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Minorities get taste of franchising

Group seeks boost in entrepreneurs in the inner-city

by [Kerry Murtha](#)

Late last year, when Lisa Hunter heard about a conference designed to introduce aspiring minority entrepreneurs to a clutch of big franchisers, she jumped at the chance.

Several months later, Ms. Hunter used \$45,000 obtained by refinancing her house to purchase a V2K Window Decor & More franchise. Today, armed with a laptop computer and scores of window treatment samples, Ms. Hunter is making after-hours house calls in her territory, which covers parts of Queens and Long Island, to drum up business. She hopes to be able to quit her day job as an executive assistant by next year.

"I really wanted to strike out on my own, but I was afraid of the risk," says Ms. Hunter, who is African-American. "By owning a franchise, you are in business for yourself, but not by yourself."

Valuable assistance

She is one of several entrepreneurs who have already been helped by the conference's year-old sponsor, the Big Apple Franchise Initiative. The group brings together 20 community organizations and businesses, ranging from Citibank to the Brooklyn Economic Development Corp. All are committed to the notion that franchising is a powerful way to boost business ownership and create jobs in minority communities.

BAFI hopes to create at least 20 new small businesses and 200 jobs within two years. To speed that process, a Web site, a free monthly e-mail newsletter and a clearinghouse for franchising information will also be available by the end of the year. Already, the group offers monthly workshops, loan packages and a database of potential business sites.

To date, five new franchises employing 55 people have been established in Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Long Island. Three more are in the planning stages, including a Quiznos sandwich shop and a Cold Stone Creamery.

BAFI is working with at least a dozen other franchisers, ranging from car-repair services to cleaning companies, that want to increase their minority representation in the metropolitan area. In Brooklyn, no fewer than four neighborhoods--Cypress Hills, Greenpoint, East Flatbush and Fort Greene--are being targeted for franchise locations.

"I really think the franchise model is a good way to catapult minority business owners into the mainstream," observes Margaret Nelson, director of real estate for the Brooklyn Economic Development Corp. "Buying into an established business model increases their chance at success and gives them an opportunity to hire neighborhood people, resulting in a greater economic impact."

Big plans

That's what Roselyn Valentine is trying to do. She plans to hire 12 people to staff the Quiznos franchise that she hopes to open later this month in Fort Greene. As a hospital administrator in Queens and a former resident of Fort Greene, Ms. Valentine says she chose her franchise location because of its proximity to Pratt Institute and St. Joseph's College. She believes those institutions will provide her with a customer base that she reckons will bring in \$500,000 in annual revenue within

the next five years. If all goes well, she plans to open a full-service IHOP restaurant in Queens.

Among the franchisers eager to expand in inner-city New York is Maui Wowi, a coffee and smoothie purveyor based in Colorado.

Mitch York, the company's director of support, says he has six franchises in the metro area, but only one run by a minority. He is looking to at least double the number of his stores here in the next 18 months and would like most of the new ones to be minority-owned.

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