

Crystal Washington receives Evolving Eve Award

by Kim James

Crystal Washington, a daring young entrepreneur with a passion and gift for encouraging and inspiring small business owners, is the recipient of Houston Woman Magazine's 2010 Evolving Eve Award.

She was nominated for the award by a friend, Crystal Brown-Tatum, who said, "Crystal built a business network of thousands of business owners without a single loan, grant or investor. Her proven market strategies have helped hundreds of small business owners reach their next level and build their client base and revenue."

Early on, Washington realized the power of presentation and the importance of maintaining relationships. In elementary school, she would make high grades on projects, not necessarily because the content was perfect, but because she made the final product look pretty. Washington says this skill came naturally to her. By the time she was in high school, teachers were so impressed with her level of work they would go out of their way to help her. School guidance counselors knew her and her work well, and they would forward information about scholarships and other opportunities to her before offering it to other students, if at all. This carried her on to the University of Houston, where she majored in hospitality management.

Washington secured a management position in the hospitality industry immediately following college. By age 23, she had worked her way up to revenue management.

Though she enjoyed her career, she felt a calling to be of greater service to small business owners.

"I was making one big company millions of dollars a year, but I didn't feel fulfilled," she said.

A self-described "planner without a parachute but armed with a strong calling," Washington left corporate America in 2007 to start her own company. Washington is now owner of Black-Market Exchange, a marketing firm designed to connect small business owners in Houston's urban community.

"I learned to eat fear for breakfast every single morning," she said of her first year in business, taking that attitude to function outside her comfort zone, conquering whatever nerve-racking task presented itself.

Washington's strong ability to connect with people was a blessing, and ultimately it built her business. Her goal was to reach a community she initially had little connection with. She hadn't yet learned about minority-owned or woman-owned business certification, but

she did know the importance of establishing strong connections and presenting a polished product.

“Social networking literally built my business,” she said.

Using networking websites, satisfied clients would tag her work and recommend her services one project at time. Washington ended up scoring major contracts from contacts made through Facebook. In less than one year, thousands of business owners were connecting through Black-Market Exchange.

As a consultant, Washington teaches image marketing and business networking to entrepreneurs seeking to experience substantial business growth. Her goal is to empower them and give them access to information that will help them accomplish their goals. She shares with others what has been so instrumental in her career – the power of connecting with people.

“The only thing you can never leverage is your network,” she said. “Knowing the right people can get you in the right places and direct you to resources you didn’t know about.” Washington is most proud to have reached a point in her career where her name and reputation are valued and trusted.

“That’s a major accomplishment and an attribute to my mentors and family,” she said. “I can recommend something, and people know they can trust me; they know I wouldn’t recommend something that would steer them in the wrong direction.”

Washington encourages others to figure out their purpose. She also notes that many are so addicted to the external, they miss discovering their purpose.

“I always want to be evolving, and I encourage others to evolve along with me if they want to go,” she said.

Kim James is a reporter for Houston Woman Magazine.