a-kind accessories for home and body."

Harmon says that the biggest challenge she faces is doing everything herself. "Moving furniture and inventory boxes and working long hours has become a norm for me," she said. "But the process of owning my own business has taught me patience, persistence and perseverance. Nothing is given to you in life; if you want it, you need to get it!"

Harmon says her business has survived over five years without any financial start-up gifts or loans. "As a small, minority-owned, female-gendered business, I began with my own money that I saved for four years; that in itself is a unique contribution to my ethnic culture and dialogue," she said. "I have become an example that many minorities and women appreciate; people often visit my showroom to show their kids what is possible if you work hard enough."

She advises female entrepreneurs to "be realistic as to what [owning a business] will take. Hire a mentor who has already done what you want to do," she said.

Belle Up, 1915 W. 103rd St., positions itself as a one-stop shop specializing in women's contemporary apparel and maternity wear. Owner Jamenda McCoy established the boutique in 2009 and now has locations throughout the city. McCoy advises other women business owners to always listen to their customers and adapt as necessary.

"We've always tried to be very sensitive to other women business owners," McCoy said. "I was one of the founding members of the Southside Women's Business Alliance, and we carry products by women and from other women-owned businesses in the neighborhood. Women helping women has been important in our business community. Women in our neighborhood come together to partner and find new and different ways to help develop our business corridors. Bringing a diversity of perspectives to the table is always rewarding."

McCoy advises others to take the leap to own a business;

despite doing research and calculating the risk, you may never know how it will go unless you take the plunge. "Beverly is a special community, but you have to know it. You have to invest in it and that takes a lot of work." McCoy is always available to her customers, which is sometimes a misunderstood fact of owning a small business. "I get calls or texts in the middle of the night sometimes, but living in the community and being accessible to your customers is the life of a small business owner. As a small business, you have to be willing to commit to your customers."

Capsule, 9915 S. Walden Pkwy., is opening on Fri., Sept. 8. Owner Maura Conine offers women's apparel, accessories, jewelry and select gift items all around the theme of a "capsule wardrobe" — meaning an edited collection of clothes and accessories that are versatile and don't go out of style. "Our focus at Capsule is to carry wearable pieces that offer a diverse collection of items that are thoughtful and well-made," she said.

Conine is new to owning a business, and foresees her main challenge to be work/life balance, as she and her husband juggle caring for their two young boys. "As much as it will be challenging, I am proud to have my children see my drive and determination to fulfill my dreams of opening my own store in the neighborhood we call home," she said. "I'm most excited to share my point of view with the community. Our goal is to get to know our customer's needs and lifestyle in order to guide them to build more edited and effortless wardrobes. I dream of Capsule being a space that celebrates the strength and creativity of women."

As her dreams become a reality, Conine advises other potential business owners to take their dream and make a plan. "Writing my business plan allowed me to see past the frills and fun of opening a boutique and understand the facts and figures of starting my own business," she said. "Once that is finished and you're still passionate about your idea or business ... jump!"

In just 50 minutes, clients at Treadfit, 10458 S. Western Ave., experience calorie-melting cardio interval training and strength training. Owner Jenny Harkins says her biggest challenge as a female business owner is balancing the responsibilities of her business and her family.

“My focus on Treadfit begins when I wake up and often extends until late at night,” she said. “The hard work is rewarded when I see the amazing changes my clients go through, becoming more confident, stronger and leaner.”

With a location in the heart of Western Avenue, Harkins feels that Treadfit plays a role in highlighting what other businesses have to offer in Beverly/Morgan Park. “Many of my clients come from the surrounding cities to take classes at Treadfit. Hopefully, they will stay to shop, eat and enjoy all of our wonderful community events as well!”

Bev Lynch, owner of Running Excels, 10326 S. Western Ave., agrees with Harkins on the positive benefits her business has for other local shops. “I consider Running Excels a destination place. We draw customers from other communities, which gives Beverly some exposure,” she said.

Running Excels is the perfect place to find athletic shoes and accessories to fit the needs of any athlete — from amateur to professional. Like many other women business owners, Running Excels owner Bev Lynch understands the pressure of balancing a business and a family. “The flexibility in my schedule as a business owner allows me to leave when I need to attend to my family’s needs or events,” she said. “As females, we have learned to be organized and multi-task, handling our homes and businesses alike.”

Cakewalk Chicago, 1741 W. 99th St., specializes in baking and pastry supplies, including cookie cutters, candy molds and icings. Owner Lori Parrett sees the unique role Cakewalk Chicago has in our community and she is proud of her business’ reach. “Many of our customers are bakers who sell their products right here in Beverly/Morgan Park. Cakewalk Chicago supports the economy of these bakers, who then spend money in the community too.”

Parrett says that a significant challenge is competing with big box stores. “But it’s our personal touch that provides so much to our neighborhood,” she said. “We greet our customers by name; we celebrate birthdays, christenings, weddings and more with families while helping them make beautiful edible memories.”

She sometimes wonders if the long hours and stress are worth it. "But then a customer shares a story or a photo of a cake you helped them to make and you remember why you love what you do," Parrett said. Overall, Parrett says the rewards are awesome and she advises other potential female business owners to "believe in yourself, do what you love, and support each other. We are stronger together."

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