

CLIPPER

Black entrepreneurs discuss perseverance and challenges

By Sandra J. Pennecke

NORFOLK — Perseverance and finding supporters are essential in overcoming the challenges of starting and growing a business, Black entrepreneurs said during Pharrell Williams' Mighty Dream Forum in downtown Norfolk.

Panelists from California, New York and Richmond gathered at The Granby Theater on Nov. 1 during Williams' three-day conference aimed at shining light on successful minority-owned businesses and encouraging others.

"The Black Entrepreneurship: The New Face of Small Business" panel discussion was based on a series by the Guardian US. Black business ownership dropped by more than 40% during the start of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. But this year, Black business ownership is surpassing pre-pandemic levels by nearly 30%, according to Guardian reporting.

More than 75 people attended the event moderated by Patrice Worthy, a Guardian contributor. The panelists included: Rabia Kamara, owner of Ruby Scoops ice cream shop in Richmond; William Huston, founder and chief information officer for Bay Street Capital Holdings in Los Altos, California; and Kenneth Ebie, founder of Ebie Strategies in New York City.

Even after two years in business, Kamara said she still faces learning curves from food costs to management skills.

"I think I've learned throughout my journey as a pastry chef and as an entrepreneur that my superpower is me," she said.

Eager to squelch misconceptions about entrepreneurship, Kamara said it can be



The Barco family gathers to surprise 7-year-old Ryan with a Make-A-Wish trip to Florida. PHOTO COURTESY SOUTHEAST VIRGINIA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

'An outpouring of love and support'

Community foundation, Make-A-Wish help make a boy's dream come true

Ryan Blanco is one of 16 children, but he's "a very special case," according to his mom.

Starting when she was 19 and continuing to 38, Jen Blanco has given birth to 16 children.

One of her youngest, 7-year-old Ryan, was diagnosed about two years ago with a rare genetic disorder that threatens his life.

"It's been very hard," said Jen Barco, who now has grandchildren running around the home where she and husband Richard live in South Norfolk. "Ryan is such a great boy, and we wanted to do something good for him."

Enter Make-A-Wish Greater Virginia. Barco says Ryan has always wanted to visit the theme parks of Florida, but money is tight, particularly to take the entire extended family.

The request from Make-A-Wish Greater Virginia for financial help

landed on the desk at the Southeast Virginia Community Foundation.

It's not a typical case for the foundation, said CEO Richard Wentz.

But after he met with representatives of Make A Wish and encouraged them to apply for a grant, the foundation awarded \$10,000 to make Ryan's dream come true.

The foundation helps meet charitable needs in Chesapeake, Portsmouth, and the greater

southeast Virginia region by targeting grants and scholarships toward the community's most pressing needs and promising opportunities.

Grants average about \$5,000, but "because we like to help children in Chesapeake, we gave this application serious consideration and decided to grant it," Wentz said.

So on an October morning in the lobby of the foundation offices on

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Love

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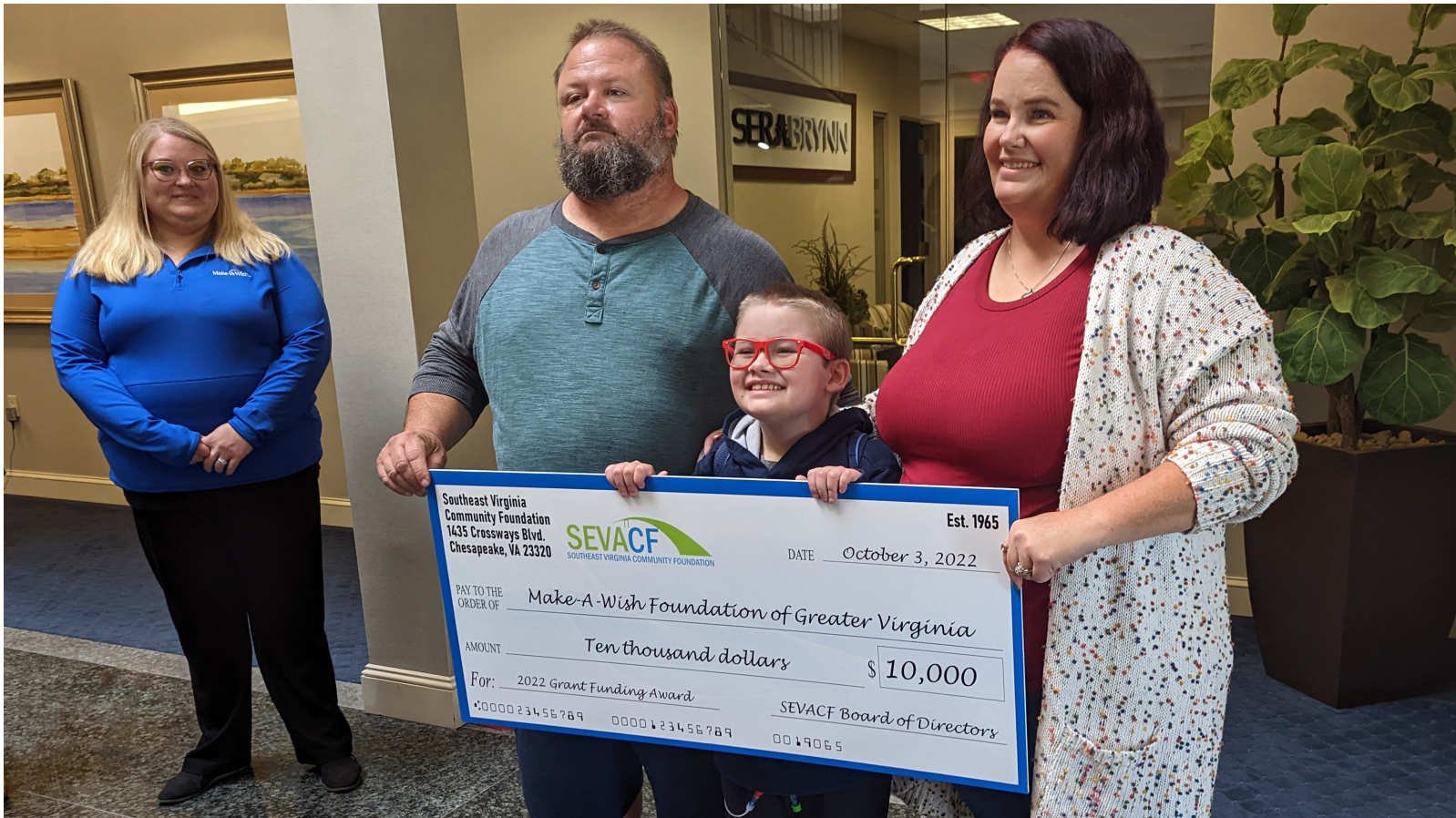
Crossways Boulevard, the entire Blanco family arrived for a big surprise.

“Cars kept pulling up, the family came in,” Wentz said. “Fifteen siblings, all were there except two who had to work. Ones that were married and had children brought their children. It was an outpouring of love and support.”

Make-A-Wish Greater Virginia Development Director Paige Bullen broke the news to Ryan, and Wentz presented an oversized check for \$10,000 for the cost of the trip. Tears flowed.

“We have more than 250 applications from families in Virginia who really need this kind of opportunity,” Bullen said. “It’s so wonderful when we can make one come true, and Ryan is certainly deserving.”

Sometime over the next few months, the Blancos will head south for a much-needed vacation, with a little help from the community.



From left, Richard, Ryan and Jen Barco pose with a check for \$10,000 granted by the Southeast Virginia Community Foundation and Make-A-Wish. **SOUTHEAST VIRGINIA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION PHOTO**

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1 Based on fiscal year July 1-June 30, 2021 and July 1-June 30, 2022. Delivery reports from EPIC. Sourced Sept. 2022.
2 VHHA market share change for the designated Hampton Roads service area.