

Interviews with Entrepreneurs: Episode 2 (The Realities and Myths of Entrepreneurship)

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In our second episode of Interviews with Entrepreneurs, we chat with Tiffany Brown and Klassi Duncan from Louisiana. They discuss the realities and myths of entrepreneurship and more.

Tiffany Brown, Wicks NOLA Candle Company

Klassi Duncan, Urban League of Louisiana

Imani Augustus, Third Way

Imani Augustus

All right, well, thank you so much for joining us today, Ms. Tiffany Brown and Klassi Duncan. I'm excited to have a conversation with you and hear all about the entrepreneurial journey that you've been on, Ms. Brown and Klassi, your work with the National Urban League to support businesses and to ensure their success. So kind of where I want to start is just a little bit of background. Tiffany, you are the CEO and founder of Wicks NOLA Candle Company, and you're based in New Orleans. Can you tell us a little bit about what inspired you to start your business?

Tiffany Brown

Yes, hi. Thank you guys for having us today. I really appreciate the opportunity. I started Wicks NOLA in 2018. It's just a means for additional income. I'm a married mom of two girls and my girls were just getting older and just wanting to do different things that were hitting my pockets. They wanting to learn how to drive and you know, needing vehicles and insurance and all those things that come along with raising girls and raising kids. And I was working full time in medical practice doing management and just making a good salary but it just wasn't enough. So I started looking at another means for income, just an extra stream of income to kind of help ends meet and trying to figure out what I wanted to do when I decided to take my love for fragrance and candles and scent and turn it into a business. And that's pretty much how I started.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, that's wonderful. How did you get connected to the National Urban League down in New Orleans?

Tiffany Brown

So I had been looking for funding and just looking for help as far as running my business and structuring my business. I do feel like as entrepreneurs a lot of times we have dream and we have vision, but we don't have the education and direction to start a business and run a business legit and legally. So the Urban League has been just a big help with that as far as getting my paperwork in order and helping me with programs and learning systems and things like that. So I'm just very thankful for them. I actually connected with them during COVID.

Imani Augustus

Okay, and Klassi you are you serve as the vice president for the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the Urban League of Louisiana. Can you tell us about your role there? Tell us about the entrepreneurship center and some of the programming that you all provide.

Klassi Duncan

Sure, and thank you so much, Imani, for the opportunity for Tiffany and I to be here. It's such a wonderful opportunity for us to be able to share more about Tiffany and her business, and also more about the Urban League of Louisiana and the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation. As many folks know, we are one of more than 90 affiliates of the National Urban League. And so the Urban League of Louisiana, this year we are celebrating our 85th anniversary are really in the space of supporting African-Americans and other underserved communities in gaining access to economic independence, racial justice, economic parity. And so we just are thrilled to be able to deliver programs not only in New Orleans, but across the state of Louisiana to support individuals and specifically businesses. So our Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, you know, what we do as one of the National Urban League's entrepreneurship centers, there are 13 of us, as one of the

National Urban League's entrepreneurship centers, we are in the business of small business development. We work to provide training, we work to provide counseling and business coaching, and also access to resources for businesses that are looking to start and those that are looking to grow. We understand the challenges of small business owners. We know what the important aspects of growing a small business are. And so when we focus on developing trainings, when we focus on delivering counseling services to our small businesses, we focus on those critical elements of entrepreneurial development, those critical tenants that we know are important to our businesses. And that is everything from strategic planning, to marketing, HR, PR, and of course, the accounting and financial management. And also of course, as Tiffany mentioned, getting access to funding to support the growth of a small business. And so we are in the space again, of making sure that businesses get access to those resources.

Imani Augustus

Thank you.

Klassi Duncan

Here at the Urban League of Louisiana, our Center for Entrepreneurship, it is so important because what we try to do is make sure that we are providing services to businesses across various stages of development and across various industries. So we have some targeted programs to support small businesses. One of the programs, for example, that Tiffany is a part of right now is through a partnership with the National Urban League and Walmart. It is our Black Women in Retail Accelerator Program, an amazing program where we are supporting our Black women-owned retailers in gaining the information, knowledge, and resources to not only, you know, for some of the businesses, get on the shelves, but for a lot of the businesses to expand their presence within the retail space and to grow their businesses. And so the program, again, offers mentorship support. And it's just a shining example of the types of programs that we have that are targeted but to support specific businesses and specific industries.

Imani Augustus

That's great. I want to talk more about that program, but Tiffany, I want to come back to you. Klassi mentioned some of the challenges across the board that Black founders and entrepreneurs face, particularly in the Louisiana community. What have been some of the challenges you have faced in your personal entrepreneurship journey as you started to get this business off the ground and as you have kind of been in business for a few years now?

Tiffany Brown

I think for me, the biggest challenge at the beginning was time management.

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Tiffany Brown

Because I had this dream to start a business, but I did still have to continue to work a nine to five until my business was able to provide a living for me and my family. So just trying to manage, you know, running a business, getting education about running that business, and still trying to work a full time job during the day, that was extremely difficult at first. We have one of the most expensive rent and lease price here in the state of Louisiana. When you're looking to find space to open up to operate a business, the rents are so expensive here. It's almost impossible just starting out to be able to put down, you know, deposit first months of rent in a space. The insurance rates are high and ridiculous as well. So you know, getting permitting and all these things. When you just stepped into this realm, and like I said, you just know you're good at what you do, and you want to be able to take that and give that experience to people, everything that comes with it can be so overwhelming at times. I think sometimes it deters people from starting businesses. You know, myself, I did not attend college, so I don't have a degree in business. So all of this was new to me. So I'm very thankful for programs like the Urban League that have helped me learn how to get my business and my books in order, helping me with certification and things like that are gonna push my business to the next level.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, and Klassi is that pretty common for the businesses that you work with at the entrepreneurship center for them to come from all kinds of backgrounds, not necessarily, you know, a formal professional business background and education?

Klassi Duncan

Yeah, absolutely. I would say that, you know, I would say that the majority of our small business owners have not had any formal, you know, business training or just experience, right, with managing a business. And that's why, you know, really focusing in on the entrepreneurial ecosystem in really leveraging the resources is so critical because we are here to support businesses and business owners and entrepreneurs like Tiffany that again have not had any formal training.

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

The other piece that I think is so critical is making sure that we understand the dynamics, right? Of not only this entrepreneur and this business, but also the everyday experience, right, as individuals. Because one of the critical things that we see a lot in terms of lack of resources is, you know, lack of childcare, right? When you're trying to get to a training or you're trying to start a business, but you

don't have, you know, childcare to support you taking that time away from your family. It's childcare, it's also elderly care. A number of folks are the caretakers and primary caretakers for their elderly family members. There's so many circumstances again that our small businesses have to overcome. Sometimes it's even transportation. With COVID, we saw just an influx of folks exploring and really starting businesses, but really exploring the opportunity for entrepreneurship as a pathway to really just make more money. And what was so important is that our entrepreneurship centers across the country really went in and really doubled down on the types of services that we were providing. We were able to, again, like so many others, continue providing training. And we saw an increase in the number of businesses that were participating, one, because of accessibility. If we're doing our trainings virtually, it was amazing the number of folks that were able to now participate. That includes people and individuals that are in some of our more under-resourced areas and communities where you don't see a lot of training in small business resources. They were now able to plug in. And so it's just important to be, one, acknowledge all of the circumstances that our small business owners face and then try to make sure and put in place really some mechanisms to be able to support them in that way. We're now exploring opportunities for more programs that support childcare. We're now balancing out everything is not in-person, as it once was prior to COVID. Going, making sure that we are getting out again, those under-resourced communities because again, a number of people, we've seen such an increase, the number of folks that are looking at small business ownership, and we want to make sure that we are getting to those folks as early as possible in the process. Because, you know, at a certain point, you know, we found that so many businesses found that, hey, you know, when they don't get the support, they find themselves in trouble, right?

They find themselves because, you know, as Tiffany mentioned, some of the scenarios where, you know, you don't know about, you know, licensing, permitting, zoning, you don't know about...you know, how to get access to the capital that you need and how to prepare to access that capital. And we find that the earlier that businesses come to us, the better we can help them in getting access to those resources early on.

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

And so they're not making too much of a time and investment, putting too much time and too much investment early on to something that may not be the best approach.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, that's great. And I think about what you said, you know, this entrepreneurial ecosystem, it really is...capital is important, right? Let's not, you know, pass over that. But there are so many other parts of an entrepreneur's life, just an individual who is trying to, you know, care for their

children and also care for, you know, some older folks in their family and get around town with transportation. And these are all things that are in the minds of entrepreneurs, it seems like. And Tiffany, would you say that these are kind of some of the wedge things that you really had to figure out? How am I going to start this business, grow this business while having these other challenges? What were some of those surrounding circumstances for you as you were kind of starting to grow this?

Tiffany Brown

Yeah, definitely. I think just being a woman, you know, separates the experience a lot of times. And don't get me wrong, of course, you know, dads are there and I don't want to take anything away from men and take anything away from fathers. But a lot of times we are the primary caretakers in the home. So when you're not present a lot of times, you know, it's like you're having to make sure that you have things in place. Who's going to cook dinner? you know, who's gonna get the kids off the bus, you know, because now I have a meeting that I'm trying to go to, or I'm here working out of my home, you know, doing things like that, you know. So I know a lot of times I always speak to people just that I've met along the way and just stressing the importance of the balance of it all and how important that homework balance is because I had an experience with my own child at one point that... She was dealing with a lot of depression and things like that. And I was so busy working and pushing and trying to provide what I thought was a safe space for her and trying to have generational wealth to leave to my kids and doing all these things. But I was neglecting the signs that my child was needing help. And I felt awful afterwards because I felt like this is what I'm doing. I'm trying to be a good mom, and I'm trying to be a good businesswoman. Just trying to be so many different things to so many different people. A lot of times it's just one of those things that you experience in this journey of entrepreneurship. It's not for the weak, it's not always easy. It's a lot of sacrifice and I think people don't speak to that. I think a lot of times we like to glorify entrepreneurship and make it seem like it's just this, we get money all the time and it's, but it's a lot of hard work. Like I said, it's a lot of sacrifice. It's time with your spouse when you're married a lot of times. You're pulled away from marriage. You're pulled away from your children a lot of times while you're out there grinding, trying to make this thing work. And hopefully at some point it does to get to that to where then I can step back and just enjoy everything that I've built. But the beginning, it's work and you have to be ready to put the work in.

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

I think, yeah, I think

Imani Augustus

oh, go ahead.

Klassi Duncan

Tiffany is just, again, just a great example of kind of, what we also recommend to our small business owners is starting with care, starting slowly, because even, as Tiffany mentioned, she was, had that full-time job when she started, right? And so those are the things that we have to do for our family, but also they can contribute, those jobs contribute to the resources that we have to start the business the right way.

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

But I also think it's so important in, again, Tiffany mentioned, getting to the point where you can step back. That's one of the major things that we at the Urban League of Louisiana are focused in on with our small businesses. And that is not only starting the right way, but getting to the point where you're growing the right way. And for us, the definition of growing the right way is to scale, right? In scalability, I mean, we have a pro-entire program called Scale Up Louisiana that we take across the state. It's a 10 session modular program where we are working with our small businesses that have been in business for a couple of years, but they're at a point where they have acknowledged and see that they don't necessarily have a scalable business model. One that they're focused in on, you know, really, you know, what are the strategies for increasing revenue, but also what are the strategies for really getting those operating expenses right, right? And how to balance that out within the business because in scalability is all about also making sure that, you know, you have the right systems in place, the right people in place, the right resources in place so that you are able to walk away from the business if you need to in terms of caring for your family, in terms of, you know, going to the... baseball game, going to soccer practice, whatever that is or whatever that looks like for you. And it's so important that we get to the point where we're developing, not only starting businesses, because I always say anybody can start a business, right?

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

But it's about growing that business and scaling that business to a point where it lasts beyond the owner, right?

Imani Augustus

That's right.

Klassi Duncan

What business needs to have legs to last beyond the owner. And so you're putting again, all of those systems, all of those replicable systems and processes to make sure that happens. And so that's one of the focus areas for us that is so critical for our small businesses. Again, those that are, they're going the, they're in the race, right? They've been in business two or

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

three years, but again, they need to fine tune the scalability model. And that is

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

so critical to our small businesses. And so, you know, again, we continue to support businesses like Tiffany in doing just that.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, that's excellent. That's something that we think a lot about here as well at the Alliance for Entrepreneurial Equity is there are many government federal programs through the Small Business Administration, through the Minority Business Development Agency, but we really want to see those curriculums at those resource centers right size their programs to the size of the business because like you said, you know, Black, particularly Black women, they're the fastest growing demographic of entrepreneurs in our country today. And so it's not an issue or a question of people starting like our people, do people want to start businesses? It's how do we get these businesses to add employees to get to scale, to really grow into a lucrative venture and get, you know, Tiffany to a point where she has employed enough employees where she can take a step back and maybe start something new. And so I love that's really a center point of what you all are thinking about at the Urban League.

Klassi Duncan

Absolutely.

Tiffany Brown

Mm-hmm.

Imani Augustus

Tiffany, I want to go back to what you mentioned about the challenges you face as an entrepreneur starting up in the beginning and this kind of resilience that we see among Black entrepreneurs, particularly because we face so many other challenges outside of the business. You shared with our team in a previous call around your storefront and some of the disaster that happened and the destruction that happened with some of your storefront properties. Can you share

Tiffany Brown

Mm-hmm.

Imani Augustus

a little bit about that story with us?

Tiffany Brown

Yeah, sure. I opened my first storefront location in 2020 in December, right around Christmas time. I was like, I want to be open for the Christmas rush. Opened in 2020 of December, and the following year we were hit with Hurricane Ida. I want to say that happened around August of 21. So I was in an older space. Landlord decided at that point she wasn't going to bring the building back. So it was myself and maybe 14 or 15 other storefront owners, all Black women that were pretty much displaced at that point. We had to all move out and try to find different spaces to operate the business. At that point, I kind of struggled because I wondered if I wanted to even go back into a space or did I just want to return back to my house and continue working out of home. But I just wanted more for my business and just that one little step out into that small store really gave me the confidence to know that I could do this on a larger scale. And just gave me the confidence to finally just leave my full-time job and go for, you know, a full-time store front. So, two months later, I was able to move into what was my dream location at that time. I was able to get some grant money from Urban League because I honestly struggled to even think that I could afford to move into that space. But just the more that I prayed about it, everything just kind of started coming into place. Like it just worked out somehow. And I was able to move into a storefront there, move into that storefront on Good Friday of 2021. And then on, not Good Friday, on Black Friday, which is November of 2021. And then four months later, in April of 2022, we had a store fire. Some of our electrical equipment caught fire at the back of the store. So we were forced to close the store down again. So this was my second time having a storefront location that was pretty much destroyed. At the time, I did not have any insurance because we moved into the store right after the hurricane. So no one in the state of Louisiana would write us a policy right after a major storm. So we moved into that space basically on faith and hoping nothing was gonna happen before we got a chance to get a policy, but we didn't. So that was pretty much a total loss. So since then I've just been here back at home, working out of home, and we've just continued to keep going. Just I was telling the last person I spoke to, it took probably about a year before I was able to even speak about the whole ordeal without like breaking into tears, and I didn't even realize for a while I think I was honestly

depressed. I do. I think it's just in our nature as Black women just to keep going, keep going, keep going, keep going. And it's like we ignore everything. It's like just focusing on work and keeping our head down and making it happen. And we're just so used to doing that. And that's just kind of what I did. But like I said, not realizing, I wasn't taking care of myself because I was dealing with that loss. I had not grieved. It was almost like a death.

Klassi Duncan

Yeah.

Tiffany Brown

And I had not grieved at loss until finally I was in here in the house one day and something in me just broke. And I just cried. Walked through my house and I was like, God, like, I felt like this was ordained. I felt like you put me in this space. I felt like I prayed about it. You made everything work out the way it was supposed to, you know, but it was so many other lessons that came from that, that I now see, that I didn't see at the time, but I believe I can do anything at this point. There is nothing, there is nothing that can stop me at this point because I've done and dealt with so much in life and in business at this point. that I'm just ready to, like you said, get myself to where I can scale my business, set myself up for longevity, set myself up for stability, so that this business can be here to provide for my family.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, that's remarkable. And I love that you didn't quit, you know, that you still today are operating this business and, you know, really honoring kind of the years that you've been through by like keeping on and not letting that dream die. Klassi, what has this looked like for you as you work with other businesses? I'm sure you have probably served other businesses that have faced the hurricanes and kind of this disaster. What has that looked like?

Klassi Duncan

Yeah. I mean, you know, if you can ask anyone, you know, the, I would say the Gulf Coast, state of Louisiana, you can say New Orleans, there's other parts of the state that have been hit. We have actually, you know, been in a position where it's a recurring, you know, this, when you have a hurricane season, right, you know, it's, this is an annual thing, right, but it's not just hurricanes. You know, that's just, you know, because of where we are. But there are other things like Tiffany mentioned, you know, a fire. There's other, you know, things that happen within the lives of our small business owners that we have to, again, figure out how we're going to make it work, figure out our way around it and keep pushing, right. And keep going. It is actually so you know, vitally important that folks understand the level of resilience that it takes to

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

be in this region, right? Just being in this region. The level of resilience and the level of, you know, continuity of resilience, right? It has to be a part of your spirit to be able to manage every day. You know, we're talking about hurricanes flooding more recently, tornadoes have hit a number of places across our state. Again, the hits keep coming, but that's why, that's why it's so important for our small businesses to leverage the resources that are around them. And again, I will stand on this. Louisiana has one of the most robust and comprehensive entrepreneurial ecosystems. You mentioned earlier about the SBA. The SBA, our Louisiana district office, is a magnificent team of individuals that have been, they've been through it, right? They've experienced it along with us as practitioners, but also our small businesses, right? Hurricane Katrina, then all of the hurricanes that have come after, even things like the BP oil spill. There are so many things that have impacted our community. And to have such a, again, a robust ecosystem is just one thing that I say that we are definitely at an advantage of for having. And so when we think about the programs of the SBA, we're a part of that vast network. So we have the Women's Business Centers, which we have the Women's Business Center that serves the state, but we also have, you know, our SBDC network, we have SCORE, we have our Veterans Business Outreach Centers. The SBA network is just a critical, critical part of, you know, the ecosystem here. And so, again, I always encourage our SOAR business owners to leverage organizations like us and other technical assistance partners, leverage the resources because again, if we're here, we know, right? It's not if something is going to happen, it's just when. That's

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

the way we live. And that's how, again, we have kind of built up that armor of resilience because we have to.

Tiffany Brown

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

It is not a choice. It is an imperative. This is how we have to exist in order to, and again, we wanna make sure that our businesses are not only starting, but they have, again, access to resources, access to connections, access to the people, the funding to do it the right way so that they can scale. And so again, Tiffany has, again, is just an example, an example of some of the challenges that our

small businesses have to face every day. And again, we wanna make sure that our businesses continue to get as many resources as they can as they go through their process.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, that's great. And you mentioned a lot of the, you know, government programs and agencies that are in the community. And that's something that we spend a lot of time thinking about at AEE. You know, our mission is to build a comprehensive federal agenda that helps women and people of color, not just start and fund their businesses, but scale those businesses. And so, Klassi, is this something that you think about as you lead your entrepreneurship center, what specific policies and programs do you think would be most helpful from the government side in and be effective at supporting businesses?

Klassi Duncan

Yeah, I think what's important is that, and so, you know. Of course, the space that we're in at the Urban League is, we are definitely on the side of advocating for individuals in small businesses and communities across the state of Louisiana. And one of the things that's so important to us, I mentioned earlier that we are a women's business center for the SBA. And as a part of the women's business centers network, we are part of the Association of Women's Business Centers advocates and supports small business owners, our women entrepreneurs, but also the WBCs themselves. And so one of the things that has been a major topic for us is not only the modernization and reauthorization of the Women's Business Center program, but also on specific policies and programs that can support our women-owned businesses. I mentioned, you know, we talked about childcare. You know, what are some of the policies, programs that can be put in place, and resources that can be put in place to support the women's business centers in providing childcare services, or at least, you know, access to a childcare provider? What about, you know, elderly care? What about the transportation? What about, those are some of the things that we are talking about in developing, you know, initiatives and really on the side of advocating for, again, resources in these spaces, because we know that those are, that's where the challenges lie. Those are some of the things that keep our small businesses from being able to access the resources. And so, you know, those are the things, those types of things that we, you know, want to, again, advocate for, but also be, you know, get support from, you know, our government programs and legislation on. It's again, we know it's always an important topic of conversation because it is the conversation and it's around access to capital. And so what we've seen is, there has been a lot of progress in the space of specific programs being put in place to support small businesses. We need more though, we need more in terms of, in one of the things that I am I'm always talking about is a transparency from our financial institutions around, what are some of the, what are those reasons and barriers as to why our small businesses are not, especially minority-owned small businesses, women-owned small businesses, why are we not getting access to capital at the same level of others? And so I'd like to see more transparency in that space because

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

our small businesses, we know. that once they come through a program, once they get the training, and once they are connected to this ecosystem, they now have the tools, right? We're working with them step by step on building the financial and operational capacity of the business. There's just that one barrier, right? Which is, like Tiffany mentioned, just the cost of starting, right? If there was space there for more startups to get access to capital, you know, again, that could go a long way. So those are some of the things that we are thinking about considering and making sure that we continue to have conversations around to support our small businesses. And we, you know, again, counting on, you know, our resources with the SBA, counting on our resources here locally across the state of Louisiana. You know, we are, you know, really in the space of making sure that we can see some wins on these types of things. And so that's

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

where we are.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, that's fantastic. And we are going to link arms with you in that and advocate to our federal lawmakers about some of these policies that you've put forward and discussed. Tiffany, I'm going to try to wrap this up here in a moment, but I'm just curious, as you've been involved more with the National Urban League, has advocacy and policy been something on your mind? Do you have ideas about what the real needs are that you would like to see lawmakers focus on?

Tiffany Brown

Yes, I think for me too, I think a lot of it is, I think as individual business owners, I realize the importance also of us helping each other as well. Those of us who have come through this journey, making sure that we're reaching back and that we are uplifting and helping and spreading information that we've learned and gained to other business owners who are still in the struggle and still trying to figure things out. I feel like nobody is going to come and save us at this point. I look at things that are happening with affirmative action. I think it's just important as Black-owned businesses that we start really pushing and helping each other, investing into each other's businesses when we can, shopping with each other when we can, so that the money and those funds can go back into our neighborhoods and back into programs that are going to benefit us and give us a leg up. A lot of people that I've talked to, and I have a lot of business owner friends that are

white, they have a lot more opportunities that are presented. A lot more information is given to them in the beginning. A lot of their families have businesses already that they've been able just to walk into, that have already been started, and they just walk into these businesses and opportunities because they belong to these clubs, groups of people that, you know, they help each other and they come together and they make each other's businesses work and thrive. And I feel like we don't get those same opportunities a lot of times. We are starting from the bottom,

Klassi Duncan

Yeah.

Tiffany Brown

very minimum, and we're trying to work, excuse me, work hard to make something, you know, click and make it work. But like I said, we just don't have the same tools and opportunities. So I would just love to see like, even if in the beginning, when you decide to apply for like your EIN number, there should be some type of classes, you know, that are required to help you learn how to do your financials and your books. Things to show you about structuring your business. You know, grant opportunities. There are so many things that I just feel like businesses that fail a lot of times, they have great ideas, they have great products, but it's just the planning. We don't have the education. And I think if more was put into providing business owners with that education in the beginning, then we could be a lot more successful.

Tiffany Brown

I don't think it's like I said a lot of times that we just don't have the business. I think it's just we don't have the education to make the businesses last. Like Klassi mentioned about starting the right way, learning about scaling. For the first maybe two years, I think for me, I was just like hustling. It wasn't even about, you know, me thinking about employees. I wasn't thinking about, okay, I need to do this to make sure I can get to this next level. It was just more about hustling and making money. That was kind of what my focus was. And I felt like I have a business, but at the end of the day, when I do say, okay, I want to go apply for this program, my books aren't right, you know, to be able to go and try to get myself to this next level, you know? So I think if we had a lot of that early on, it would put a lot of us in a lot better.

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

Yeah, I think the one of the big things about that is, you know, for this ecosystem is to continue to reach as many businesses as possible because while we have, you know, just a number of resources for small businesses, again, a lot of businesses come to us after they've started, right, not to do pre-

planning, not to, you know, make sure that they're set up the right way. Again, we usually get businesses that are in some kind of emergency or they realize that, oh, they think that maybe this was a mistake, they in some type of urgency of, oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into? We need to see more businesses as Tiffany mentioned before we get to that point. And I think that some of it is around this again, Tiffany mentioned the glorification of entrepreneurship. We want to be a small business owner yesterday, right? We want to be able to say that I'm an entrepreneur. And so we just go for it. And I also always caution folks on that because you hear a lot of people say, but just do it, just do it. And I'm like, no, don't just do it. That's not the approach for entrepreneurship.

Tiffany Brown

Right.

Klassi Duncan

It is not that type of endeavor where you want to just jump in. Because again, we're coming from places of lack of resources, right? We're coming from places of not having the experience and the education. That means we have to get it, right? We have to work on getting access to those resources, getting access to the information and the education. And so that takes time, right? It takes time.

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

And so again, we can't always move on entrepreneurship with this, you know, urgency of just I just want to own my own business. Now another thing, so

Tiffany Brown

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

many people. you know, say, hey, I don't want to work for anybody, so I'm going to go start a business. And I'm thinking to myself, oh my gosh, that is the, you know, we got to get past some of these really, you know, what I call, you know, this mindset and these really these myths about what entrepreneurship is and what it isn't because again, this is not somewhere you're coming to get away from accountability or somewhere that you're coming to get away from responsibility. It's even

Tiffany Brown

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

more so when you become an entrepreneur. And so

Tiffany Brown

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

we got to make sure, and that's why all of our programs, we're really focusing and start off with the entrepreneurial mindset, right? Because we got to get away from some of these, the things, ideas about what we think entrepreneurship is, and really get down to the details of what it really takes to sustain a business over time, but also grow it over time. I talked about

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

revenue, when we talk about operational expenses. Most businesses are not even thinking about what it takes to get a business from point A to Z, the cost

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

of it, right? Because

Tiffany Brown

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

for so many, we're only focused on how much money I'm gonna make. And we have so many, again, I've seen it over my career. You can have a \$5 million business, right? You may, you feel great about that. And people are able, yeah, you have a \$5 million business. But no one knows that in order for you to run that business, it cost you \$10 million.

Tiffany Brown

Yes.

Imani Augustus

Mm.

Klassi Duncan

I've seen, again, multi-million dollar business still robbing Peter to pay Paul, still unable to make payroll, still again, so it's much deeper. And that's why, again, with the programs that we have and a lot of the support that we try to give, we have to get off of the surface. We have to get off

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

of the surface. We have to go deeper into what really entrepreneurship is and what it can be for small businesses. And you know, I'm confident that businesses, again, like Tiffany, you know, again, once you get into this ecosystem and start leveraging these resources, things start to change. You can see, and we see the impact, we see the results of the businesses that have come through our programs, the businesses that have taken advantage of the counseling services, you know, the access, you know, the number of businesses that we're working with to get access to public and private contracts. Amazing, because they're doing the work. Right? They're taking the guidance and they're making informed decisions where they're able to really be more sophisticated about managing risks. Those

Imani Augustus

Mm-hmm.

Klassi Duncan

are some of the elements that we need to get better at in terms of our small businesses and again the types of programs that we continue to deliver, you know, I know that we're doing more in that space and really that's what we try to make sure that our businesses, again, I think about Tiffany and her experience, and I'm so proud of, again, the journey, right? And the getting to the point where you realize, hey, I need to shift some things and hold up before I make that decision. Let me, you become more intentional about the decisions that you make,

Tiffany Brown

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

right? And so that is growing in entrepreneurial maturity. Right? And

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

so

Tiffany Brown

Right.

Klassi Duncan

that's what I want for more of our small businesses. And again, so proud of Tiffany and the work that she's doing in her business and success. And I just hope that so, you know, I want everybody, then I want to say across the country, you know, internationally to get Tiffany's products. Oh my gosh. It's just

Tiffany Brown

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

the, the brilliance around these fragrances. I'm just, it floors me. And it's

Tiffany Brown

Thank

Klassi Duncan

just

Tiffany Brown

you.

Klassi Duncan

amazing products. And, you know, I say everybody needs this in their home. You know, I'm getting a package soon because one of my bottles ran out. I'm like, oh my gosh, I have to get another of this particular fragrance. It's just amazing. And so again,

Imani Augustus

Okay.

Klassi Duncan

this is something that is, you know, I know Tiffany is going to continue to, you know, walk in resilience. I know she's going to continue to be successful and grow her business. And we're here to support her, to you supporting her along that journey.

Imani Augustus

That's

Tiffany Brown

Thank

Imani Augustus

fantastic.

Tiffany Brown

you.

Imani Augustus

I feel like I could talk to you both all day, but I want

Tiffany Brown

Oh

Imani Augustus

to be mindful of the

Klassi Duncan

It's fine.

Imani Augustus

time. One last note before I give you both the last word. What you mentioned, Klassi, about really disarming these entrepreneurial myths and getting people to really look at entrepreneurship for what it is and the hard work that it is. I think so much of that starts, if we can start young and start people early, building that entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial mindset, really helping them understand what all goes into it. That just sets them so far and above, especially in our community where there's not a lot of role models in this and that have been successful. And so one thing that I'm just so proud of, Tiffany, with your work is your girls are seeing you strive and be resilient and continue on this entrepreneurial journey. So I think that's

Tiffany Brown

That's

Imani Augustus

fantastic. But I'm gonna

Tiffany Brown

right. Thank you.

Imani Augustus

give you both the last words with a question here, Tiffany, what is one thing that you want people to know about your business? And also how can people learn more? Share your website, share your social media information, let us know how we can patron your business.

Tiffany Brown

I would say the one thing that I want people to know is that overall Wicks NOLA is a candle brand but Wicks NOLA is also, it's my way of giving back, it's my way of giving philanthropy. My dad was homeless for years and I always wanted to have Wicks NOLA be like a light, it's a candle and I wanted it to be a lighted. My end goal is to focus on the youth in the city of New Orleans. I want to start developing programs. I want to start a nonprofit to try to get these kids into some type of extracurricular activities, to get them off the streets. I feel like a lot of the crime in the city is contributed to these kids just having nothing to do and nowhere to go. So that is my goal at the end of all of this, is to start some type of community center where I can do homework help and after school meals and all types of things. So that's, Wicks NOLA is just me and just taking care and just like almost like a love note from me to the city of New Orleans. I am on social media, you can find me, Wicks NOLA, it's W-I-C-K-S- N-O-L-A-5-0-4. That's our Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. So yeah.

Imani Augustus

Thank you so much. And Klassi, I will give you the final word. What's one last thing you want to share with us and have people know about your work?

Klassi Duncan

One of the things that is so important for our small businesses, our minority-owned small businesses is that it is so critical, so critical that you leverage the resources that are available in your community. And if they're not available in your community, you can be a voice and advocate for more resources in your community. You know, one of the other things that we talked about today was, you know, just, you know, the resources programs that are available for businesses when they start, we're seeing much more in that space. We're seeing many more programs available to small businesses. We want to get out more in terms of marketing, right? Creating awareness for those

programs because, you know, what good are they if nobody knows about them? We need to make sure that more small businesses, again, before they start, know about these programs. And so it's my mission to continue to focus on that as a priority, getting a word out more as we leverage this ecosystem. And we want our small businesses to gain access to everything that is important to starting and growing the right way. And so we're going to make sure that more businesses get access to this information. And they can make the decision on leveraging the resources, again, early on, not when we will

Tiffany Brown

Right.

Klassi Duncan

get in trouble. And one of the other things that is critical, and I want folks to know and understand it, is that there are more resources becoming available that are led by Black and Brown investors, VCs, banks. There are more, more resources, not only available today, but that are coming in the future. And so, while we may not be able to get a seat at some of the tables that exist in the systems that exist, we are positioning ourselves to really create our own tables. And that's one of the things that I want to encourage our small businesses to understand and to know. There are many hands at work from a government perspective, from a private perspective of resources that are being not only created, but also enhanced to support small businesses. And so again, I want our businesses to remain encouraged and to reach out to your local small business resources to find a National Urban League Entrepreneurship Center in your community. Just visit nul.org and click on Entrepreneurship. You'll be able to see the location and the contact information for the 13 entrepreneurship centers of the National Urban League to get access to support in the state of Louisiana. I encourage folks to visit our website at UrbanLeagueLA.org, and find information on not only the entrepreneurship program that we have, but also join us in the policy and advocacy work, join us in workforce development, join us in education and youth development, because again, we are working across all of those Centers of Excellence to make sure that we are impacting communities across the state. So thank you so much, Imani, for the opportunity.

Imani Augustus

Yeah.

Klassi Duncan

This has just been an awesome conversation.

Imani Augustus

Yeah, thank you. Thank you both. And we are so excited to be joining you on that policy and advocacy front as well with our work at the Alliance for Entrepreneurial Equity. So I want to just

thank you both for being so generous with your time today. And I look forward to sharing this interview with the rest of the world.

Tiffany Brown

Thank

Klassi Duncan

Thank

Tiffany Brown

You.

Klassi Duncan

you.

Tiffany Brown

so much.