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## ***Mariama's Beauty Supply Story***

### **Portland, Maine**

In January 2012, when Mariama Jallow arrived in the United States from her home country Gambia, she had ambitions to be a part of the growing immigrant business-owner community in Portland, Maine. After overcoming many hurdles, including advocating for and seeing the shift in a state law, developing a business plan, and opening a type of business that was new to the state of Maine, she now owns and operates Mariama's Beauty Supply store on Forest Avenue in Portland.

In Gambia, Mariama managed a store with her mom. "It was nothing like here," she explained. "When you arrive in the US you just don't know. I thought I could just go and open a store. Then I learned about taxes, paperwork, insurance, rules and regulations. I didn't have any help." She learned about CEI's StartSmart program from other immigrant business owners and set out to meet with Business Advisor John Scribner.

Her first idea was to open a grocery store, but she quickly learned that the market for new immigrant-owned grocery stores in Portland was saturated. Next, she dreamed of opening a hair and braiding business which would include retail products and rooms that braiders could rent to braid hair. She initially came to StartSmart looking for assistance with the licensing aspect of opening her business. Under Maine Law, hair braiding was prohibited without a cosmetology license. "I couldn't believe it," said Mariama. The hair braiding process doesn't involve any chemicals or harmful products, which is a major reason for cosmetic licensing. "People in Maine don't understand hair braiding because there aren't many Africans here. I knew this business could be good for the state."

Mariama and her business advisor John began by reviewing the state laws. They worked with CEI's Senior Vice President of Research and Policy Development, Carla Dickstein, and Peggy Shaefer, who served as the small business advocate within the Secretary of State office at the time. "We worked together to help update the licensing requirements at the State level. Mariama's willingness to get involved on that level is unique, and showed her strong desire to open her own business." Mariama and John both provided testimonial before the legislature. The case was strong and a bill quickly passed, allowing individuals to offer hair braiding services without having a cosmetology license. With the new ruling in place, Mariama pursued finding a retail space where her vision for the beauty store and hair braiding space could become a reality.

After about a year of looking for a location for her business, a retail space became available on Forest Avenue. Mariama worked closely with John to manage all the legalities of renting and operating out of the storefront, including setting up a tax ID number and getting business insurance, to name a few. "Sometimes I sit down with John for one or two hours, for free! He takes time to come in here to my business. There's no way I could've paid for those services," she said.

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The business opened in the summer of 2016 as a hair retail space. After a few months, some of her clients began renting rooms in the store for their personal hair braiding services. While Mariama is not a hair braider, she is excited to offer a space where skilled immigrants can earn a living for themselves. In the Portland area, there are no stores that are solely dedicated to African hair sales and services. Some hair is sold in small grocers, but Mariama's Beauty Supply is the first hair-only retailer.



After assisting Mariama with the many hurdles she had to overcome to start her business, In May 2018, CEI provided her with a \$5,000 SBA Microloan to help her expand her inventory.

“If it wasn’t for CEI, where would I go? When I came up with the project, John was there from the start. Each time I work with him I feel more confident in my ability to run a business,” she said. “The people in Maine are lucky. It’s impossible for us to do this without support. CEI has provided a lot of help for me, and I know many others who feel the same way.”

“Mariama is always looking to learn and grow her business to the next level, and it’s a pleasure to play a small part in the growth of her business and dream,” said John. She plans to expand the business this fall to include a fully operational hair salon with two stylists. “People feel comfortable and relaxed here. Now they can come to buy hair and have their hair braided,” she concluded.

**Submitted by SBA Microloan Intermediary: Coastal Enterprises, Inc. in Portland, Maine**