



K. Zulene Adams, co-founder and CEO of Z Promotions, was named the Pickerington Area Chamber of Commerce's ATHENA Leadership Award winner. LORRIE CECIL/THISWEEK

LEADERSHIP ROLE

Adams works to strengthen community

Nate Ellis ThisWeek | USA TODAY NETWORK

Through her business and several philanthropic endeavors, K. Zulene Adams has sought to create pathways to success for others.

As co-founder and CEO of Pickerington-based Z Promotions, Adams has worked for the past 12 years to create specialized marketing that helps clients become more recognized and memorable, particularly those that are owned by minorities, women and veterans.

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Adams

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Adams' work is rooted in a philosophy that businesses and communities are better when different groups of people have equal opportunities to share perspectives and leverage ideas and talents. It's also what drives her to mentor and train minorities, women, veterans and even prison inmates who aspire to succeed in business, become productive citizens or simply need glimmers of hope.

"I just believe in helping anyone who is requesting assistance. It's about serving," Adams said. "If we are providing resources, knowledge, experience, mentorship, funding or whatever it may be, that's going to reverberate throughout the community."

"It ends up helping and benefiting everyone."

On Oct. 7, the Pickerington Area Chamber of Commerce named Adams the 2022 recipient of its ATHENA Leadership Award. She was honored along with Ella Williams, owner of Posh Teatime Co., who was chosen as the Emerging ATHENA Award winner, and Himadri "Disha" Hoque, who was the Youth ATHENA Award selection.

The awards, presented since 1998, are aimed at recognizing women and girls who have taken leadership roles in the community.

The ATHENA Leadership Award is one of the chamber's top honors and is an offshoot of an international program launched in 1982 by Martha Mertz, who sought to recognize women who excelled in their professions, gave back to their communities and helped raise up other leaders. According to PACC President Kim Barlag, Mertz also believed that if women's strengths as leaders were publicly acknowledged, their work and ideas no longer could be dismissed.

"As a woman and minority entrepreneur, Zulene is passionate about ensuring that all women- and minority-owned businesses have an equal chance to have a seat at the table," Barlag said.

In honoring Adams, Barlag said she is vice president of the National Association of Women Business Owners, an organization founded in the U.S. in 1975 to provide networking opportunities to the approximately 10.6 million women-owned businesses.

She also said Adams was part of a group who successfully lobbied for the passage of Ohio Senate Bill 105 this past March. The bipartisan bill requires political subdivisions to recognize state-level certifications for minority business enterprises, women-owned business enterprises and veteran-friendly business enterprises that often avail those businesses to specialized grants and other resources.

"What was happening for businesses like mine was we would go and get certified, whether it be at the city or state level, but there was no recognizing at each municipality," Adams said. "This is minority or woman-owned certification to certify that your business is a minority business or woman-owned business."

"Now, we don't have to go through all of the paperwork. Sometimes, it also costs money. Sometimes, when you're a small or new business, you can't afford to pay \$200, \$300 for each certification."

Along with those efforts, Barlag said that while serving on the PACC and Lancaster Fairfield Chamber of Commerce's Fairfield Equality Taskforce, Adams "educated the local business community on diversity, equity and inclusion by bringing in Citywide Training to work

with this taskforce."

Citywide Training is a program developed by the city of Columbus that offers a variety of professional development classes open to the public that are reasonably priced and conveniently scheduled.

Lastly, the PACC recognized Adams for her work prior to the COVID-19 pandemic to teach life skills to female inmates at the Ohio Reformatory for Women in Marysville through the Ohio Prison Entrepreneurship Program partnership with the National Association of Women Business Owners.

"Zulene was one of the first to volunteer to teach," Barlag said. "Women found her personal story and passion for service to be inspiring, impactful and instructive."

"But she didn't stop there. She became one of the initiators of a joint project to establish a permanent program to teach market research and customer service skills to women in prison."

For Adams, the work with female prisoners was especially rewarding because she could serve as a mentor to women with business ideas but lacked the education and resources to build business models or take products to market.

In other instances, she said, the program provided training the women could use to land jobs once released from prison.

"It gives them opportunity, even the lifers," Adams said. "It gives them opportunities to learn leadership, build structure, build certain skills. It gives them a purpose."

"I would help them in terms of personal branding and business branding. I would help them in areas of marketing and areas of networking. It's just letting them know the organizations they want to tap into and giving them names and making connections. I feel like I got more out of the program than I gave because they just really energized me."

Adams is steadfast in her belief that through service, she can help provide equal access to opportunities in her community and throughout Ohio.

That's why she continues to work with the Equality Taskforce and seeks ways to empower minorities, women and veterans in Fairfield County who want to break through in the business world.

"What I wanted to do was make sure that we do whatever we can to level the playing field," Adams said. "That's sharing your experiences and sharing the resources you have."

"That's why diversity, equity and inclusion is important. We can't have the equity until we all start sharing things."

Adams said she believes the Pickerington community has made strides in recent years related to DEI issues, in part because more Black, Asian and Hispanic people have moved to the community. Over the next few years, she hopes to continue to work with those groups to help mentor them and guide them to resources that will help their businesses succeed, while also bolstering the local, regional and state economies.

Adams said she's grateful to be recognized for her efforts, but she said the Athena Award is a reminder that her work is not done.

"I really do appreciate it and with that, I see a responsibility," she said. "I need to forge ahead and do more and do better."

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