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# Twelve BIPOC Bookselling Entrepreneurs Jump into BincTank

The Book Industry Charitable Foundation is bringing a dozen diverse participants into its pilot program for business incubation

By Nathalie op de Beeck | Mar 05, 2024

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BincTank, the Book Industry Charitable Foundation’s business incubator and mentorship program for BIPOC booksellers, has introduced its first cohort of 12 entrepreneurs from across the U.S. Over a three-year cycle, BincTank participants will receive support and access to bookselling information, including the full curriculum of the Professional Booksellers School, as they establish their stores. The program also plans to announce a call for mentors in the coming weeks.

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Binc announced plans for BincTank last July, and opened to applications in mid-January. The call yielded 48 applications, and a panel of four judges worked with program manager Ken White to review the pool, selecting the finalists “according to predetermined criteria and anonymously,” BincTank reported.

Reviewers included Nuola Akinde, founding executive director of Legacy Unbound; James Fugate, the retired co-owner of EsoWon Books in Los Angeles; Javier Ramirez, co-owner of Exile in Bookville in Chicago; and Tianna Woodford, a program manager at Mortar Cincinnati, an organization that offers business training for historically marginalized entrepreneurs.

Participants started the program with an in-person orientation in Washington, D.C., hosted by Binc over the weekend of March 2. During this initial meeting, they toured BIPOC-owned stores including Loyalty, MahoganyBooks, Sankofa, and Solid State Books. Later this month, they’ll begin Professional Bookselling School coursework, receiving a two-month introduction to the business.

Erika Mantz, Binc’s communication coordinator, explained that BincTank developed out of a need to close the diversity gap in bookstore ownership. “BincTank is designed to help remove known barriers for BIPOC entrepreneurs, such as limited access to capital, peer-to-peer business networks, and investments,” Mantz said. While conducting research for the program, Binc found that “minority entrepreneurs are up to three times more likely to have a loan application denied,” and discovered that “only 58% of Black business owners sought professional services due to expense, inaccessibility, and mistrust, compared to 70% of white business owners.”

Some of BincTank's cohort have only a business plan in hand, while others are further along. According to a press announcement, "eligible entrepreneurs were either working toward opening a store or had a store that had been open no more than six months from the time of application." Five booksellers have established stores: Aysia Brown, founder of books-and-cocktails shop Protagonist Black (Fontana, Calif.); Diana Dominguez, founder of intersectional, feminist indie Más Libritos (Springdale, Ark.); Gwendolyn Henderson, founder of the HBCU-focused Black English Bookstore (Tampa, Fl.); Florida House District 13 state representative Angie Nixon, founder of the about-to-launch Café Resistance Bookstore (Jacksonville, Fl.); and Jay Williams, founder of Next Chapter Books (Detroit).

Seven BincTank participants are still in the planning stages: Courtney Bledsoe (Chicago) envisions a Black woman-owned store. Robert Eckman wants to create a bookstore oasis in a book desert (Belleville, Ill.). Alma Guzman, who works in bookstore operations for the Los Angeles store LA librería, plans a southeast L.A. bookmobile with a Spanish-language emphasis. Kenya Kirkman will open a children's bookstore in Brooklyn, and W.W. Norton sales rep Kevin Zambrano plans another Brooklyn store that amplifies Latinx and queer voices. In Nashville, Ciona Rouse will focus on poetry, libations, and liberation.

Aspiring BincTankers who missed out on this round will get another chance next year. According to Mantz, "a second application period is planned to open in early 2025 for a second cohort.