

# THE UNDEFEATED

HARLEM HOPS

## Three HBCU graduates bring craft beer bar to Harlem

Harlem Hops to become the first beer bar in Harlem owned 100 percent by African-Americans



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Three graduates of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are bringing a stylish take to a trendy craft beer bar in New York's historic Harlem neighborhood. On June 9, owners Kevin Bradford, Kim Harris and Stacey Lee officially opened the doors of Harlem Hops to the public, making the establishment the first craft beer bar in Harlem to be 100 percent owned by African-Americans.

Harlem Hops sits nestled in the heart of Harlem at 2268 Adam Clayton Powell Jr Blvd., a bustling street alive with independently owned businesses, convenient stores, curious neighbors and schoolchildren counting down the days until summer vacation begins. Walking into the bar gives the feel of everything Harlem embodies: a cozy, close-knit community where everyone is welcome.

"We want Harlem Hops to be Cheers for a lot of people in the neighborhood," Harris said. "We want it to be the safe haven where you can just come and learn about something different."

The vision of Harlem Hops began for Harris, a graduate of Clark Atlanta University, nearly five years ago. Born and raised in Harlem, Harris appreciated her neighborhood, but good beer was hard to find. Her quests to drink beer she enjoyed included traveling to Brooklyn to get it.

"I thought, there's something missing here," Harris said. "And that's when it came to me that we should do a beer bar in Harlem. That's was one of the reasons I thought about it."

At the time, Harris had been in what she described as a distressed partnership with another business. But upon meeting with restaurant consultant Jason Wallace, Harris learned there was another entrepreneur who shared a similar vision for a craft beer bar. Bradford, a graduate of Hampton University, had the same problems as Harris when it came to finding good beer. Originally from Detroit, Bradford would find himself bringing beer back from his hometown to New York.

"I like good beer, and I couldn't really

find good beer above 125th. To tell you the truth, even above 110th," Bradford said. "I had to travel to Brooklyn. I had to travel these far distances to get beer I liked. I think back in 2011 or 2012, New York was not really the beer center of the East Coast. Now, New York is pretty much on the map for craft beer. I live in Harlem and I wanted to open a bar in my neighborhood, but the zoning was residential. I could not have a commercial space in my property. That's when Jason Wallace introduced myself and Kim and I was like, this is it."

The two met near the end of 2016 and agreed that they could make the partnership work. Harris also ran her ideas past Lee, a fellow graduate of Clark Atlanta University and a trusted entrepreneur Harris had worked with in the past. Lee was more than happy to hop aboard and invest in the business.

"When Stacey came on board, she kind of made us whole in terms of all the bits and pieces," Harris said. "I have business sense, Kevin is focused on the beer and Stacey brings in the creativity and helps me keep my thoughts together. We're all married to each other. We love each other. It's the perfect combination."

Before long, ideas and concepts of what Harlem Hops could and should be began to fly. The three worked feverishly together to figure out everything from color schemes to beer to food menus. For decor, the group enlisted the help of designers. Matte black and copper would serve as the theme throughout the bar, and Harlem — whether it was in words, light-up messages or a marquee hanging from the ceiling — would be fully represented.

"Luckily, we all had the same style," Harris said. "We wanted clean lines. We wanted something simple. Something that was a combination of typical beer, but Harlem. Harlem is high-end and upscale, and that's what we wanted to do. We wanted to bring in some industrial aspects of a beer bar, but we wanted to make it sexy for everybody."

"It's not just your regular-looking beer bar," Lee said. "We know that Harlem is one

of the most recognized places in the world, so when people come to Harlem, we want them to think of Harlem Hops."

Next, the three wanted to put thought into the beer and small bites they would serve. The menu lists traditional and unique bar bites, including Bavarian pretzels and Tater Tots, bratwurst, and patties.

"Our menu is comprised of craft beers with all-natural ingredients," Harris said. "A lot of our cocktails and spirits that we're using are small-batched craft cocktails and spirits from small, family-owned distilleries. With that in mind, we are trying to educate, especially our community, in terms of drinking responsibly, being healthier with your drinking but still having fun and learning at the same time. Everything we're offering has a story."

The bar also serves a variety of brewers on tap, including those created by brewers of color.

"There's not a lot out there, but there are people of color that are very knowledgeable about beer that just haven't had the opportunity or the funding to push their products," Bradford said. "Luckily, we have two African-Americans here in Harlem that we'll have on tap for the opening day, Harlem Brewing Company's Celeste Beatty and Julian Riley's Harlem Blue."

"There are brewers of color all over the country and it takes time to get your distribution and things of that nature," Harris said. "So, as they get their distribution into the New York area, then that's when we'll be featuring them as well. We've been in contact with a lot of brewers and building our own network."

The networking and community support are what the owners look forward to as the business grows. The fact that all three owners are HBCU graduates is what they also hope to highlight. The three credit their universities for helping them be fearless in their everyday ventures.

"We love our HBCUs," Lee said. "Historically black colleges and universities have produced some of the best and the brightest. We all graduated with STEM

degrees, but we're all doing something different. I think HBCUs taught us about humility, taught us about drive and it's also very nurturing attending an HBCU. They have the mentality that you can do anything that you want to do. This started out as a dream with no money, no dollars and here we are about to open the first 100 percent all African-American-owned craft beer bar in Harlem. If you don't have the money, find a way or make one."

"That was the motto at Clark Atlanta University," Harris added. "Find a way or make one. I feel like every day of my life I say that. We have businesses, events companies, and I've been around 16 years doing events. When you're an entrepreneur, you always have to figure it out. If there's any message I walked away from that school with, it was find a way or make one."

Although Bradford attended a different HBCU, the nurturing and skill-building experiences were also the same.

"I became a man at Hampton," Bradford said. "It was a great experience just being around others moving forward. You didn't want to get left behind. It was always a competition between myself and my close buddies. I made great friends and it was a wonderful university."

As the three owners watched their hard work, sweat and tears come to fruition during the grand opening of Harlem Hops on June 9, they also began to think about the future.

"We want to be prominent figures in the neighborhood," Harris said. "For the little kids walking back and forth down the street, letting them see people like themselves in businesses, letting them know we went to HBCUs and in the future, we will be offering scholarships to them so that they can attend HBCU as well."

"Service is the rent we pay in order to live on earth, so we're gonna serve," Lee said.

