

Vicki Gray has found her niche in apartment turnovers



Vicki Gray of New Chapter Home Improvement shows off painting work in a Burlington corporate headquarters.

By Robin Washington – Special to the Business Journal
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Title: Founder & Owner, New Chapter Home Improvement

Age: 38

Education: Associate's degree in business, Bunker Hill Community College, 2011; Pursuing bachelor's in business management, University of Massachusetts Boston

Residence: Cambridge

Three years ago, [Vicki Gray](#) completed a questionnaire for the Business Journal showing revenues for her apartment painting and maintenance company at \$150,000. Not bad for what was essentially a mom-and-pop operation, with ad-hoc helpers hired as needed, but the modest amount still ended up as a \$5,000 loss for the year.

Yet, she said confidently then, New Chapter Home Improvement was on its way toward profitability and riding a handful of small business honors. And she was a world removed from the street culture that threatened her adolescence years earlier, which saw her put on probation and her future husband caught up in the criminal justice system.

Today, her attention is all business, and Gray, 38, is closing in on a goal she set in 2017 of doubling the company's revenue, this year reporting \$265,000.

“We narrowed down our focus and looked at what was the most profitable area (of the business), and that was in the painting,” she says, identifying the sweet spot as apartment turnovers. “We go into an apartment unit and make it rental ready within three to five business days. That way the property manager doesn't lose any income on the unit.”

The apartment turnover niche didn't just come out of nowhere: Gray is a graduate of Interise, a Boston-based small business adviser that drills cost-benefit analyses into its program participants.

Born in Cambridge to a single mom from Barbados who worked three jobs to raise three children and make ends meet, Gray graduated from Boston's Dorchester High School. That wasn't where she started: She was expelled from Cambridge Rindge and Latin after a fight with another girl led to a court date and probation, she said. In Boston, her boyfriend was into deeper trouble — selling drugs, getting caught, convicted, and incarcerated.

Vicki began pulling herself together, working in retail, then working for seven years as a coordinator at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education. She earned an associate's degree from Bunker Hill Community College and later took a patient-coordinator position at Mass General Hospital.

The couple married, and her husband found a job after his release at a pest control company. When that ended, he suggested they start their own painting business. He had painting skills, and she had worked for a year doing wall repair for a maintenance company in Newton.

“He said, ‘Let’s just try it,’” Gray recalled, and she agreed — but kept her hospital job for a couple of years. Their client base grew, including steady work from the Danvers Housing Authority. “Money was coming in,” she says, but wasn’t showing up on the bottom line.

“We were in that period of figuring out how to maximize that dollar. You keep running over the same errors,” she says, realizing when looking back that they repeatedly underestimated the time to complete a job or how many extra hours hired help would rack up. The Interise class reset their way of estimating jobs. They were also encouraged by certifications as a lead-safe renovator and state-recognized Minority Women Business Enterprise, as well as multi-year best-service awards from Home Advisor.

Alisa Lavrentyeva of emergency communications provider Everbridge, Inc., in Burlington, shares that praise.

“We hired them for a few projects in the office last year. Personally and professionally, they are just great people,” she says.

“She did an estimate that they would do it in a certain period of time, but they finished earlier. They were working on the weekend. It was a really nice surprise.”

With New Chapter’s earnings chart pointing in the right direction, it would seem to spell unqualified success — except adversity hasn’t completely gone away. Recently, the couple divorced. “We grew apart, businesswise, which unfortunately broke the marriage as well,” she says.

Though they continue to share parenting of their daughter and son, her ex-husband is no longer with the business, she says, and he did not return a call for comment from the Business Journal.

Still, [Vicki Gray](#) exudes optimism, with a dream of inspiring others.

“I’m working on becoming a motivational speaker,” she says, her voice echoing the confidence she expressed three years ago when vowing to double her company’s earnings.

With that nearly achieved, she says, “I’m trying to become a better me every day.”

1981: Born in Boston

1999-2002: Works in retail, including as a store assistant manager

2002: Becomes a coordinator at Cambridge Center for Adult Education

2011: Graduates Bunker Hill Community College. Joins Mass. General

2012: Co-founds New Chapter Home Improvement

<https://www.bizjournals.com/boston/news/2020/02/12/vicki-gray-has-found-her-niche-in-apartment.html>