

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

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Chocolate City HAIR SALON

Janice Willis-Hitchye talks about Faith, Finances
and promoting Entrepreneurship

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Janice Willis-Hitchye, Master Stylist &
Owner of Chocolate City

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SERVICING THE GREATER KANSAS CITY AREA

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Chocolate City HAIR SALON

Janice Willis-Hitchye
discusses Her Faith, Finances and
Promoting Entrepreneurship

By Nadirah Angail

When Janice Willis-Hitchye began doing hair at age 14, it was nothing more than a pastime. A lover of numbers, computers and math, she had planned to go into accounting and soon began down that path. By age 25, she was a data entry supervisor with nine employees under her supervision. Perhaps she would have continued in the accounting field, but a new, rather unpleasant manager left her feeling unsatisfied and eager to leave. "We started bumping heads, disagreeing a lot. I felt maybe it was God telling me to go to school for hair, so I did," she explained.

A single mother with limited funds, Willis-Hitchye did not have the money to pay for hair school, but as if it was meant to be, a family friend stepped in and offered her free admission. "I acknowledge Joyce and Jerry Williams of Joyce William's University of Cosmetology, they allowed me to attend their school for free.... Joyce and my mother were really good friends, so that's how I got to attend their school, tuition free" Willis-Hitchye said with a smile.

After graduation, she bravely put in her two weeks' notice and rented a chair at A Touch of Elegance Salon. She had no clients and practically no savings, but everything about the decision felt right. "I went from making a salary to stepping out on faith with no money. I had my own place and bills to pay, but I wasn't scared! I knew if I got one head, it would multiply," she said confidently. Just as she predicted, all it took was one

client to get started. Word quickly spread like wildfire. "I became known for hair cutting and color. They called me a perfectionist. I had clients tell me don't touch it, it's perfect, but I still had to make sure every strand was in place. They say I have OCD," she said. Her original goal was to do three clients a day, but thanks to her dedication to high quality work, she soon found herself working from 9 am to 3 am.

For Willis-Hitchye, it's not the money that motivated her to work well into the night. It's her love for people. "I want to make sure every client looks good. When you look good, you feel good. You don't have to dress the part, but when your hair is done, you feel good! You're hair tells it all," she said.

Despite Willis-Hitchye's initial success, she didn't jump into business ownership. She waited three years to ensure she had the clientele to support the business. "I waited until my income was consistent. I had set a goal and was consistently over my goal for a whole year before I opened shop. I talked to my family. They supported me."

Inspired by the name of a nightclub in the popular 90s film *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate*, Willis-Hitchye chose the name Chocolate City and became the master stylist at a salon she could truly call her own. "I knew I'd always want to have my own," she said. "No matter what I'm doing, sooner or later I'm going to want my own." With a bachelor's degree in accounting, she was able to



avoid a major problem many new business owners face: mismanagement of funds. "When you make money, you have to know how to manage it. Some people spend it as fast as they get it. That's not the way to go. You control your money. Don't let your money control you. I've worked with stylists who have been doing hair as long as I have, but they don't have anything to show for it. They have the

clientele and they make the money. I don't understand that," she said.

Many entrepreneurs (and traditional 9-to-5 employees) fail to realize that the money they make doesn't matter if they spend it all. In her two decades of doing hair professionally, she has seen many stylists open their own shops and then later close because of financial mismanagement. "You have to think smart," Willis-Hitchye said. "Don't take it for granted because you're making so much money. You're going to get old. You're going to want to sit down when you get about 65. You have to manage your money so you can retire later. Think wise, think smart. Don't just do whatever you want to do," she advised.

Part of her wise and smart thinking has been to never rely on the money she makes from booth rental. Willis-Hitchye is adamant about paying her bills with the money she makes from servicing clients. Because booth rental fees are not guaranteed—renters go and come—she considers that money extra and, therefore, doesn't need it to maintain basic overhead costs of running her business.

This is the type of advice she gives every business owner she comes across. Because she has been blessed so abundantly, she loves to share her blessings with others.

"You can't be selfish with your blessings," she said. "

That's not how God wants it. If I can help someone in running their business, I'm glad to."

Chocolate City has faced challenges (for example, during the recession), but Willis-Hitchye is overwhelmed by the success she has experienced over the years.

Grateful, she is determined to give back. "We used to do an annual picnic in Swope Park for all salons and barbershops in the city," she said. "I had a few sponsors, set up a stage, and allowed them to get on stage and do a cut and style. All I asked was that they wear a shirt to represent their salon." She's also hosted outdoor community events at her salon, volunteered free styles at her church's back-to-school event, and partnered with the Red Cross in 2005 to give free styles and meals to victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Not only does Willis-Hitchye give back to her community, but she also gives to her staff and customers. Once a month, she hosts educational classes for her stylists. She knows that every client serviced at her salon falls under the Chocolate City umbrella, so she invests in her stylists to ensure everyone receives the best service. She prides herself on being a "greeter," a kind, loving, uplifting stylist who cares more about the person than the money. "It doesn't matter how cold you are, if you have a bad attitude and you're not a people person, you won't make it. You might start off good, but your clients will fall off. It's about the customer. Not you," she warned.

Her success has given her many opportunities to branch out in the industry and speak at various hair schools, where she has encouraged young, hopeful stylists who are in the same place she once was so many years ago. Thanks to her faith, skill and focus, Willis-Hitchye has been able to achieve a level of success she never would have imagined in her teen years. She is ever indebted to her mother Marriah Smith; her sister Shirley Williams; her husband Reverend Julius Hitchye; her son Kevin Thomas Jr.; her stepson Julius Hitchye Jr.; her brothers James Willis, Melvin Willis, and Roosevelt Willis; and last but not least, her dearly departed father Roosevelt Willis Sr. who, unfortunately, passed two years ago.

Though she has accomplished much, she knows that it has been nothing but God's grace and favor that have brought her through. "I give it all to God," she said. "I know it wasn't me."

Chocolate City

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