Sweet treats: Teen entrepreneur shares chocolates in pop-up shop

Julie Hullett 16 hrs ago · 0

Orange High School senior Sharrae Henderson, 18, of Woodmere has a sweet tooth. She found a way to combine her love of strawberries and chocolate in her business, Rae's Chocolates. Sharrae is excited for her upcoming pop-up shop Feb. 12-14 at Eton Chagrin Boulevard in anticipation of Valentine's Day, one of her busiest holidays of the year.

Photo by Michael Steinberg

Sharrae Henderson is a real go-getter, according to her marketing teacher Lisa Simon. Sharrae started a business, Rae's Chocolates, at age 17 to offer fresh and tasty snacks to her community. One year later, Sharrae is preparing for a pop-up shop at Eton Chagrin Boulevard before Valentine's Day, the biggest holiday of the year for her business.

Sharrae, 18, of Woodmere is a vegetarian. Strawberries are her favorite fruit, and chocolate never disappoints. She is the only student in her class to start a business, Ms. Simon said of her classes at the Business Academy, housed within the Willoughby-Eastlake City School District.

“I like making people happy,” Sharrae said on Monday. “When they say it's good, it makes my heart warm.”

She is a strategic businesswoman. During her interview with the Times at Eton Chagrin Boulevard, Sharrae stopped to talk with a passerby who noticed her chocolate covered strawberries. Sharrae promoted her upcoming pop-up shop at Eton from Feb. 12-14.

Ms. Simon said Sharrae made significant strides in the business academy courses, which are hosted at the Northern Career Institute in Eastlake, part of the career preparation program Excel TECC. Sharrae is also a senior at Orange High School, where she is a cheerleader for the football and basketball teams.

Ms. Simon teaches four courses in the business academy, including introduction to business, business management, entrepreneurship and marketing, which are each one semester long. She said students learn about how to create business and marketing plans, including how to pitch their product or service. Twelve districts are represented at the business academy, Ms. Simon said, and she only accepts one applicant from the Orange schools.

“Sharrae has been really awesome in getting her business out there. She has gone to several farmers markets,” which Ms. Simon said were organized through University School in Hunting Valley. “She also did some on her own throughout Cleveland in the summer and last year. She did pop up shops. Starting a business is not required. This was her going the extra mile.”

Sharrae sells chocolate covered strawberries, oreos, pineapples, grapes and pretzels. She offers milk, dark and white chocolate. There are packages available for purchase as well as the option for custom orders, she said. The decorations correspond to the season or holiday, such as red and pink for Valentine's Day and spring pastels for Mother's Day and Easter, the most popular holidays for her business.

Although Sharrae said she does not have extensive experience with cooking or baking, she enjoys the creativity she can weave into her business. She described the beginning of Rae's Chocolates as “an experiment.” She started selling to friends and family, but used social media to expand her range and find more customers.

“I wanted to increase my range and Facebook really helped with that,” Sharrae said. “With social media and marketing, I'm seeing how far I can go.”

Sharrae's Instagram handle is @raeschocolates and her Facebook page is called Rae's Chocolates. Customers fill out a Google form to place their order.

Ms. Simon said the students learn a variety of skills in their business courses at the academy, including teamwork, leadership, communication, time management, project management and planning. She also teaches students to be philanthropic by participating in fundraisers for United Way and other nonprofits.

“I help them build resilience,” Ms. Simon said. “They're going to be told ‘no’ in life. They're going to face some obstacles. They need to be able to bounce back and learn from it and be smarter and stronger.”

Sharrae said patience is the most important trait as a young entrepreneur. It is also important to know your market, she said. Valentine's Day is not only for couples, it applies to all loved ones.

“People buy it for themselves, their mom and sisters. It's mostly family based and people enjoy it,” Sharrae said. “Valentine's Day isn't just about couples. It's about families and who all you love.”

Her family helps Sharrae succeed with her business, too. Sharrae taught relatives how to make her treats. They help her make the products and deliver them when Sharrae is busy with school and her two jobs at Olive Garden and Lifetime Fitness. Sharrae said she searches for the best fresh strawberries, often found at Miles Farmers Market in Solon.

By supporting her business, Sharrae said customers get a quality product “without breaking the bank.” A pack of 12 chocolate covered strawberries is $25 and 10 treats cost $15.

Rae's Chocolates has also garnered attention from community stakeholders. ErieBank held its groundbreaking in November at Eton West End on Chagrin Boulevard. Mayor Ben Holbert said Christine Hartog, vice president of ErieBank, opened an account for Sharrae. The mayor gave Sharrae a personal donation of $100 at the bank's groundbreaking. Mayor Holbert's action led to another donation from his college classmate and local entrepreneur, Darrell McNair.

Mr. McNair is the CEO of MVP Plastics and a friend of Mayor Holbert. Since he uses ErieBank for his business, Mr. McNair attended the groundbreaking. He was inspired by the mayor's donation to Sharrae, so Mr. McNair pledged a $100 donation as well. Stark Enterprises also made a $300 donation to Rae's Chocolates.

“I love to see the glee in young folks' eyes when they start their business,” he said. “I started when I was young, too. I did odd jobs like shoveling snow and cutting grass. Every entrepreneur has to start somewhere and this is her start.”

Mr. McNair also offered mentoring and advice to Sharrae. He tutors students in the Cleveland Metropolitan School District and mentors young entrepreneurs through the Presidents' Council, a local organization for African American business owners. The council includes about 16 businesses, Mr. McNair said, but its associated chamber of commerce includes several hundred businesses of all sizes.

Sharrae's pop-up shop will be held at Eton Chagrin Boulevard in Woodmere from Feb. 12-13 from 2-6 p.m. and Feb. 14 from 1-5 p.m.

Tags: Communities · Orange · Young Entrepeneur · Schools

Julie Hullett

Julie Hullett has been a reporter for the Chagrin Valley Times since August of 2018 and covers Gates Mills, Hunting Valley, Moreland Hills, Orange, Pepper Pike and Woodmere. She graduated from John Carroll University with a journalism degree in 2018.

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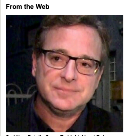
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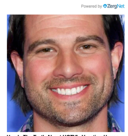
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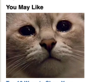
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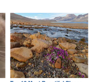
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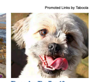
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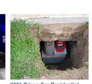
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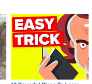

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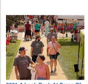
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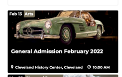
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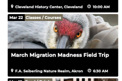
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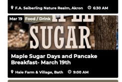

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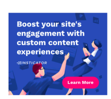

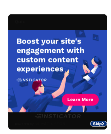

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