

Small businesses emerge from virus crisis

Scarsdale consulting firm helps survive pandemic

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Jessica Larios's baby arrived a few weeks before her due date at the end of February.

The owner of Bella's Event Inc – an event planning business in Yonkers specializing in rentals and sales of all things party related from wedding gowns to Quinceanera dresses, table linens and party supplies – Larios could not afford to take any time off during one of the busiest months for bookings.

In a haze of feedings and caring for the baby, Larios plowed through her work. Less than a month later, things ground to a halt as the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the state – and phone calls with cancellations started pouring in.

"I was so worried I was not going to be able to make rent and would have to shut down my business," she said, of her store on South Broadway that she opened in 2014.

Then she thought of reaching out to the women from the Acceleration Project, a nonprofit business consulting firm that had helped her with book keeping and merchandise sorting last summer.

Consultants from TAP strategized with Larios on how best to approach and negotiate with her landlord.

"That was very helpful. My landlord actually cut my rent by half for six months," she said. "They have also been keeping me informed about all the protections available for small businesses."

The Acceleration Project was founded in 2012 to help small businesses that were dealing with the aftermath of the economic recession and increased competition from online shopping. As of today, 75% of the businesses it serves are women-owned and 33% are minority-owned.

Jane Veron, CEO and co-founder of TAP, made up of all female consultants, said there has been a high demand for their services in the past two months.

"It has been an incredibly busy time for us. In a way, our mission from 2012 has become more urgent than ever. And now this enormous disruption is something that impacts virtually all small business owners," said Veron. "So what became clear to us very early on is the need to develop emergency services."

Since March, TAP consultants have supported small businesses with free emergency services addressing their immediate decisions calculating payroll costs, identifying ways to negotiate expenses and providing guidance on SBA loans and forgiveness programs. So far, they've assisted almost 50 small businesses, a mix of past and new clients.

Initially, the most pressing needs were all around government loan information and assistance, said Nancy Ro-



Jane Veron is CEO of the Acceleration Project, a Scarsdale nonprofit consulting firm that's helping small businesses survive in the challenging economic environment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. JOHN MEORE/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Jessica Larios, owner of Bella's Events, which specializes in rentals and sales of party-related items, received assistance from consultants from the Acceleration Project. TANIA SAVAYAN/THE JOURNAL NEWS

senberg, COO of TAP.

"We quickly dug in and got up to speed on the PPP (Payment Protect Plan) and other loan opportunities and were constantly fielding questions like: Which loans should I apply for? How much money should I request? Should I furlough my employees? How can I use the loan proceeds if my business has been forced to close? Will my loan be forgiven?" she said.

The small-business focused Paycheck Protection Program, which Congress established as part of the \$2.2 trillion CARES Act, businesses with fewer than 500 workers can secure low-interest loans of up to \$10 million. The loan will be fully forgiven if the funds are used for payroll costs, interest on mortgages, rent, and utilities (at least 75% of

the forgiven amount must have been used for payroll). Loan payments will also be deferred for six months.

Of the businesses that applied for the loan, about 66.7%, received the money, according to the Census Bureau.

For businesses who used TAP's expertise, the numbers have been better.

"About 83% of our clients that applied for the PPP eventually received the funds they had requested," said Rosenberg.

Tiffany Amaya-Cipriano, who is the founder of A Child's Dream, a nursery school located at the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in New Rochelle, shut down her school on March 12.

When she reached out to TAP with questions on the loan application process, the consultants advised her to ap-

ply for the PPP so that she could pay her teachers and keep them involved in her students' lives through story hours and other activities.

"The consultants were a really great support system," she said.

A planned summer school has been canceled, resulting in another financial hit.

"I have a wonderful team of employees that have worked together, and we stay in touch daily to make sure that everyone's doing OK and, stay in touch with our families."

For Rob Kissner, president and CEO of Digital Arts Experience in Scarsdale, which provides hands-on classes and experiences to children interested in learning how to code, create video games, graphic designs, and more, TAP was a familiar sounding board.

Back in 2015, as he looked to expand his operations, he'd leaned on the expertise of the TAP consultants. One result was the expansion of DAE's business through after-school programming. After working with TAP consultants, the DAE doubled the number of its school district partners and began teaching hundreds of students coding and digital arts.

"When the whole situation came about with COVID-19, I was having to obviously rethink the function of my business," he said. "Jane set me up with consultants that were all local parents so I could get their perspective both as parents and as business consultants and came up with a couple of great strategies."

The consultants suggested ideas like teacher-supervised virtual Minecraft parties, consulting services for other small businesses who now need to move their product and services online and group coding classes. They also suggested targeting parents who want to learn to be more digitally savvy and refundable registration for summer programs.

Veron, who grew TAP from a small consulting outfit in Scarsdale to serving more than 550 clients in 10 states and 110 consultants is not quite done. She said her goal is to double in size by the end of the year.

"We now have a bootcamp for businesses to rethink all aspects of their business model, from product offerings to managing employees and operations and their network of vendors and landlords," she said.

Going forward, Larios, the owner of Bella's Event Inc., plans on shifting her focus to online sales and is setting up a website. For now, she'll double down on balloons and table and chair rentals.

"I think it's going to be two years before we have events with 100 people or more. But I think people will be having backyard parties and summer barbecues," she said. "People want to feel happy. I think balloons and decorations are going to be popular."

Swapna Venugopal Ramaswamy covers women and power for the USA Today Network Northeast.

Former Secretary of State Powell to vote for Biden

William Cummings USA TODAY

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell says that he once again will not vote for Donald Trump, calling the president's approach to politics "dangerous for our democracy" and asserting that Trump has "drifted away" from the Constitution.

Powell publicly said he would vote for Hillary Clinton in 2016 and he plans to vote for former Vice President Joe Biden, who clinched the Democratic nomination last week, in November.

"I'm very close to Joe Biden in a social matter and on a political matter. I have worked with him for 35, 40 years," Powell told CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday. "And he is now the candidate, and I will be voting for him."

Powell, a retired four-star Army general, joins a growing list of former senior military officials who have denounced Trump, including a wave of condemnation last week that was sparked by Trump's walk to St. John's Episcopal Church after National Guard members helped drive protesters from the area around the White House.

Trump's former secretary of defense, retired Marine Gen. Jim Mattis, had said in a statement he was "appalled" by Trump's handling of the protests that have followed the death of George Floyd, a black man who died after a white Minneapolis police officer held him down with a knee on his neck.

"Donald Trump is the first president in my lifetime who does not try to unite the American people — does not even pretend to try. Instead he tries to divide us," Mattis wrote.

Trump's former chief of staff, retired Marine Gen. John Kelly, said in an inter-



Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, center, says he has worked with Joe Biden, who clinched the Democratic presidential nomination last week, for decades. "He is now the candidate, and I will be voting for him." SUSAN WALSH/AP

view that he agreed with Mattis.

"I think we need to look harder at who we elect," Kelly said. "I think we should look at people that are running for office and put them through the filter: What is their character like? What are their ethics?"

Retired Marine Gen. John Allen said June 1, the day of Trump's walk to the church, that it "may well signal the beginning of the end of the American experiment."

Powell said he was happy to see the former military officials speaking out.

"I'm proud that they were willing to take the risk of speaking honestly and

speaking truth to those who are not speaking the truth," he said. "We have a Constitution. And we have to follow that Constitution. And the president has drifted away from it."

Powell said he did not feel the need to issue a statement because he made his feeling about Trump clear four years ago when it became "clear that I could not possibly vote for this individual."

"The first thing that troubled me is the whole birthers movement. And birthers movement had to do with the fact that the president of the United States, President Obama, was a black man. That was part of it," Powell said of

Trump's denial that Obama was an American citizen in the face of evidence proving that he was.

"And then I was deeply troubled by the way in which he was going around insulting everybody, insulting Gold Star mothers, insulting John McCain, insulting immigrants — and I'm the son of immigrants — insulting anybody who dared to speak against him.

"And that is dangerous for our democracy. It is dangerous for our country. And I think what we're seeing now, the most massive protest movement I have ever seen in my life, I think this suggests that the country is getting wise to this, and we're not going to put up with it anymore."

Powell added that Trump "lies," a word "I never would have used with any of the four presidents I have worked for."

"He lies about things. And he gets away with it because people will not hold him accountable," Powell said.

In a tweet shortly after Powell's interview aired, Trump called Powell — the first African American to serve as secretary of state and chairman of the joint chiefs of staff — "highly overrated" and touted his own work in office. Last week, former President George W. Bush said in a statement it was crucial the protesters be heard. And without mentioning Trump by name, he denounced those who would try to silence them.

Condoleezza Rice, who served in Bush's Cabinet along with Powell, declined Sunday to say on CBS News' "Face the Nation" whether she planned to vote for Trump, but she said the president should "speak in the language of unity, the language of empathy."

Contributing: Deirdre Shesgreen and Nicholas Wu; The Associated Press