



UMB News

CEC Supports Small Businesses with New Initiative

January 27, 2021 | By [Jena Frick](#)

Leo and Chanel Fleurimond, the owners of [SoBeachy's Haitian Cuisine](#) in [Cross Street Market](#), are starting off the year 2021 with a renewed sense of hope and optimism.

"There's just a lot of a lot of things at stake right now because of the COVID-19 pandemic," says Leo. "We're just looking for things to get better, but in the meantime, we're just hanging in there."

Restrictions and regulations put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on their finances in 2020. Just one month ago, they were on the verge of having to close their business.

"COVID is just the worst of the worst," he says. "Maintaining and operating a business during this time is really hard. I'm just trying to find the right words to explain what it is that we're going through, and the only thing that I can come up with is just sheer misery."

Local businesses across the city find themselves in a similar predicament because of the pandemic, which is why the [University of Maryland, Baltimore](#) (UMB) [Office of Community Engagement](#) (OCE) started the Small Business Volunteer Initiative. The initiative launched in March 2020 through a partnership with the [University of Maryland Robert H. Smith School of Business](#). It pairs local minority, immigrant, and women business owners with a volunteer MBA student who helps them navigate the process of applying for state and federal grants to keep their businesses afloat during such a tumultuous time.

(View media coverage on [WBAL](#) and [WJZ](#).)

"A lot of small businesses can get left behind compared to larger businesses that have more staff members at their disposal," says **Madison Haas, MSW**, UMB's economic inclusion specialist and creator of the Small Business Volunteer Initiative. "When we heard that operations for all businesses were going to be changing, we knew that locally owned, small businesses were going to be more drastically affected because most of these businesses are 'mom and pop' shops with a limited staff."

Having a knowledgeable business advisor on their side took a huge weight off local business owners and allowed them to focus on pivoting their operations to align with the COVID-19 regulations. The volunteer MBA students helped to identify state and federal grants, submit applications for funding, and offer guidance through the entire application process.

The Fleurimonds were paired with Brad Fallon, who works in the Maryland General Assembly as legislative director for Del. Eric Luedtke (D-Montgomery County). With Fallon's connections in Annapolis and his knowledge of Maryland government, he was able to help them apply for several state grants.



Leo and Chanel Fleurimond, the owners of SoBeachy Haitian Cuisine.

“Leo and Chanel are just incredible,” says Fallon. “They work so very hard and were just looking for some help. They were not savvy with government programs or paperwork and since I do this kind of work all the time, I was more than happy to help them out.”

Fallon submitted several applications for the Fleurimonds in the beginning of December 2020. Then, just before Christmas, they were awarded a \$21,000 grant from the Baltimore Restaurant Assistance Grant Program.

“It was a relief and just mind-blowing to have somebody to lean on like that,” says Leo. “We were in a dark space and having access to this resource was

outstanding. I can’t even put it into words because of how grateful I am for this. We were really struggling and all I can say is that this was such a gift.”

The UMB Small Business Volunteer Initiative has helped dozens of local business owners keep doors open since the start of the pandemic.

Some business owners who utilized the Small Business Initiative were so grateful for the help that they wanted to find ways to pay it forward. The owners of [Ruben’s Mexican Food](#) ☑ donated 100 free lunches to front-line workers in the [University of Maryland School of Medicine](#) who are working on the COVID-19

vaccine, and 100 more lunches to educators at [Digital Harbor High School](#) .

Haas says she also hopes to work with the University of Maryland Robert H. Smith School of Business to integrate this volunteer initiative into the curriculum for all MBA students so that OCE can continue to support local businesses after the pandemic.

The Small Business Volunteer Initiative is open to all minority-, immigrant-, and women-owned businesses in Baltimore. To learn more about how to get involved, contact Haas at madisonhaas@umaryland.edu.

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