

the collective *on main*



Growing a Business

New Retail Incubator Offers Space and Training for 6 New Creatives

In Wisconsin, small businesses are the backbone of the economy. In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau small businesses make up 99.4 percent of all the businesses in the state. Many place their dreams of a better future on the prospects of a small business. However, getting a foot in the door in the world of business can be a challenge. Entrepreneurs and small businesses, especially in rural Wisconsin require solutions that are customized to their unique needs. In 2022, Couleecap launched a new business incubator in La Crosse and offered rural business planning, technical assistance, and entrepreneurship business startup opportunities in small towns across Crawford, Monroe, and Vernon counties. And now Couleecap is excited to add the new Downtown La Crosse Small Business Incubator to its ever-expanding portfolio. The business incubator, known as The Collective on Main offers a safe, low risk way for business owners to test their idea and get back to making downtown a thriving shopping district as well.

Recently, On Thursday, Dec. 15, The Collective on Main celebrated

their grand opening and featured a host of local politicians, community leaders and members, Couleecap board and staff members as well as the entrepreneurs who took the leap into this venture with Couleecap. The incubator, located at 320 Main Street in La Crosse currently hosts six different businesses and hopes to continue to expand.

“This has been my biggest dream for as long as I can remember,” shared Chris Bouquet, owner of Trendcessory, a Black owned business featuring clothing and accessories that Chris, along with the help of his girlfriend, curate, and design for his shop. “It was a process at first, but I’ve been learning as I go, and it’s been getting easier. I’m really excited to see it expand and grow.”

The Couleecap small business incubator is intended to provide opportunities with reduced barriers for low income, Black, Indigenous or People of the Global Majority owned, and women owned business entrepreneurs to successfully develop their business to become self-sustaining and for growing



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enterprises in the region.

The business model for The Collective on Main works collaboratively with each vendor participating in at least 15 hours of work in the store per week and no less than one weekend per month. The rent for the retail space is also based on a 12-month graduated fee structure with months one through three being without rental fees, months four through six \$200 a month, seven through nine \$400 a month and 10-12 \$600 a month. In addition, a Couleecap employee is also available to vendors for technical assistance, additional training, and educational opportunities.



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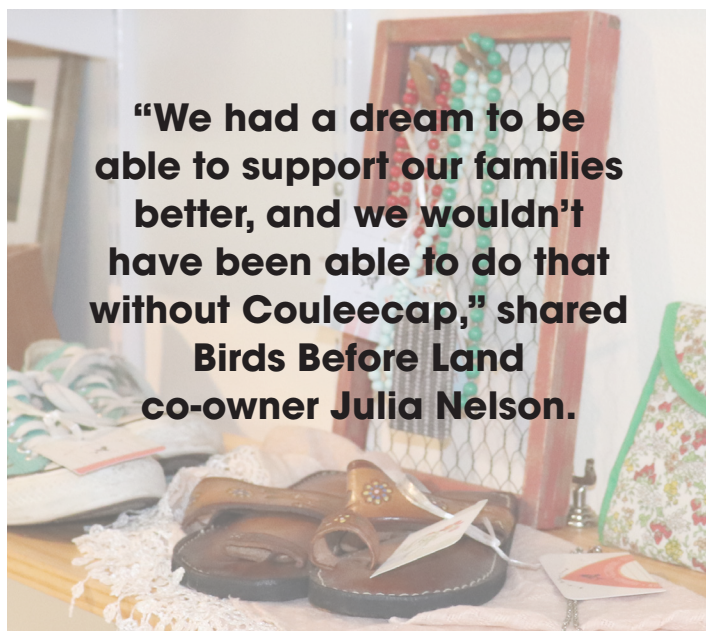
The pair carefully curate unique vintage items for their shop, featuring clothes, shoes, décor, and accessories as part of their wares, with a focus on upcycling and size inclusivity. Another unique offering from Birds before Land is the ability to customize jeans or Converse shoes with delicate embroidery as well as unique repairs to sweaters and clothing to help save them from the ever-growing trash flow. “There are so many awesome clothes out there that just get tossed because of a small hole,” Kristin noted. “If we can save a few of those from the landfill with this work, that is a great thing.”

For small business owner Shantylle Kibler, the opportunity to partner with Couleecap has helped to add momentum to a business that got its start in the wake of tragedy. “My daughters father died unexpectedly around the same time I got all of my equipment to start making shirts,” Shantylle explained. “My first big order was his memorial tee shirts, and I realized how much the work helped me grieve and process what was happening. It made me feel useful and good that I could help in this way, and I knew that I was meant to continue with the

“This was a chance for us to try something together,” shared Birds Before Land owner Julia Nelson, who with her business partner Kristin Aponte created their business upon hearing of Couleecap’s upcoming incubator. “We both knew we always wanted to try and have a business, and both being single moms we had a driving force to make this work. We had a dream to be able to support our families better, and we wouldn’t have



“We had a dream to be able to support our families better, and we wouldn’t have been able to do that without Couleecap,” shared Birds Before Land co-owner Julia Nelson.



business.” From that, Shantylle was able to help others create memorial tees while also expressing her creative side with a range of more fun apparel, additionally she can make a large variety of custom orders on tee shirts, bags, cups and more. Shantylle has set her sights high, and her long-term goal is following graduation from the Incubator Program with Couleecap is to secure a store at the mall where she will be able to continue to offer her items. “This is a great opportunity to build my following with less risk and with lots of guidance,”

Shantylle noted.



“Small businesses help create a pathway out of poverty,” shared Couleecap’s Community Development Manager Ashley Lencenski. “This opportunity offers a new and innovative way to

support small businesses.” Ashley welcomed many community leaders to the event including La Crosse Mayor Mitch Reynolds and State Senator Brad Pfaff. Both shared their pride and excitement for the new ventures the entrepreneurs have ahead of them with the help from Couleecap.

Also among the businesses was Triple Goddess Creations, a small business based on arts, crafts, and apothecaries. Offering hand made crystal crowns, paintings, stone towers, unique natural ornaments, tarot cards and a variety of other spiritual and handmade gifts. The shop is run by friends Azure Bernard-Gregory and Kayla Jambois. “The name for the shop is two parts,” explains Azure. “We wanted to highlight the Maiden, Mother and Crone, the three parts of life and showcase that we have something for everyone. But it also nods to my three children who are my focus for this business. The pair, like those from Birds before Land, had only dabbled in small business working a little with the online market, before but when the information about Couleecap’s business incubator showed up in their Facebook algorithm they felt it would be a perfect fit and decided to take a dive into the world of small business ownership.



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For more than 25 years Couleecap has helped operate job and business development programs with a particular focus on low-income business owners, small business owners and those located in rural communities. In more recent years, Couleecap has also been able to focus in developing capacity to offer more expanded entrepreneurial programming like The Collective on Main. These efforts have enabled us to assist over 170 businesses to get started, or expand, through assistance programs like pop-up shops, the CO STARTERS entrepreneurial training program, one on one business development technical assistance, microenterprise loans, COVID business recovery grants, start-up grants and of course the small business incubator services.



Couleecap manages the site of the incubator and provides wrap-around business planning and technical assistance while the Wisconsin Women’s Business Initiative Corporation (WWBIC) partners with Couleecap to support business with onsite training for the tenants. The incubator also received financial support from Associated Bank, City of La Crosse, La Crosse Community Foundation, Three-Sixty Real Estate, WI Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) as well as an Anonymous Donor.

Blue Coulee Beverages also joins the ranks of those in the business

the collective on main

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incubator with its first beverage 3n1. Started by Mian “Mike” Ahmad, the small business sells their vitamin infused energy drinks canned right in La Crosse. “We’re really proud of a low carbon footprint,” Mike emphasized recently during the open house event. “We put a lot of planning into this product and hope it turns into something that grows nationally.” Mike also notes that one of the best parts about his energy drink is the fact that it has a ‘friendly taste.’ “Most energy drinks you have to adapt to the taste,” Mike explained. “The taste of ours you don’t need to adapt to, it’s a friendly citrus flavor that is very enjoyable.”

Rounding out the current selection of businesses at the Collective On Main is Em & Co. Boutique, owned and operated by Sara Harding. Featuring stylish, affordable women’s boutique items with a wide range of trendy treasures. You’ll find women’s tops, dresses, makeup, jewelry and more as well as seasonal cards as gifts. Sara strives to keep all her items featured at Em & Co. under \$50.

The Launch of the La Crosse Small Business Incubator or as we know it, The Collective on Main has been one of the largest achievements of 2022 for Couleecap. It is a first-of-its-kind project in the Coulee Region and the sky is the limit when it comes to potential for its future.

“The Collective on Main gives new entrepreneurs a chance to open a storefront in the heart of downtown with support from Couleecap to help these new businesses thrive,” said Missy Hughes, Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) secretary and CEO. “Through WEDC’s Main Street Bounce back grants we’ve seen the power of adding small businesses to our community and the life and vitality they bring to our downtowns. The Collective on Main will bring that spark to La Crosse.”

To learn more about The Collective on Main and catch up on their regular store hours you can find them at www.facebook.com/thecollectiveLAX or at www.couleecap.org.

