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Booking It: Decatur women open businesses to impact children

By Catherine Godbey Staff Writer

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Janelle Brown, owner of Brown Books & More, opened the book store after learning about the reading gap between white and minority students. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

JERONIMO NISA

Afternoon sunlight filtered through the windows of the store, landing on the shelves and stacks of books titled “Little Leaders Bold Women in Black History,” “The ABCs of Black History,” “Frederick Douglas: The Abolitionist Hero” and “The 1619 Project.”

“This is my happy place,” Janelle Brown said. “This is my way of making a difference.”

In 2021, after learning about the reading gap between white and minority students, Brown, a former treasury analyst and loan officer, acted.

“I’ve always known there was a need to get Black and brown children up to the school grade level of reading, but I never knew how far behind they were until we had an education panel at our church,” Brown said.

According to the Alabama Department of Education, Decatur City’s English Language Arts proficiency for 2018-2019 was 40.35% with Black students at 27.76% and Hispanic students at 23.75%. Those numbers have risen to 31.08% for Hispanic students, 29.94% for Black students and 41.12% overall for the 2021-2022 report.

“Hearing those numbers pushed me over the edge to get something started,” Brown said.

Last February, Brown opened Brown Books & More in Southwest Decatur.

“I wanted to create a sense of community here. I want everyone who comes through these doors to feel welcome and I want everyone to see their face in a book in here,” Brown said.

When the 40-year-old Brown discovered her passion for reading as a child — going with her mother to the library every Saturday and to Bookland in Muscle Shoals with her father on Sundays — books featuring Black characters were lacking.

“I hardly saw anyone who looked like me in books,” Brown said. “I guess that’s why I gravitated to the Berenstain Bears as a child. They were brown bears. You always look for something or someone that is relatable and makes you feel comfortable in your skin.”

That representation now exists in Brown’s store, which includes the titles “I Am Every Good Thing,” a picture book of with a confident Black narrator, “Who is Kamala Harris?” about the current vice president, and “A Door Made For Me,” a picture book exploring a racist encounter from the perspective of a young Black boy.

“It’s awesome to see the young children come through the doors and make a beeline for the children’s section. The books are their special place,” said Brown, who stocks the store through donations, by scouring shops for books and ordering from publishers. “Right now, I need more children’s books. The more affordable books I have means I can get more in the hands of the kids that really need them.”

Along with serving as a reading hub, the book store at 2119 Westmead Dr. S.W. hosts community events, such as open mic nights, children’s play days, movie nights, paint parties and book celebrations.

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New learning center

Like Brown, the need to reach the Black and Hispanic communities spurred Frankie Strong and Treza Edwards to open a learning center.

“I worked in Decatur City Schools for 25 years. I saw kids coming in behind the eight-ball. Most of the kids behind the eight-ball look like us. It’s a proven fact that about 52% of our Black kids are way below grade level,” Strong said.

Working with second and third graders, Strong witnessed the need for early intervention.

“I’ve seen students not know letters and sounds. It breaks your heart,” Strong said.

Edwards experienced similar situations while teaching eighth grade history for 10 years in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

“There were students reading at second and third grade level. It’s a systemic problem. Frankie saw it in Alabama and I saw it across the country. A lot of these students suffering were students from our community and students that looked a lot like us. We felt a professional and personal pull to address these issues,” said Edwards, who grew up in Danville.

For Edwards and Strong, part of the solution involved opening a learning center for children six weeks to prekindergarten.

“I think there is a misconception that there is something very special and grandiose that you have to do to attain literacy, but they are very simple steps. For small babies, the mere speaking to them, reading to them and engaging with them like they understand makes a difference,” Edwards said.

Both Strong and Edwards know the importance of teachers and parents to a child’s success. They experienced it firsthand.

“My father taught me the importance of education. Also, in elementary school, I remember my first-grade teacher. He was so dramatic when it came to reading. He taught me to love it,” Strong said.

For Edwards, the impact came from her mother and maternal grandparents, who drilled in her the importance of an education, and two teachers, her first-grade teacher, Linda Owens, and a high school teacher, who inspired her to set her dreams higher.

“In the 1980s, I had it set in my mind that I was going to be a flight attendant. I thought it was a very high goal. My high school teacher pulled me aside and said, ‘There’s nothing wrong with being a flight attendant, if that’s what you want to be, but it’s no more than slinging hash in the air. You have the potential for so much more.’ That’s when I set my sights on being a teacher and, ultimately, an attorney,” Edwards said.

The learning center on Somerville Road Southeast opened last week with a goal of instilling in children a love for learning.

“My goal, and it’s a very ambitious goal, is that when our students leave, they can read simple declarative sentences, can tell you their name, telephone number and address, know their numbers from 1 to 100 and possibly do a little addition,” Edwards said. “We also hope to teach them to be caring and socially responsible individuals so that when they grow up they can give back to society.”

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