

Grad Revs Up Career With Franchise

A chance meeting led her to be the first woman to own Ice Cold Air shops.

By MARK HOLAN
The Tampa Tribune

SOUTH TAMPA — Ashley Butler met Allyn Ayers standing in line at Panera Bread.

She was 22 and nearly done with her business degree at the University of South Florida.

He was 62 and beginning to divest himself from the daily operations of the discount auto repair chain he founded 40 years earlier.

"I told her business is not for the weak or the lame, but whatever you want to do you can do," Ayers said.

Butler, a Port Tampa native and Robinson High School graduate, promised to call Ayers after finishing her degree.

When she followed up about



Tribune photo by SCOTT ISKOWITZ
Ashley Butler, 24, owns Ice Cold Air on South Dale Mabry Highway. She wears a name tag that a customer made for her.

six months later, he hired her as an assistant. He also attended her 2006 graduation and met her family.

"I liked her potential; the way she carried herself," Ayers said. "She asked tough ques-

tions."

Butler soon became the assistant to chain's first female franchise owner, taking over Ice Cold Air at 803 W. Hillsborough Ave. Today she owns the busiest and larger store at 410 S.

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ASHLEY BUTLER

Dale Mabry Highway.

"Allyn taught me in layman's terms the simplicity of business and how hard work and time invested can reward a young person," said Butler, 24.

As a young black woman, the 5-foot-3 Butler doesn't fit the profile of the typical auto shop owner.

"I thought that was going to be a big deal," Butler said.

"At first, the workers were tougher than the customers," she said of the Hillsborough

store. "But I got them to respect me and grow with me."

A few customers still mistake her for the receptionist. Butler said one of her regular customers gave her a name tag identifying her as the owner to help avoid confusion.

"You have the random customer who thinks my technician is the owner," she said.

Technician Keith Cox said Butler brings a positive attitude.

"We can be having the hardest day in the world, and she makes it fun," said Cox, who has worked at the Dale Mabry store for about 10 months.

Butler oversees two employees, handling the books and other administrative work.

"Sometimes I'm out in one of the bays holding something in place," she said. "I don't act like I know everything."

Ayers said he is glad he gave Butler an opportunity.

"I've heard nothing but incredible reports," he said.

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