

# ANNUAL HIGHLIGHTS



Resources & Solutions  
for Small Business

# UCEDC



# 2023

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear Friends,

As I reflect on the accomplishments of UCEDC not only in 2023 but also over the past four years of my presidency, I am humbled and astounded by the incredible impact we've had. When I look at the numbers alone, the sheer volume of loans and services we've provided is remarkable. Yet, beyond the statistics and figures, I am acutely aware of the immense dedication and hard work put in by our staff every day. Their unwavering commitment to our mission, along with the support of our board of trustees, funders, and partners, has propelled UCEDC forward and allowed us to make a difference in the communities we serve.

At the heart of every loan we've extended or training program offered lies an entrepreneur who takes the brave step into small business ownership. Their courage is the lifeblood of local economies, driving innovation, creating jobs, and fostering growth. As we celebrate our achievements, let us remember the individuals behind the numbers, the local leaders who embody the spirit of entrepreneurship and inspire us. We look forward to continuing our work, assisting small businesses, empowering communities, and doing our part to lift local economies.

Sincerely, Adam Farrah



## CHAIRWOMAN'S MESSAGE

Dear Friends,

As a small business owner, I appreciate the vital role that UCEDC plays for entrepreneurs throughout and beyond New Jersey. UCEDC's support of small businesses in the areas of financial assistance, education, networking, and marketing is impressive. It has been an honor to serve as UCEDC's chairwoman this past year. Doing so has enabled me to witness firsthand the profound impact of UCEDC's efforts and the unwavering commitment and experience of its staff, board members, partners, and funders. I am immensely proud to serve on the board of this impressive organization that is dedicated to serving the small businesses that are at the heart of our communities.

I encourage you to explore the entrepreneurial success stories featured in the following pages. Each story is a testament to the meaningful impact of our work, and I have no doubt you will be inspired by the resilience and success of the businesses we've supported.

Sincerely, Marcy Metz



# SUB-OLGY CRANFORD, NJ



After 20 years of working in corporate America as an Independent Trader, Paolo Fontana realized he was ready to embark on an entrepreneurial journey. Although Paolo wasn't sure what to expect, he knew he wanted to be in a service business surrounded by community.

He looked for restaurants and pizzerias and eventually came across Sub-Ology, an established sandwich shop located in the heart of downtown Cranford. Paolo immediately fell in love. He purchased Sub-Ology in August 2015 and inherited the dedicated team that had grown with the business as well as a small customer base.

When asked about the transition from working on Wall Street to entrepreneurship, Paolo quickly exclaimed, "I love it," adding that the flexibility he now has allowed him to spend meaningful time with his family.

Upon facing small business obstacles, Paolo looked to Downtown Cranford for resources. They referred him to UCEDC, where he began attending training workshops

and networking events. Eventually, he met Mary Adelman, a UCEDC Business Counselor who he says "is always very helpful" and was pivotal in helping Sub-Ology retain a necessary certificate needed to reconstruct Sub-Ology's website.

After months of aggravation trying to obtain a much-needed tax certificate, Paolo says that Mary's unwavering support shone through. She spent hours on hold at Sub-Ology trying to get Paolo the answers he needed and even continued the effort while driving to her next appointment. Paolo marvels, saying, "She genuinely cares. No one else would do that." Mary's tenacity in navigating his entrepreneurial challenges and finding a solution made a lasting impact.

Now nine years into entrepreneurship and with many lessons learned, Paolo credits a significant part of his success to his community. He recognizes his team, whom he could not run the business without, Downtown Cranford for caring deeply about the success of local business owners, and UCEDC for being a tremendous resource that is always a phone call away.

# MOMMY'S BEST FRIEND II NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ



Celeste Rivers considers her path to entrepreneurship a divine gift. After a corporate restructuring, Celeste's Human Resources position was in flux, and she felt that she needed a change. She says she remembers it like it was yesterday. It was June of 2012. She went to sleep one night, had a dream, and when she woke up, she knew what she was meant to do.

Rivers started planning her childcare center immediately. It became her passion, and she started researching and taking the classes she felt she needed to prepare for opening a childcare center. She renovated her basement and garage to create an in-home childcare facility. It was very important to Celeste that the program be both educational and fun. The program included an educational curriculum and field trips.

As a NJ state-registered in-home childcare provider, Mommy's Best Friend II was limited to only five children. It wasn't long before there was a waitlist, and Celeste knew she needed a bigger space. Rivers says it felt like it happened overnight. An acquaintance of her husband's mentioned that they knew a person selling a business.

She says, "He gave me the information. I went out, and I looked at this place, and I said, this is it. This is where we are going to be." In her new space, Mommy's Best Friend II can care for up to 30 children.

UCEDC met Mrs. Rivers in 2022 when she was accepted into the Virtual Incubator Program (VIP), which helps businesses with ownership from an underserved population sustain themselves through education and access to capital. Celeste says, "The training department at UCEDC is absolutely phenomenal," and the VIP gave her a wealth of information that she still utilizes today. She explains that though she knew a great deal about childcare, the program helped her on the business side of things, including how to manage finances, bookkeeping, and taxes.

Celeste remains in contact with her VIP mentor, UCEDC Training Officer Alejandro Cruz, and she says that she continues to gain knowledge that aids in her success more than a year after completing the program.

# FLUX MODERN OCEAN GROVE, NJ

With Danielle and Drew Levinson's love for flea market finds, it wasn't long before the couple needed to sell their old treasures in order to make room for "new, weird old stuff," as Drew puts it. They didn't know it then, but quietly, the concept of FLUX Modern was being born.

It was in 2009, when the Levinsons bought a house filled with mid-century modern furniture that they began to realize the value of their mutual hobby. After keeping the items they loved, Danielle and Drew researched the leftover items and began to sell them accordingly. It wasn't until they funded their new home's kitchen renovation through the sale of these mid-century items that the Levinsons realized how worthwhile their antiquing endeavors had become.

First, it was a side hustle, but before long, their basement was filled with furniture, then it was the garage, and then finally, their car. Bursting at the seams, they decided they needed a physical location to sell their refinished furniture finds. It started with a booth in an antique mall, and they were often just breaking even.

At the time, both Danielle and Drew were still working their corporate jobs. Danielle, who had been in the fashion industry for over a decade, says she was ready to walk away from it. They did some calculations and believed they could make their business their full-time job. So they did the brave thing entrepreneurs do and took a leap of faith.

It wasn't until they were ready to purchase the building where their headquarters now resides that they came across UCEDC. Danielle explained that they went to their local bank first, but the bank wasn't interested in lending to them. That's when the NJSBDC at Brookdale Community College introduced the Levinsons to UCEDC, whose staff helped them get the funding they needed.

Danielle and Drew shared that the 504 loan program was a complicated process, but UCEDC walked them through every step and even went as far as to jump on Zoom calls to fill out the paperwork together line by line. Drew says, "We would not be here without UCEDC." Danielle adds that the people at UCEDC have a wealth of knowledge to share and that the most meaningful thing to her was that UCEDC genuinely cared about Flux Modern's success.

For a business built on a labor of love, where each item in their shop is touched, resurfaced, or re-upholstered by Drew, Danielle, or one of their family members, it seems only fitting that their funding partners care as much about their business as they do. To see more of their remarkable work visit them on Instagram @fluxmodern.





Resources & Solutions  
for Small Business

**UCEDC**

A Non-Profit Economic Development Corporation

---

**2023 IMPACT  
STATISTICS**

---

---

## LENDING

---

**191**

Number of Loans

**\$9.7**

Million Closed

**62%**

Minority-Owned

**824**

Jobs Created/  
Retained

**\$33.4**

Million Total  
Project Costs

**54%**

Woman-Owned

---

## GOVERNMENT CONTRACTING

---

**175**

New Clients

**\$45**

Million in Contracts  
Awarded

**306**

Counseling  
Hours

**68**

Thousand  
Bid Matches

---

## TRAINING

---

**117**

Workshops

**2036**

Attendees

**36%**

Start-Ups

**2153**

Clients Mentored

**7982**

Mentoring Hours



# BARA HOMES NEWARK, NJ

Encouraged by her mother's success in building her own real estate portfolio, Maritza Guillaume Émile boldly decided to leave the corporate world and embark on a mission-driven journey in the construction industry. Thus, Bara Homes was born—a testament to Maritza's vision of promoting home ownership and revitalizing communities through urban redevelopment.

Derived from the Hebrew words "bara ex nihilo," meaning "to create from nothing," the name Bara Homes embodies the essence of the company's mission. Maritza's passion for community empowerment led her to explore government contracting in 2019. When the pandemic struck in 2020, causing her to lose clients, she discovered that government contracts could provide a lifeline for her business.

Delving deeply into the intricacies of government procurement, Maritza found a guiding light in Nadine Clark, UCEDC's Director of Procurement. Describing Nadine as instrumental, Maritza credits her with providing invaluable support and guidance throughout the complex process of bidding on government contracts. Nadine's heart of service and genuine concern for Maritza's success left a lasting impression.

Adapting to the challenges of the pandemic, Bara Homes expanded its services to include janitorial services, a move that proved fruitful when they secured a contract to provide janitorial services to the only federally managed fish hatchery in the United States.

Looking ahead, Bara Homes is enthusiastic about their role in urban redevelopment and their commitment to creating pathways to homeownership for underserved communities. Maritza's dedication extends beyond business ventures; she demonstrates compassion by offering support to those she works with, such as assisting an electrician in setting up phone reminders to take his medicine.

Bara Homes' journey is a testament to resilience, community care, and the transformative power of entrepreneurship. UCEDC takes pride in contributing to Bara Homes' success and eagerly anticipates the profound impact of their meaningful work in building inclusive and thriving communities.





# RIDDER'S CUSTOM WOODWORK, LLC. HAMILTON, NJ

As the son of a cabinet maker, Philip Ridder began working with wood when he was 12 years old. And though he's been woodworking most of his life, after watching his parents struggle as immigrant entrepreneurs, he grew up thinking the path to success was through a steady 9 to 5 job.

After becoming a civil engineer and one too many layoffs, Ridder began to reconsider his options. Surprisingly, giving one of his kidneys to his brother finally placed him on the path of entrepreneurship.

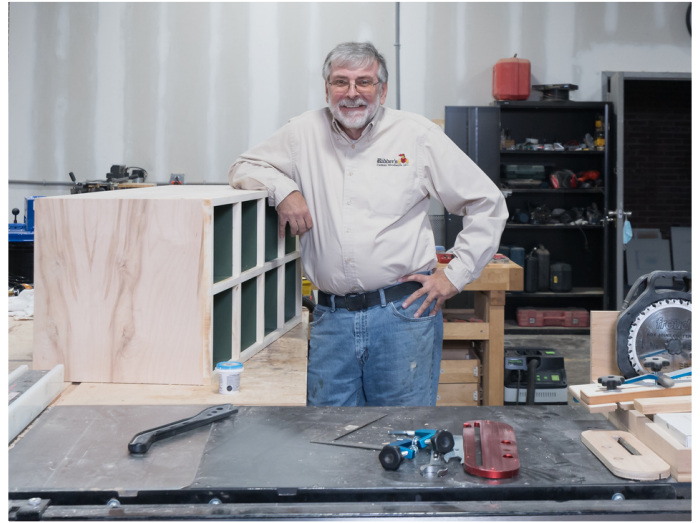
Ridder shares that the experience with his brother taught him a great deal about himself. He thought if he could go through everything that donating a kidney entailed, he could do anything, including becoming an entrepreneur.

Philip's belief in the Latin creed, "audentes fortuna iuvat" (fortune favors the bold), which he engraved on a wooden sign that hangs above his workshop, is what guides him in his entrepreneurial endeavors. He explains that entrepreneurship is not for the faint of heart and that despite his occasional worry or sleepless nights, he knows he won't let anything hinder his success.

When asked how UCEDC's lending team helped him, Philip shared that he opened his shop in Hamilton at the beginning of the pandemic. At the time, he didn't realize it would be as challenging as it was. He says that money was quickly depleting, and "UCEDC stepped in, in a very big way, and helped me get through Covid."

Ridder's workspace is vast, and he works on all types of projects, including custom cabinets, furniture, built-ins, awards, memorials, urns, gifts, and home accessories. He even made a large-scale candelabra that he crafted for Saint Peter's Church in Morristown, which he is particularly proud of.

Through every carefully carved piece and meticulously crafted joint, Philip Ridder's talent and creativity shine. His workshop is a hub of innovation and passion. With support from UCEDC, he's weathered tough times and emerged stronger. Ridder's creations reflect his skill and commitment to excellence, and his story inspires us to chase our dreams with courage and audacity.



# DOCTOR LASHONDA GREEN

## COUNSELING CONSULTING AND COACHING

### BAYONNE, NJ

Dr. LaShonda Green often imagined herself as Queen Latifah's character in *Living Single*, a publisher of an independent magazine. She went to school and got an MBA with the intention of becoming just that. However, two years after grad school, LaShonda realized she wanted to do something more meaningful with her life.

Longing for personal connection and something that spoke to her with purpose, she says she wanted to bridge her skill set and her desire to make an impact. That is how she landed in psychology.

When Dr. Green came to UCEDC's Virtual Incubator Program (VIP), which helps diverse business owners with training, mentorship, and access to capital, her private practice was still fledgling. LaShonda explains that the program helped her to make connections with other small business owners who were also facing the challenges of entrepreneurship. Being part of a team of people trying to succeed in business and going through the VIP made her less daunted by the idea of running her own practice and made her realize that feeling overwhelmed or unmotivated while still hopeful wasn't unique.

LaShonda credits the VIP with staying in private practice. She says she had been on the precipice of walking away because of the administrative barriers she was facing with insurance companies and billing. She says the program helped her to feel empowered to try again.

Dr. Green explains, "It's very common for businesses to make missteps. And sometimes, it's the small business owner. You think if you're not doing great and spectacular, wonderful, mind-blowing, mountain-moving things, that you're not doing anything, but the smaller steps matter. And so I said, well, you know what? Let me circle back, let me start again, and let me appreciate the smaller steps."

With a new attitude and renewed motivation, LaShonda was able to find a private practice platform that would manage the pieces of her business that weren't working for her so she could get back to her purpose. We are so glad to have been able to help Dr. Green on her entrepreneurial journey and know that in doing so, she will continue to help others with their mental health needs.



# DEPLOYED \$649,000 IN LOANS TO MERCER COUNTY SMALL BUSINESSES

We are proud to share that in collaboration with Mercer County, UCEDC launched the Mercer County Loan Program, which deployed \$649,000 in capital to Mercer County small businesses through American Rescue Plan Act funds.

**Introducing the 0% Mercer County Loan Program**  
offered in partnership with **UCEDC**

Grow Your Business Today

MERCER COUNTY NEW JERSEY

Resources & Solutions for Small Business  
**UCEDC**  
A Non-Profit Economic Development Corporation

# UCEDC'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A SECOND CHANCE PROGRAM RECOGNIZED WITH PHILANOS SPOTLIGHT AWARD

UCEDC is honored to announce that Impact 100 Garden State has been awarded the prestigious Spotlight Award by Philanos Women, a renowned national women's giving circle network. This accolade specifically acknowledges the impact of a \$110,000 grant awarded to UCEDC in 2019, which supported the creation and expansion of UCEDC's Entrepreneurship as a Second Chance program for formerly incarcerated individuals seeking self-sustainability through entrepreneurship.

# UCEDC CLOSED OVER 800 IN-HOUSE LOANS DURING THE PAST FOUR YEARS

That's a 65% jump in loan volume over the prior four years

This is the same volume of loans as the prior 16 years of lending activity spanning from 2004 to 2019

Resources & Solutions for Small Business  
**UCEDC**  
A Non-Profit Economic Development Corporation

**ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS A SECOND CHANCE**

www.ucedc.com

- Training Workshops**  
Gain knowledge in evaluating business feasibility, navigating New Jersey's business setup process, and selecting the optimal business structure.
- Business Planning**  
We provide step-by-step guidance, templates, expert advice, and tailored support, ensuring entrepreneurs develop clear strategies for their venture's success.
- Access Potential Funding**  
Upon completion, entrepreneurs have the opportunity to receive a forgivable-loan.

- About the Program**  
The Entrepreneurship as a Second Chance (ESC) initiative offers formerly incarcerated, or court-involved individuals the opportunity to explore re-entry into society through business ownership. In addition to intensive entrepreneurial training, two years of one-on-one mentoring, and business plan development.
- Why Choose us**
- Access to comprehensive entrepreneurial training, equipping individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge to run a successful business.
  - Work with experienced mentors who can provide guidance and support based on their own entrepreneurial journeys.
  - Help in understanding and navigating legal requirements, licenses, and regulations essential for establishing and running a business.

**At UCEDC, we consider it a privilege to be able to serve so many entrepreneurs!**

# DONORS & FUNDERS

## DONORS

### PLATINUM

Capital One Bank  
Northfield Bank  
Santander  
TD Bank  
Wells Fargo Bank

### GOLD

Bank of America  
Citizens Bank Foundation  
M&T Bank  
Synchrony Bank  
Valley Bank

### SILVER

OceanFirst  
Spencer Savings Bank

### BRONZE

PSEG Foundation

## PATRON

A.K. Stamping  
BJ&M Auto, Inc.  
Gail Driscoll  
Hamilton Holding Co.  
IBEW Local 102  
Joseph P. Starkey  
Plumbers Local 24  
Spearman Consultant Services  
Union County Savings Bank  
Universal Tax and Accounting Services  
Universal Vending Management, LLC

## FUNDERS & SUPPORTERS

County of Union  
City of New Brunswick  
County of Mercer  
Hudson County Economic  
Development Corporation  
New Jersey Economic  
Development Authority  
Explore Millburn Short Hills  
Isles, Inc.  
Norwescap  
US Small Business Administration  
US Department of the Treasury  
US Department of Defense

**We couldn't do it without you!**

[WWW.UCEDC.COM](http://WWW.UCEDC.COM) | 75 CHESTNUT ST, CRANFORD, NJ 07016 | 908-527-1166