

SPRINGFIELD

Creating opportunities for communities of color

Breweries, HCC collaborate on beer release and scholarship initiative

For anyone interested in cold, tasty beer, here are some sobering statistics: Out of some 8,000 breweries in the United States, only 60, or less than 1%, are Black-owned businesses.

In Massachusetts, a virtual hopland of craft beer with more than 200 breweries, only about a half dozen are Black-owned. One of them is White Lion Brewery in Springfield.

“The fabric of the craft beer trade doesn’t mirror the fabric of the communities we work

play and live in,” says Ray Berry, White Lion’s owner and founder, who sits on the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee of the Massachusetts Brewers Guild.

In response, Berry and the owners of three other Massachusetts breweries — Arcpoint in Belchertown, Crue Brew in Raynham and 67 Degrees in Franklin — have banded together on a project they hope will draw more people of color to the industry.

The project is called “As One.” It’s a beer — a juicy New England IPA. A portion of the proceeds from the sale of this limited release brew will go toward the creation a scholarship at Holyoke Community College for students of color

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Front row, from left, Arnold Cazeau, owner of 67 Degrees Brewing, and his wife Stephanie Cazeau; Ray Berry, owner of White Lion Brewing Co.; Kevin Meritt, owner of Crue Brew Brewery; and Amanda Sbriscia, vice president of Institutional Advancement at Holyoke Community College and executive director of the HCC Foundation. Back row from left, Mike Yates, head brewer at White Lion; Kevin Kardel, assistant brewer at Crue Brew; C.J. Eldridge, owner of Arcpoint Brewing Co.; and Chris Petersen, head brewer at Arcpoint. The group gathered March 11 at the White Lion in Springfield to initiate the brewing of a beer called “As One.” Some of the proceeds from the sale of the beer will go toward the creation of a new scholarship at HCC for students of color who enter HCC’s brewing program.

Breweries

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who enroll in its beer, cider and winemaking program.

“Throughout the country, there have been a number of initiatives driven by breweries, trade stakeholders, and guilds who recognize the diversity and inclusion deficits and want to be change agents,” Berry said. “Some of those initiatives happen to be scholarship driven.”

The idea for “As One” came from C.J. Eldridge, co-owner of Arcpoint, who had read an article about the experiences of Black Massachusetts brewery owners in a historically white-dominated industry. The story featured interviews with Berry and Kevin Merritt, owner of Crue Brew, and also mentioned 67 Degrees, which is co-owned by Arnold Cruzeau.

“I saw all those guys in the article and it inspired me to want to get together with them and brew something and also bring some awareness,” Eldridge said. “We want to attempt to spread brewing out to more people of color, not necessarily just Black, but people of color in general, and get them into the business. Let them know what it’s about.”

HCC debuted its beer, cider and winemaking certificate program in the fall of 2020, so the decision to partner with the college made sense, Berry said. “Craft beer is all about local,” Berry said. “If we want to expand the conversation, this is a perfect opportunity

for us to align ourselves with a great local institution.”

The label for “As One” includes the names and logos of all four breweries plus HCC’s, along with a poignant description: “As One, a collaboration of unity, is just that. We came up with a conversation starter, something to bring people together. ... As many of you may or may not know, people of color make up approximately 1 percent of ownership in the craft brew industry. To this end, we have teamed with Holyoke Community College to create a scholarship for their brewing program. The financial aid will help people of color break into the industry that is far underrepresented. We hope you enjoy this beer with open minds and open hearts.”

“We are very excited about the pipeline of talent that this scholarship program could generate while also helping to break down barriers, open doors, and hold them open for people of color in our community,” said Katie Stinchon, executive director of the Mass Brewers Guild. “As an industry we are very aware that the makeup of our brewery owners, staff and consumers are predominantly male and pale. This is a great step to work to change that, and something that can be emulated in other regions and institutions across Massachusetts.”

The scholarship, as yet unnamed, will be administered by the HCC Foundation.

“Every scholarship tells a story about why someone feels it’s important to give back, or what they hope

to make possible with the establishment of the fund,” said Amanda Sbriscia, HCC vice president of Institutional Advancement and executive director of the HCC Foundation. “The scholarship that will be created as a result of this brewery partnership is so powerful because it’s all about creating opportunity, and it’s a real example of people coming together to create positive change. HCC students can see themselves in each of these business owners and realize that they, too, can chase and achieve their dreams.”

Sbriscia joined Berry, Eldridge, Merritt, and Cruzeau earlier this month at the White Lion Brewery in Tower Square in Springfield for the one-day brewing of “As One.” Canning is scheduled for today. The beer will be available starting Wednesday during White Lion’s weekly “Cans to Go” sessions at the brewery, which run every Wednesday from 4 to 7 p.m., and every Saturday, from noon to 4 p.m.

“Springfield has a lot of diversity, so it’s great that we’re doing this in the heart of Springfield,” Eldridge said. “A lot of people of color, they’re gonna be like, oh, damn, look at these guys here, just like me. They’re pumping out beer and working together for something like that.”

Although the batch is small, the goal is to make the brewing of “As One” a special, annual event that will continue to seed the scholarship fund at HCC over the years.

“It’s not a one and done, that’s for sure,” said Berry.