**Clothing boutique displays Nubian Square progress, and its challenges**

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The Hardaway family including Catherine, Danny and son, Haris, operate Final Touch Boutique, a clothing boutique in Nubian Square struggling to overcome a series of challenges including the pandemic and supply chain delays.

Danny Hardaway kept needing to stop every sentence or two to help customers as he explained how his business is going. It was late morning on a Thursday, and Hardaway was working at Final Touch Boutique by himself. His wife, Catherine, was busy doing paperwork, one employee was out on vacation, one son was home sick and the other was busy campaigning for state representative.

The store, located in the Bolling Municipal Building in the center of Nubian Square, was swamped with people shopping for weddings and other formal events that had been mostly canceled for the past two years.

“People are coming out in droves in trying to get back into being out in life again,” Hardaway s

But while the shop is busy, business isn’t all good. The past two-plus years undid so much of the progress the boutique, like much of the rest of the small businesses in Nubian Square, had been making, Hardaway said.

“Before Covid hit, we were just hitting our five-year projection,” said Hardaway, who opened the shop 15 years ago with Catherine after a career in marketing and communications. “Covid hit, and it just took everything down.”

Today, hiring is difficult in a tight labor market, and the suppliers that the Hardaway’s work with for the women’s clothing and accessories that make up the bulk of its offerings are often unable to source what the shop needs.

Even being packed with customers has its downsides because of strained supply chains.

“Those are back dramatically,” Hardaway said of customers looking for prom, wedding and other event outfits. “But I can’t get the gowns. I can’t get them. They’re not there.”

Then there’s inflation and other rising costs, which he said they are trying not to pass on to customers.

Final Touch received federal small-business Paycheck Protection Program funds, but ended up having to pay the money back instead of keeping it as a grant, Hardaway said. He's still critical of the program, which he sees as tailored more for bigger employers who could navigate the funding requirements.

The Hardaway’s see their own struggles as a part of the broader challenges facing Nubian Square, a central part of Boston’s Black community that has been making strides in fits and starts. He cites the closure of Haley House, a popular cafe and neighborhood cornerstone, in 2019, and a business owner who died of Covid last year. Public events that used to bring in people from outside the neighborhood, held at the Bolling Building, haven't returned.

“There have been a lot of ups and downs here,” said Haris Hardaway, Danny and Catherine’s son and a candidate for state representative in Dorchester. “People are really connected with the neighborhood, and it’s starting to come apart a little at the seams.”

“It’s just so much of this fabric that isn’t here now,” he said.

Revenue among neighborhood businesses have been down as much as 70% or 80%, said Robert George, the executive director of Roxbury Main Streets, one of 20 such nonprofits across the city aimed at helping small businesses.

Homelessness has been a persistent problem, he said, and lower levels of bus and train traffic can leave the neighborhood sometimes feeling like a ghost town.

“The majority are mom-and-pop stores,” George said, “and they don’t have the financial cushion to help them through it.”

At Final Touch, Danny Hardaway credits one factor that’s kept him open: his loyal customers.

“It’s a tough battle,” he said. “Every day, I count my blessings to still be open.