

Two of our Somerset County Youth Council members Riley S. **(RS)** and Siri T. **(ST)** interviewed Cindelle Harris **(CH)** to learn more about her motivation for opening her bookstore.

**ST:** So, my first question is what made you want to start an online bookstore rather than open up a physical bookstore and what are the benefits of opening an online store?

**CH:** Yeah, so in terms of how bookstores work when you're a bookseller there's two kind of sides, or two kinds of things that you really enjoy. So first of all, you really enjoy books right, you enjoy reading and you enjoy the whole scheme of books. Then other side is the actual business. How can you make money from loving books? So, when we launched, which was in August of 2020, this was in the middle of the pandemic. It was almost a thing where it was like we have our license to sell these books, but do we want to open a bookstore now? We don't know how people are going to communicate with each other and interact with each other. Or do we want to find cool advanced ways to still connect with each other for people to still have books? So, the point of having an online/mobile bookstore is so we can-do pop-up events. We are currently in articulation agreements with a few coffee shops in the area to do mobile bookstores. There would be bookcases there and people can purchase there, or they can pick up from different coffee shops. This was for us to kind of visualize and see what life will be like after the pandemic in terms of what bookselling will look like. If it is something where we have a drive through service, or if we have something where there's a walk-up service where people can just pick up their books. There may even be like glass cases and people can choose through machines. We're currently in the startup/planning/ research phase of what a bookstore will look like post pandemic. The point of that and I think is an advantage, is the fact that we don't have to open the brick and mortar right now. We still make really good sales, but we can kind of just figure out how we can start a trend or continue a trend of what stores look like post pandemic. The advantages of that are there's not a lot of overhead. If you have a brick-and-mortar store for example, you have to pay for rent and for light right. Or you have to pay a mortgage or extra fees. Kind of the idea of all of that is it is now at a 0. I don't have to pay an overhead fee because of those things. What ends up happening is from a consumer level from someone who wants to actually buy a book, it would be cheaper for them. I am not including the cost of making sure that my employees get paid, or having to make sure that my rent gets paid. It's one of those things where it's like well now I can sell books at a cheaper rate because I don't have overhead costs.

**RS:** My question is do you have any plans on expanding your online bookstore into a brick-and-mortar bookstore?

**CH:** Yes, so absolutely! Like I said before, we definitely want to have not only just one Cindelle's Bookstore but multiple of them. In New Jersey there's not a lot of bookstores altogether and not a lot of black bookstores specifically. So, we do want to see what that looks like. Well obviously, we will have to have had one first. We do plan to have a brick-and-mortar, if not this year probably next year for sure. We are in great contact with the politicians, the funders, and investors in Plainfield in terms of what the bookstore will look like in Plainfield. That's where we would want to have the first one and then we could branch out from there. So yes, I do plan to have one, very soon.

**ST:** My second question is what inspired you center your bookstore around a one that gives a voice to black authors and novels that represent black culture?

**CH:** So, when I was younger, I used to read books a lot and often times I did not see people who looked like me in books. It was very very hard to see a protagonist or an author that was black. So, we're currently living in a renaissance time I call it the black book renaissance, where publishers are now starting to see our black authors. They're starting to publish more black books and books with black protagonists or black main characters. What we want to do, or our main mission is to kind of latch on to that. We want to give a voice to

or a platform rather, to people who don't experience as much or as often. We kind of want to capitalize and profit off of that. We also want people, specifically black kids and black girls to see these types of books and know that they can see themselves in it. That's pretty much the anchor of the bookstore. To just make sure that it is centered around black voices, black authors, black characters, and black people. It does not mean that we're limited to black characters, authors, and people. So, say for example you want to come to my bookstore, and you wanted to order *The Alchemist*, you can obviously get at the same rate that you will get it somewhere else. It's just to center and focus more on black people, black authors, and black voices.

**RS:** My second question is what is your biggest challenge in owning an online bookstore? Is it hard competing with Amazon and Barnes and Nobles?

**CH:** So, if you want to ask any other indie bookseller, they will tell you that it is not as hard to profit as much as Amazon or Barnes and Noble. Mainly because you oftentimes find that the customers that you receive, are actual book readers. Book readers are not people who are going to just go on Amazon and buy a whole bunch of books. Book readers want to be connected to the people that sell them their books. Say for example Riley what is one of your favorite companies? Or Siri tell me one of your favorite companies.

**RS:** Michael's

**CH:** Michael's okay. Siri what is one of your favorites?

**ST:** I like the clothing store Pacsun

**CH:** Okay, so Riley, you basically told me that you really appreciate crafts and arts and crafts. If they were to open a craft store in your town, would you go to Michaels or would you go to that craft store in your town?

**RS:** The craft store in my town.

**CH:** Why would you go to the craft store in your town?

**RS:** It's more I guess personal.

**CH:** Right and so that's the point. Oftentimes people love human experiences, book people specifically love human experiences. If I am ordering a book from Amazon because it is cheaper it doesn't cost as much as it is if you were to walk into my bookstore and talk to me about a book. Often, I realize that the clients or the customers that I have, enjoy more of the fact that it's coming from me then from a computer. More than if it's coming from a robot or from people that they don't know, you know. What I'm saying is I don't feel like I have to compete with Amazon or Barnes and Noble, mainly because I know that the people are going to continuously buy books for me. The bookstore is actually going to have some type of longevity because of the people that actually read books. I hope that it makes sense. People can say I need this book let me just go on Amazon because it's the cheapest. Versus, oh I really like this bookstore I'm in their book club and I'm a book person. So, it's more of a community-based thing than a product selling thing.

**ST:** My last question is what does a typical work day look like for you?

**CH:** Okay so a typical workday I have to tell you, know how people say like successful people wake up at like 5:00 AM? They go run, they write in their journals, they manifest, and they do all of this stuff. I do not do that! I have to be at work at 7:45 AM and because I live 6 minutes away from my job, I make sure that I leave at 7:39 AM to get there at 7:45 AM. So what I do is I do a lot of things in the nighttime, I'm a night owl. That means

that in the daytime I work, teach, and grade papers. I give assignments and I speak to parents. In the middle of the day, I'm teaching probably a college class. So, I have lecture, I talk to students, and I'm on a college campus. Then pretty much after that I am packing book orders and I am checking our email to make sure that I did not miss a book order. I'm in communication with a whole bunch of publishing companies trying to make sure that I get all of these advanced reader copies, so that I can read them before the book comes out. That takes up a chunk of my night, it takes me a very very long time to do that. Then after that, I am reading of course, because I still am a book lover. That's it, on the weekends I like to sleep a lot. I'm a pretty average person except for the fact that I own a bookstore.

**RS:** My last question is your logo was a green leaf, why'd you choose this for your business? I also noticed the cool colorful art working on the brick wall on your website. Is there a reason why you chose this artwork?

**CH:** So, the artwork that you saw on the website is from the coffee shop that I give people hubs or like places to meet me at. That coffee shop is kind of like our sister/brother coffee shop. Mainly because we have a lot of events there. On a familial level the owner the coffee shop, his father knows my father. They used to be very close friends and so we know each other because of our fathers. So, what the coffee shop does is every month, they find new artists to put new murals or new art on the walls. Then people come in and if they like the art they buy it. It's also a really cool place to just take pictures. If you are ever in the Plainfield area, please go visit Queen City Coffee Roasters because they also roast their own coffee there. It's a really cool place. In terms of the leaf on the logo, I always loved that type of leaf. So, it made more sense for me to put together green, which is my favorite color, leaf, plants, green, greenery. I wish there was a profound moment where I like walked up a mountain and I was like oh my gosh this leaf meant I need absolutely open a bookstore. It wasn't one of those things. Versus I just love that leaf and that's the reason why it is in the design. We are currently still moving logos and things around. Since we're online, we get to kind of figure out what works for online things and what doesn't work. So, we're going to have a whole new logo revamp. Obviously still with the leaf because I love that leaf, it's just something that I love.

