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Former inmate launches her own coffee business

By JIMMY TOMLIN ENTERPRISE STAFF WRITER
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Queen Coffee Bean's signature blend is a sweet blend of coffees from East Africa.

LAURA GREENE | HPE

HIGH POINT — Not all that long ago, Claudia Shivers hit rock-bottom.

Her role in a tax fraud scheme had landed her in federal prison. She'd lost her job with Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools. Her grandmother had died. Any semblance of dignity she'd ever possessed was gone.

"I was so sad and depressed," the 46-year-old High Point woman recalls. "I just wanted to go hide somewhere and get away from everybody who knew who I was."

These days, though, Shivers finds herself in a much better place — literally and figuratively — thanks, in part, to Inmates To Entrepreneurs, a program that helps individuals with a criminal background start their own business.

“They help you start something new, so you don’t go back to prison,” Shivers says. “They help you realize you don’t have to go back to a life of crime.”

Shivers recently launched an online coffee business, Queen Coffee Bean, that she’d been planning for since her incarceration. After five months, she thinks she’s got something special brewing.

“I can’t retire yet,” she says with a chuckle, “but the business is going well. I’ve definitely exceeded my expectations. My goal was to get some name recognition and brand recognition, and I’ve done that. I have repeat customers, which was another goal, and now people are buying my coffee not for the novelty of it or to help a friend, but more because they just like the coffee.”

Shivers, a Lexington native, served 10½ months at the Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia — from August 2019 to July 2020 — for conspiracy to commit tax fraud. It was during that time that her plan to start a coffee company began to come together.

Prior to the beginning of her prison term, Shivers had begun working at a local Starbucks. Even then, as she learned how to make various coffee drinks, she wondered if there might be a future in coffee for her. With her manager’s encouragement, she bought a coffee roaster for her home and began experimenting, letting family members sample the results.

Then, during her prison term, she read books about coffee — everything from the history of coffee to how to start your own coffee company.

“By the time I got out, I had already written a draft of a business plan,” Shivers says.

She needed a jump-start, though, and that’s where Inmates To Entrepreneurs entered the picture.

“I had not heard of them, but their ad kept popping up on Facebook,” she says. “Well, I was a former inmate, and I wanted to be an entrepreneur, so why not?”

She enrolled in the free, eight-week online program and began learning the ins and outs of running her own business.

“They have instructors with real-life experience on being entrepreneurs,” Shivers says. “And they have access to information that I didn’t know about. They were very helpful.”

According to the Inmates To Entrepreneurs website, the program — which was founded in 1992 — seeks to reduce the rate of recidivism in the United States. Because their criminal history makes it difficult for former inmates to find jobs, Inmates To Entrepreneurs helps them start their own businesses.

“The discrimination that these would-be employees experience perpetuates a cycle of economic insecurity that forces many to return to illegal activities just to survive,” the website states. “It is unsurprising then that nearly two-thirds of formerly incarcerated individuals find themselves back in prison in just three years.”

Shivers, who completed the program in October, doesn’t want to become one of those statistics. She has high hopes for Queen Coffee Bean.

“My goal is to buy a commercial roaster and a shipping container to turn it into a roastery,” she says, explaining that she currently operates the business out of her home. “I want it to be in either High Point or Lexington.”

In the meantime, you can find the business online (queencoffeebean.com), where she sells coffee beans and ground coffee in a variety of flavors, ranging from the signature dark roast blend to more exotic blends, such as chocolate-covered cherry and Ethiopian cinnamon buttercream. Shivers also sells an iced coffee in a bottle, as well as T-shirts and other marketing products.

Your orders can be shipped, delivered (within about a 50-mile radius) or picked up in person.

Launching her own business has been the perfect perk-me-up — er, pick-me-up — to help Shivers change how she feels about herself and put her past behind her, she says.

“I have an attitude of gratitude now,” she says. “You have to remember that you’re not a criminal or an evil person. You simply made a mistake, and it’s your job to not let your mistake define who you are going forward.”

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