

Marcus Malchijah

Guyana: milliner, entrepreneur

Object: needle and hat

It was very serendipitous, the way I fell into millinery after my son passed away. I kind of took off running with it, and it always worked in miraculous ways for me. Many times I reflected that it was a gift given to me by my son.

My mom and dad left me back home in Georgetown, Guyana when I was three and a half. It's the story of most immigrants: first the parents come, and then they send for their kids. I was raised by my grandmother, who was a knitter, and my great-grandmother, who did a lot of sewing and a lot of needlepoint. She could stitch an entire dress from scratch without a machine. She taught me when I was young. She taught me to thread a needle, since she couldn't see well. She was a home entrepreneur and used to sell in the market at one time.

I came to Brooklyn in 1976. When I got there, it was a culture shock. In that area it seemed like West Side Story with Italians on one side and Spanish on the other. We had to learn how to interact and deal with the fights in the schools, and to make the connections. It really took a while to learn how to be ourselves. I was a forerunner. My accent is now kind of cool in America, but then, as soon as you opened your mouth, you were very conscious of being different. Looking different, sounding different.

The entrepreneurial spirit is something I brought with me. I didn't bring a needle, but one of the things I came with was being able to hand sew. When I was young, I used to hem pants for people. I used to make some money doing that. If a store would charge two dollars to hem a pair of pants, I would charge 50 cents. When I became an adult, I wanted to have my own business. My first one was a health food store from 1982 to 1993. And later, I fell into millinery.



Bio:

Marcus Malchijah came to New York in 1976 at the age of 12 from Guyana. Raised by his grandmother and great-grandmother, he learned tailoring and business skills from them. He settled with his family in central Brooklyn, attending middle and high school. In 1983, Malchijah started his first business, a health food store on Clarendon Avenue, which he operated until 1993. In that year, after the loss of his son, he returned to Guyana but was persuaded by a cousin to return to Brooklyn, and, with his original skills, entered the millinery trade. He opened his first shop in Fort Greene and later his (now current) store at 942 Atlantic Avenue. Malchijah is a leading maker of original hats and has been a major resource for the church-going hat market, artists and entertainers, and hat lovers of all stripes. For more information, visit malchijahhatshop.com