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Georgia second in nation for black-owned businesses

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By Leon Stafford
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Laron Walker started his Web design and software business several years ago in Indiana, and it thrived.

Enlarge photo



Josh D. Weiss / Special

Chef Tony Morrow pours a sauce on top of his blackened shrimp and grits inside the kitchen of his restaurant, "The Pecan," in College Park, Ga. Black-owned businesses in Georgia cover a wide range of industries, including risk management firms, clinics, hotels, telemarketing and data centers.

He had contracts with the biggest firms, hospitals, churches and schools. His contact list was a who's who of the community, including friends from his alma mater, Purdue University.

But after a while Walker realized he had no room left for growth. So in 2006 he moved to metro Atlanta. The most obvious reason: A larger market meant new opportunities.

But he also wanted to become part of the explosion of African-American business people like himself.

"There were definitely not a lot of people who looked like me in Indiana," he said. "Atlanta offers a better networking base and resources that I can tap that weren't available to me in [Indiana]."

The U.S. Census Bureau reported recently that Georgia has the second-highest percentage of black-owned businesses in the nation at 20.4 percent. Only the District of Columbia, at 28.2 percent of the city's businesses, has a larger percentage of African-American ownership.

From 2002 to 2007, the number of minority-owned businesses in the nation increased by 45.6 percent to 5.8 million, more than twice the rate of all U.S. businesses, the bureau said.

Leaders in metro Atlanta's black business community said the list of attributes contributing to the state's success is long.

Georgia is home to some of the nation's top historically black colleges and universities. Fortune 500 companies have been training grounds for entrepreneurs. The African-American community itself has traditionally invested in startups when banks would not lend.

And, they said, don't forget Atlanta's reputation as a black

mecca.

"When you look at Atlanta, it is seen as one of the top cities in the nation for young people to relocate," said John Grant, the executive director of 100 Black Men of Atlanta. "They bring a lot of creativity, energy and innovation."

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Leona Barr Davenport, president and chief executive officer of the Atlanta Business League, said much credit should be given to the late Maynard Jackson. His push as mayor to have minority contractors included in bids to expand [Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport](#) in the '70s opened doors to black businesses that had been closed.

"That is a success that has resounded across the country," she said.

Black-owned businesses in Georgia cover a wide range of industries, including risk management firms, clinics, hotels, telemarketing and data centers, and public relations and advertising agencies. Some are well-known, including construction giant H.J. Russell & Co. and Citizens Trust Bank.

Alice Bussey, who co-owns Bussey Florist in Atlanta, said the state's black business community grew because it filled a need. Her husband, James Bussey, for instance, started their business in 1962 while still a student at Morehouse College because the black community was underserved in the sector. Similar scenarios have played out statewide over the decades, producing black business leaders throughout Georgia.

Tony Morrow, owner and chef of The Pecan restaurant in College Park, is one of the entrepreneurs who took the skills he learned working for others -- such as local favorite Pano's & Paul's, as general manager of the Morehouse cafeteria and in corporate dining at Bank of America -- to make his own path.

"Atlanta is a mecca for us," he said. "It's a place anybody can stop working so hard for somebody else and do it for yourself."

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