

GRNoir

GRNoir, a name Nadia Brigham literally dreamed up, opened in December 2020, smack dab in the middle of a pandemic that came complete with rules that kept people out of restaurants and bars. “But there’s a silver lining,” said Shatawn Brigham, Nadia’s husband and co-owner. “It has given us the time to hire staff and perfect our menu.”

Northern Initiatives initially helped GRNoir by partnering with the Grand Rapids Community Foundation using funds designated to help entrepreneurs of color. NI also helped GRNoir manage cash flow during COVID by providing a payment deferral option; GRNoir also received a deferral on rent. “If those two things hadn’t happened, we would have really been struggling,” Nadia Brigham said.

The couple had a longtime goal to run a business that kept with their own values, including equitable and living wage pay and working with diverse vendors. They wanted to create a venue for Black professionals to network and relax in a warm environment after work – and listen to wonderful music that is a cultural art form.

The dream of opening their own wine and jazz bar grew in a giant leap when the couple entered on a whim and won \$20,000 in the August 2019 Start Garden pitch contest. Even with that windfall and sizable savings of their own, they knew they needed additional capital for their startup. That’s when they approached Northern Initiatives about financing. Nadia Brigham was familiar with the name, but not the mission – and was bowled over when she found kindred spirits. “Not only did we get financial support but community support,” she said.

GRNoir represents a breakthrough in the wine industry in many ways: Shatawn Brigham is Grand Rapids’ first Black sommelier; few African Americans own wineries (less than 2%); and even fewer have wine bars in the United States.

Even when people weren’t allowed inside, the Brighams didn’t skimp on service. They offered curbside pickup, virtual wine tastings and a monthly wine club. The menu grew to include hors d’oeuvres, small plates and desserts. And they continued working their day jobs, running Brigham Consulting, which helps businesses increase diversity and equity (Nadia) and as a community schools coordinator (Shatawn). Nadia is also working on a Ph.D and the couple has three kids, one of whom attends virtual school from GRNoir while her parents work.