

## *Woke Beauty panel celebrates, supports Austin's female entrepreneurs*



All kinds of women listen intently to hear the wisdom and advice shared by the five panelists of the Woke Beauty discussion.

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**Written by Lawson Freeman**

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Austin women of all ages, races and character gathered near the University of Texas on March 10. They agreed that pursuing passion and overcoming fear while reversing discriminatory hiring practices is essential to entrepreneurial and life success.

“The theme is really entrepreneurship dream-chasing, what it's like to build a brand and keep it alive and continue to grow it even when you get to a place where it's pretty magnificent,” Riley Blanks said.

The panel, titled “Woke Beauty: An Intimate Discussion with Celebrated Austin Women,” was hosted at Space 24Twenty by Riley Blanks, creator of a photography company called Woke Beauty which aims to showcase the beauty of all women through photography and intimate

connection. Blanks invited four other female entrepreneurs, to discuss the struggle, passion and dedication necessary of women who create their own businesses.

“I put everything into my business,” said Erinn Leigh, founder of Sukha Yoga Austin. “I put my entire savings into my business without a plan B, and I recommend that ... If you're not all in and you have this plan B, you're never going to fully invest your heart, your guts, your time into creating what you want.”

According to a survey by the Guidant Financial and LendingClub, the leading motivation for women to build their own businesses is a desire to pursue their passion, something all five panelists share. But they also said work is not the defining factor of a woman’s success.



The five panelists Sophie Kwok, Riley Blanks, Miranda Bennett, April Kayganich and Erinn Leigh, respectively, celebrate their passions together and share them with the crowd.  
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“It’s so good to be doing the work that you're doing, that you're passionate about,” Sophie Kwok, founder of the Love Intently podcast, said. “But don't let that override what you're worth and who you are.”

The panel was held just two days from International Women's Day, as requested by the Space 24Twenty content and events manager. According to its official website, International Women's Day is a yearly celebration of the achievements of women around the world, working toward a better balance between genders in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres of life.

Although Blanks was honored to host the event and believes in the mission of International Women's Day, she said women should be supported and praised all throughout the year, not only on a specific day.

"Can we celebrate women when women suck, when they make mistakes?" Blanks asked. "Can we bolster them when they're depressed? Can we provide them with support and materials when they're lost?"

Celebrating women year-round is something Blanks works to enact through her business. As a woman of color, she feels diversity in gender and race needs to be embraced in the workplace, not only in the imagery the company produces, but also in its hiring practices. She critiqued brands that display women of color in their marketing material but fail to hire a diverse pool of applicants.

"It's starting to feel like it's about optics, and optics are fake," Blanks said.

In challenging the tendency to prioritize optics over actual change, Blanks draws inspiration from her heritage. Coming from a family of mixed racial background, she has a vision for the diverse community she wants to create within the world.

"The difference is this is my reality, and this is what I have craved my whole life," Blanks said. "I'm creating what I've craved, and it feels nice to give me something that I want, because I so often give others what they want through what I provide."

This diversity that Blanks desires was apparent in the panel she selected to converse with as well as the audience listening in.

“I think it’s beautiful, there being so many women of color in attendance here and running the panel,” said Heather Gallagher, an attendee and business owner herself. “That is a beautiful statement ... it’s just not one type of person that can succeed in life.”

Toni Klock, an aspiring business owner, waited almost an hour after the panel ended to get the chance to speak with Blanks and her peers. She said she learned a lot from these women and is leaving the event inspired, although still nervous.

“I want to open my own business,” Klock said. “But like they said, the fear kind of sets in, and that’s my problem.”

Despite this fear the panelists referenced as something many business owners experience, there has been a recent and sweeping change in the community of women internationally.

“I just feel like women in general are waking up to a new energy,” Klock said. “It’s time and it’s happening all over the world.”