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Norwich entrepreneur to be honored by the Women's Business Development Council - what she says

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Even though there have been challenges in starting a housecleaning business just before the pandemic, Shellena Pitterson's hard work is paying off, and she's being recognized for it.

Pitterson and her business, Orchid Maids, based out of Foundry 66 in Norwich, is one of six businesses recognized this year by the Women's Business Development Council as a part of the 2023 Women Rising Gala and Awards Celebration. The event will take place on Oct. 27 at the Hyatt Regency in Greenwich.

The other honorees for this year are also business owners. They include Liz Ceppos of Cross Culture Kobucha in Danbury, Melissa-Sue John of Lauren-Simone Publishing in East Hartford, Emmanuella Lauture of Ma Maison Childcare, LLC in Stamford, Neisa Medina-Nunez of The Learning Barn Childcare Center and Preschool in Naugatuck, and Kristin Vece of Elevate Healing Arts in Cromwell, the announcement states.

The honorees are "the best and brightest" of Women's Business Development Council clients, as determined by the staff, who've made the best use of the organization's advising, connections, classes, and grants, Marketing and Communications Director JoAnn Gulbin said.

"They've done hard work to get where they're going, and the results speak for themselves," she said.

This isn't the first honor that Pitterson has received for her business, as she was also given the Carlene B. Lee Woman Business Enterprise Award by the NAACP Norwich Branch in 2021, and spoke at the Connecticut Economic Development Summit last year, Pitterson said.

"I'm always shocked that I'm noticed," she said.

Current full-time job didn't satisfy

Pitterson first got the idea for Orchid Maids in 2018, when she “had an epiphany” when she realized her current full-time job wasn’t where she wanted to be. She had worked as an architectural drafter for The State of Connecticut for 17 years. She doesn’t believe there’s any opportunity for her to advance, and she doesn’t want to be stuck working until she’s 65 or 70, she said.

“I wanted to put myself in a position where I was working for me,” she said.

Pitterson reached out to a cousin who has two successful cleaning businesses in Hawaii, and learned from him, along with doing her own research. Orchid Maids opened in October 2019, and had to learn as she worked, she said.

“I like a challenge, and this definitely provides that for me,” she said.

Slow start and the pandemic

The business had a slow start in 2019, with only a few clients. Pitterson was confident that 2020 would be her year. Then the pandemic happened, and the business was essentially “dead” for a time, in a similar position that many other businesses had gone through also, she said.

“No one wanted cleaners in their home,” she said.

However, she was able to take a negative, and turn it into a positive, honing her skills, communicating with and accommodating customers, learning software, keeping employees safe, and more, she said.

It was at this time that Pitterson started working more with Women’s Business Development Council, and working with Foundry 66. Pitterson’s office is based out of her home, but she has used resources to network and meet people, she said.

“What could’ve been something that shut me down, it just made me stronger, and persevere harder to be successful,” she said.

Orchid Maids today

While numbers fluctuate, Orchid Maids currently employs two people, and also works with an independent contractor. Pitterson said the business changed over time from something

selfish to something selfless, and she wants to help the community through her business.

“Now I’m providing jobs for my community. Now I’m helping my community,” she said.

While most of Orchid Maids’ work was residential, the company is now starting to take on commercial clients, mainly small offices. She wants to continue “stepping up my game,” Pitterson said.

“The sky’s the limit,” she said.

Advice for entrepreneurs

Budding entrepreneurs should listen to their passions, follow their path, and “can’t should never be in your vocabulary,” Pitterson said.

“Sometimes people say ‘there’s no money in that. You can’t make money off of that,’” she said. “If you’re passionate about something, the money will come.”

Having family and friends as a support system is also crucial for a work-life balance, Pitterson said