

**FRANCHISE
ASCENSION
INITIATIVE**
Powered by the IFA Foundation

Reflection Library

Cohort 2 – Class of 2026





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Foreword

The Franchise Ascension Initiative Reflection Library is more than a collection of testimonials. It is a living record of growth, ambition, and forward momentum within the IFA Foundation's Franchise Ascension Initiative.

Over the course of the program, Cohort 2 participants immersed themselves in education, mentorship, peer collaboration, and real-world franchise exploration. The reflections that follow are entirely their own. They capture moments of uncertainty, breakthrough, renewed confidence, and clear next steps.

What makes this collection especially meaningful, is the shift described in their journeys. Many entered the program with ambition and leave with clear direction. You'll read about plans to launch businesses, pursue ownership, step into leadership roles, deepen operational expertise, and stay connected to networks that will support them long after the cohort concludes. The learning didn't end at graduation, it gained momentum.

Cohort 2 builds upon the strong foundation established by the program's inaugural class, further demonstrating FAI's commitment to expanding access to franchise education, strengthening leadership pipelines, and preparing talented professionals for meaningful futures in franchising.

We invite you to read these reflections as they were written: authentic, personal, and forward-looking. They are proof that when opportunity, mentorship, and determination intersect, lasting impact follows.

Explorers



Mia Able

Newton, MA

Explorer

[Mia Able | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

Prior to beginning the FAI program, I had a misconception that franchising guaranteed success. I understood that a franchise offers a proven system, but I now fully appreciate that it does not guarantee success and profitability. Success still depends on strong execution, financial literacy, leadership, and disciplined decision-making. That realization came while completing the finance focused lessons. I was drawn to the format and the depth of the content, especially because it exposed gaps in my knowledge that I did not even realize existed. Learning formulas and understanding how to analyze and manipulate numbers on income statements and balance sheets to make strategic decisions was fascinating. It shifted my perspective from simply hoping a business would be profitable to understanding how profitability is intentionally engineered.

This program also created meaningful personal growth through clarity and self-reflection. I spent time considering, “Why I want to open a business, and what motivates me”. These questions helped me narrow my focus to industries that genuinely inspire me. Through that process, I developed my guiding principle for choosing which brands to pursue. This clarity has helped me move from a general desire to own a business toward a more purpose-driven vision. I am now aligned with a mission that feels authentic and motivating. As I move closer to taking real steps toward ownership, I have become increasingly aware of the level of consistency, discipline, and leadership required to run a business successfully. The responsibility of building franchises that are both profitable and sustainable has sharpened my focus and elevated my standards. Because profitability is essential to my long-term vision, I feel a strong sense of commitment to getting it right. Rather than being discouraged by the weight of that responsibility, I am using it as motivation to strengthen my financial knowledge, deepen my preparation, and build the mindset required for long-term success.

Overall, the FAI program provided structure at a critical time in my journey. Being so early in the process of opening a business, I could have easily found my attention scattered in too many directions. This experience provided a comprehensive view of franchising and helped us

understand the key components of running a business in an organized and clear way. The open peer and mentor sessions were especially insightful and uplifting. I left those conversations feeling supported, enlightened, and encouraged. I only wish we had more of them, as they reinforced both my confidence and my commitment to this path. I have gained not just knowledge, but direction and a stronger foundation for the entrepreneur I would like to become.

Key Takeaways

1. Relationship building and how you communicate is essential to the success of your business.
2. The importance of having the right people on your team. Make smart decisions when assembling your business team, personal team of contacts that you can lean on, as well as smart hiring decisions.
3. It will always serve you well to do extensive due diligence.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

As I move beyond the FAI program, I am committed to taking intentional steps toward signing my first franchise agreement. I will increase my engagement with brands, conduct thorough due diligence, as well as draft and refine my business plan to ensure it is both strategically sound and financially disciplined. I will maintain consistent touchpoints with my mentor and continue leveraging the expertise of the presenters who generously supported our cohort, using their insights to strengthen my decision-making. In parallel, I will actively pursue opportunities to develop my leadership capabilities, I recognize that is an area of improvement for me. My longer-term objective after a first franchise, is to expand into multi-unit ownership and then build a portfolio of brands that align with and advance my guiding principle.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“I had the privilege of getting to know Mia over the last several months as she moved through her franchising journey with the FAI. From our first meeting, I could tell how engaged she would be with the learning process, and her eagerness never waned. Our meetings were always productive, as Mia was interested in all aspects of franchising while frequently providing targeted questions that allowed us to drill deeper into specific topics.

During this time, I witnessed Mia gain significant clarity on her strengths, opportunities, and franchisor targets. Her passion, collaborative approach, and existing business knowledge will serve her well in her future franchising endeavors.”

-Jennifer LoBianco, Chief Marke2ng Officer, BEST LIFE BRANDS, LLC



Benedict Amoo

Jersey City, NJ

Explorer

[Benedict Amoo | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

The FAI program has been an amazing experience. I learned an enormous amount about franchising and developed invaluable relationships. Understanding just how pervasive franchising is across so many different industries challenged me to broaden my perspective. Going through the FAI curriculum not only gave me a tangible understanding of what is required to be successful in franchising, but also the inspiration to pursue this path.

With all the information learned, it becomes clear that being a franchisee is a serious commitment that will significantly change your life. As a result, it is incredibly important to articulate to yourself what your “why” is – why you are embarking on this franchise journey. Given how much of a commitment is required, my “why” will be a key motivation to push through tough times and challenges. This is a realization I attribute to my mentor Lisa. She opened my eyes to the importance of a “why” and challenged me to refine my “why” in an authentic way and to push past the superficial reasons that might immediately come to mind. For me, my “why” is providing security for my family given the challenges of my upbringing as well as having a positive larger impact on my community.

Once I understood my “why” and began the FAI curriculum, I started to explore brands. This allowed me to really try to put myself in the shoes of a franchisee and feel what that day-to-day will be like and how my life will change as I transition to a franchisee.

While the well-known positives are easy to imagine (being your own boss, the opportunity for financial freedom) the potential challenges are harder to come to terms with. Among them is understanding the ways I personally would have to change and step out of my comfort zone to be a successful franchisee. One example of this was the realization of how proactive I would have to be in engaging with my local community. While I have experience in networking and reaching out to clients, I realized I would need to step out of my comfort zone and take a more sales and business development-oriented approach if I was going to be successful in franchising. Once again, my

mentor helped me get a sense of what this would be like by encouraging me to reach out to potential customers in my community to gauge potential interest in brand concepts I might consider. This was but one example of a breakthrough and moment of personal growth I experienced on this journey.

As I reconcile with the challenges I will have to overcome and the ways I will have to step out of my comfort zone to be successful, I continue to find motivation through the support of the FAI program. Always coming back to my why, as Lisa has taught me, reminds me that pushing through these challenges is worth it. I get confidence from knowing that I have the support of my fellow cohort members, David, and the rest of the FAI and IFA leadership

team. Hearing from and meeting the successful franchisees and franchisors throughout this program, beginning at the Advocacy Summit, and continuing with guest speakers throughout the program, and culminating with the Convention has been and continues to be truly inspiring examples of what the results of this journey could look like. I can think of no better example than Raynya and Omar Simmons, who exemplify how impactful franchising can be to others. The FAI program has been a clear demonstration of this and continues to inspire a core part of my “why” which is giving back to my community.

Key Takeaways

- **Balance between urgency and patience** – to successfully build a franchise, you need to follow your franchisor’s system relentlessly, every day. Particularly in the beginning, you need to consistently reach out to customers and understand your business. At the same time, results will not come overnight. It could take years to build the systems, scale and profitability you plan for at the beginning of a journey.
- **The importance of building relationships** - sales and business development are arguably the most core responsibility of a franchisee in the beginning. This will require going out and connecting with the local community in a B2C brand and connecting with local business owners in a B2B brand.
- **The importance of pushing through discomfort to achieve long term growth** – becoming a franchisee will be a big life change and as a result it will require stepping out of ones conform zone. It is important to stay focused through these challenges to reach the longer-term goals that are on the other side of hard times as they come.
- **As in most things in life, preparation is key** – having a sound and realistic financial plan is key to making it through the early years of franchising. Understanding yourself, the brand you are considering, the market you are targeting, the potential customers you will be serving and the potential employees you will be working with are all required preparation.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other



- My short-term action plan over the next 6-12 months is to continue to focus on selecting and executing on a franchise brand. I intend to focus on a brand with strong unit economics, tangible and growing demand for its product or service in my target territory, recurring revenue or repeat customers, a scalable model and strong franchisor support.
- My longer-term goals are to grow the brand I select to multiple territories and/or units. Also selecting and executing on a brick-and-mortar franchise brand and growing that concept to many, many units. With both brands, I intend to give back to my community, through the products and services I provide, the vendors I source from and the employees I recruit and retain, and potentially the investors I partner with. I also hope to serve as a mentor in various forms, perhaps with the FAI/IFA if they would be kind enough to have me!
- The support and resources I will leverage are my savings and either a home equity loan or an SBA loan. I will also consider the ROBS program if necessary. Longer term, I am also considering how investors and capital partners could play a part in the future. Outside of financial resources, I will continue to leverage the relationships I have built through this program, chief among them my mentor, fellow mentees, as well as

the FAI team who have administered this program. And as needed, I will reach out to the resource partners, vendors and service providers I have become aware of through the FAI program.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“Focus on your why, be willing to put in the work, and do not be afraid to step out of your comfort zone!”

-Lisa Hennigar, VP Franchise Development, ERA Group



Alaa El-Bashir

Rochester, MN

Explorer

Personal Reflection

Participating in the FAI program has been one of the most transformative professional experiences of my career. This is a field that was completely new to me and a year ago, I had limited knowledge of franchising and doubts about whether I belonged in this space. Looking back at the past few months, I was able to gain a lot of new skills, knowledge, and confidence. Our early coursework helped me shift my mindset by introducing me to the fundamentals and franchising started feeling like a structured, achievable pathway to ownership and long-term wealth creation.

One of my biggest AHA moments came during the Profit Soup financial series. Understanding breakeven analysis, reading financial statements, and learning how to interpret a business' cash story was so helpful! Before FAI, I had a more limited understanding of what financial success looked like, but the financial sessions forced me to think like an owner and helped me build confidence in evaluating opportunities, asking smarter questions, and recognizing that financial literacy is empowerment.

Meeting the rest of the cohort in-person at the IFA Advocacy Summit in Washington, DC was also an inspirational experience. It was great to reflect on our varied experiences and backgrounds and realize how much we had in common, despite the different places we were at in our franchise journeys. The speakers were amazing and seeing franchise leaders advocate at a national level expanded my perspective beyond a single unit or even a single brand. I was also struck by how collaborative the franchising community is.

Key Takeaways

- **Ownership Requires Financial Mastery** – True readiness for franchise ownership means understanding cash flow, breakeven points, and disciplined decision-making. We have to be comfortable with numbers and recognize that financial literacy is a core leadership skill.

- **Leadership Is Responsibility** – Compliance, company culture, and integrity are foundational to building a sustainable franchise. Strong leadership sets the tone for long-term success and community impact.
- **Preparation Builds Confidence** – With the right education, mentorship, and network, franchise ownership becomes a structured and achievable path, and one that is not based on taking blind risks and hoping for the best.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

As my time in the FAI program draws to an end, I find that I'm reflecting more on next steps and execution. FAI provided the education, exposure, and confidence to pursue franchise ownership for the first time and now, I have to prepare to launch.

- **Short-Term Plan (6–12 Months)**

Over the next year, my goal is to finalize brand selection and complete my due diligence. This includes validating financial performance, speaking with multiple franchisees, reviewing Item 19 carefully, and ensuring strong alignment between the brand's culture and my leadership style. I plan to secure funding through a combination of SBA-backed financing and personal capital. I also intend to deepen relationships within the franchise ecosystem by staying connected with mentors from FAI, attending industry events, and continuing compliance and leadership education.

- **Long-Term Goals**

Long term, I aim to build a multi-unit portfolio that creates both financial sustainability and community impact. My vision extends beyond owning a single location; I want to scale strategically, develop strong managers, and create pathways for upward mobility within my organization. I also aspire to serve as a visible example of minority franchise ownership, helping expand representation in the industry.

- **Support and Resources I Will Leverage**

I will continue leveraging the FAI alumni network, Profit Soup financial tools, FranGuard compliance training, and mentorship relationships cultivated during the program. Access to experienced franchise owners and financial advisors will be critical as I scale. I also intend to work closely with SBA lenders, franchise development teams, and legal counsel. I will be approaching ownership with preparation, resilience, and a long-term vision.



Kendrick Faison

Odenton, MD

Explorer

[Kendrick Faison | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

When I entered the Franchise Ascension Initiative, I brought over twenty years of federal service, and the quiet confidence that comes from building something from nothing. What I did not fully appreciate was how much I still had to learn about franchise ownership—not as a concept, but as a discipline. The FAI challenged me to step outside of the federal contracting mindset and examine business ownership through an entirely different lens: one built on proven systems, community impact, and scalable models designed to create generational wealth.

The Profit Soup training was a defining moment. As President and CEO of Spatial GIS, I manage multimillion-dollar federal contracts, navigate complex procurement regulations, and oversee cybersecurity assessments for government agencies. Yet in that session, I realized that franchise financial literacy requires a fundamentally different analytical framework—one centered on unit economics, royalty structures, and disciplined cash flow management. That training gave me the financial vocabulary and modeling rigor to evaluate franchise opportunities with the same precision I apply to federal proposals. It transformed my approach from aspiration to execution.

Equally powerful was the mentorship and networking woven into the program's DNA. The FAI placed me inside a community of diverse professionals who share a common ambition to own, lead, and build. The conversations about ETA negotiations, franchise due diligence, capital structuring, and the emotional realities of entrepreneurship were the kind of honest, high-level exchanges that do not happen in isolation. My mentor pushed me to think bigger than a single unit—to see franchise ownership not as a side venture but as a platform for lasting impact.

This program forced me to confront a critical question: Why franchising? I already run a successful federal services firm. I hold real estate broker licenses in two jurisdictions. I have built teams, won contracts, and earned the trust of agencies like NGA, USTRANSCOM, and the Department of the Interior. The answer became clear: franchising represents the most effective vehicle for translating operational excellence into community-rooted, multi-generational business ownership. It is not a



departure from who I am—it is the next evolution. I leave this program with absolute clarity of purpose and the strategic foundation to become not just a franchise owner, but a franchise leader.

Key Takeaways

- **Financial discipline is the foundation of franchise success.** Profit Soup taught me that understanding unit economics, break-even timelines, and cash flow management is non-negotiable—regardless of how much capital you bring to the table.
- **Your network determines your trajectory.** The mentors, cohort members, and franchise professionals I connected with through the FAI have already shaped my strategy, refined my brand selection criteria, and opened doors I could not have accessed alone.
- **Franchise ownership is a leadership platform, not just a business transaction.** The most successful operators are community builders, talent developers, and servant leaders first.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

My franchise strategy is anchored in KOLF Enterprise, a premium indoor recreation venture targeting the explosive pickleball and golf simulator markets. This is a fully developed business plan with identified markets, capital structure, and a clear path to multi-unit operation.

- **Short-Term (6–12 Months):** Finalize brand selection among leading indoor recreation franchises—and secure a flagship location in the Annapolis and suburban Howard County corridor, where median household incomes exceed \$104,000 and indoor recreation competition remains limited. Leverage SBA 7(a) financing alongside personal capital and strategic investor partnerships to fund the initial \$2–3M build-out.
- **Long-Term (18–36 Months):** Scale to three locations across Maryland’s most affluent suburban markets, including Montgomery County and the greater Baltimore corridor. Achieve \$4M+ in combined annual revenue with 20% EBITDA margins. Establish KOLF Enterprise as the premier indoor recreation brand in the Mid-Atlantic, targeting five to seven locations by Year 3.
- **Resources & Leverage:** I will continue leveraging the FAI network for mentorship, due diligence guidance, and capital partner introductions. My existing infrastructure at Spatial GIS—including AI-driven analytics, operational systems expertise, and project management discipline—provides a technology edge most first-time franchise owners do not possess. My real estate brokerage experience in Maryland and DC gives me direct advantages in site selection and lease negotiation.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“Kendrick’s tenacity is exceptional. His pursuit of excellence is contagious, elevating those around him and the work he undertakes. With an unwavering commitment to continuous improvement,

Kendrick demonstrates the mindset and discipline essential for long-term success, and these qualities will serve him exceptionally well on his franchise journey.”

— Earsa R. Jackson, Clark Hill



Demarco Harris

Louisville, KY

Explorer

[Demarco Harris, MBA | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

I entered the Franchise Ascension Initiative through the encouragement of Dr. Kathy Gosser from the University of Louisville’s Franchise Management Certification Program. After performing well in the program and continuing to expand my franchise education, she recommended that I apply and provided me with a letter of recommendation. Her confidence in me, combined with my growing interest in ownership, led me to fully commit to this six-month journey.

The most significant shift in my thinking since August 2025 has been my understanding of capital. I previously believed franchising required substantial personal wealth. FAI expanded that perspective. While some concepts require high net worth thresholds, many viable opportunities are accessible with disciplined financial planning. I also reframed my view of outside investment, recognizing that structured financing or strategic partners can be a responsible path to ownership.

A pivotal moment came through an honest conversation with my mentor about my current season of life. We discussed my financial position, career trajectory, and responsibilities as a growing family man. That dialogue pushed me to evaluate opportunities through alignment with my values and long-term sustainability rather than familiarity alone. It broadened my thinking beyond quick service restaurants and toward the home services sector as a scalable option.

FAI reinforced principles from my MBA experience, including strategic analysis, due diligence, and relationship-building, while clarifying that franchising demands resilience and a clearly defined purpose. The program unified my academic training, nonprofit leadership experience, and ownership aspirations into a focused long-term strategy.

Key Takeaways

- **Due diligence is non-negotiable.** Reviewing Franchise Disclosure Documents thoroughly and understanding the implications of a long-term commitment is essential.



- **Capital strategy outweighs capital volume.** Smart financing, including SBA lending and tools such as ROBS, makes ownership attainable without high-net-worth status.
- **Alignment determines sustainability.** The right franchise must fit values, lifestyle, and scalability goals rather than perception alone.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Over the next six to twelve months, I will narrow my focus to two to three home services franchise brands, complete FDD reviews, and engage in discovery with franchisors and franchisees. My goal is to select a brand by the end of 2026 and open my first location by summer 2027.

Long-term, I plan to build a scalable, multi-unit portfolio supported by strong managers and systems. After establishing consistent performance, I intend to diversify into additional sectors and ultimately grow to double-digit units. Within fifteen to twenty years, I aim to strategically exit a majority of my portfolio before transitioning into franchising consulting.

To support this path, I will continue leveraging relationships built through the International Franchise Association and pursue my Certified Franchise Executive designation to remain current in the industry.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“One of the most important things I encouraged Demarco to clarify during the program was his ‘why.’ I have seen many franchisees succeed and fail over the years, and the difference is rarely talent or intelligence. It is whether their purpose is strong enough to sustain them when the work becomes difficult. Demarco demonstrated a willingness to be honest about his current season of life, remain open to guidance, and think strategically about long-term ownership. That clarity and discipline will serve him well as he moves forward in his franchise journey.”

-Dianne Davis, President, Tulnet



Rocki Harris

Alpharetta, GA

Explorer

[R Harris | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

I entered my franchise journey, and the Franchise Ascension Initiative (FAI), out of pure curiosity, prompted by an acquaintance after I expressed interest in becoming a business owner but didn't know quite where to start. While I had some exposure to franchising through my employer's partnership with The UPS Store, my understanding of the broader franchise landscape was extremely limited. Like many people new to this space, I assumed franchising was largely confined to fast food and believed franchise owners were mostly on their own, improvising without the benefit of structured systems and proven processes. When I first attempted to research franchising independently, my efforts stalled after hitting a major obstacle around funding. Without a clear understanding of capital requirements, financing options, or how franchise deals are structured, my early exploration came to a halt.

Despite that uncertainty, my motivation was clear from the start: finding a viable alternative to traditional retirement. With ongoing corporate restructuring and downsizing across industries, I felt an increasing need to take control of my income and financial future. Owning multiple businesses represents both security and opportunity, not only for myself, but also for my ability to support my family and community. When I began the program, my vision was undeniably blurry. I had the desire, but not the systems, structure, or information needed to understand how ownership could become reality. I was operating largely on faith and hope. That uncertainty, along with my faith and hope, ultimately led me to the FAI, a starting point that would begin to bring clarity to what once felt out of reach.

As I progressed through the FAI program, that early uncertainty was gradually replaced by structured learning and informed genuine curiosity. In all honesty, the learning curve was deep and is ongoing. It is one that I am still actively navigating. My learning about franchising came from



several interconnected sources that built on one another over time. Early instruction from Dr. Kathy Gosser of the University of Louisville provided a strong foundation by introducing the structure and intent behind franchising, including how to approach the Franchise Disclosure Document and key components such as Item 19. Those lessons were deepened through conversations with my mentor, Michelle Popelka, and reinforced through the practical frameworks introduced in Barbara Nuss's Profit Soup program. The FAI web portal further expanded my perspective through modules on marketing, emerging technologies like AI, and recorded sessions from prior IFA conventions, each one highlighting just how dynamic and evolving the franchise ecosystem truly is.

Through all of the knowledge gained, one important truth became clear: I am not expected to remember everything, but I am accountable for capturing, organizing, and returning to the insights that support informed decision-making. That responsibility of ownership is one I take seriously. As I move forward, my next step is to revisit these materials to evaluate franchise opportunities more intentionally, understanding what is being offered, what will be required of me as a franchisee, and what support and accountability I should expect from a franchisor.

That sense of accountability did not develop in isolation—it grew through this community. Alongside the structured learning, the program fostered significant personal growth opportunity, particularly in the areas of confidence-building and clarity around whether franchising is the right business model for me. My mentor, Michelle Popelka, played a pivotal role by providing behind-the-scenes access to how franchising functions at the franchisor level. Through her, I was introduced to professionals whose perspectives spanned the full franchise lifecycle: a longtime franchise business broker who recently became a franchisee, members of the franchisor sales, onboarding and support team, and an experienced former multi-unit owner who had successfully exited and now supports franchisees from within the system. Seeing these different vantage points helped me understand not only how franchises operate, but how strategy, support, and long-term thinking intersect in successful systems.

A key personal breakthrough for me came during our final mentor-to-mentee roundtable discussion. Hearing mentors openly share encouragement and perspective created something I can only describe as collective belief. It was a shared confidence in the possibility of success that I felt take root in me. That moment affirmed what I had been beginning to feel: that franchising is a model where I feel supported and grounded, particularly during the inevitable challenges of business ownership, and that I want to pursue this path not only as an owner, but as a leader.

As I conclude my time in this FAI cohort, I find myself in a place I could not have fully imagined when I first arrived, my vision blurry, motivated but uncertain. What once felt extremely unfamiliar and out of reach now feels structured, intentional, and attainable. I now carry knowledge, not only about how I can succeed as a franchisee, but about how this experience and perspective can be shared with and passed on to others. One of my greatest takeaways is the understanding that this is



not the end of my journey, but simply the conclusion of this particular chapter within the broader International Franchise Association (IFA) community. The experience has opened my eyes to a level of access and exposure that I previously did not have and has fostered meaningful relationships that I believe will support me through franchise ownership and beyond. While I am still working through how to apply concepts such as exit planning and long-term strategy, I am confident that the foundation built through this program will allow me to move forward with greater clarity and purpose.

Above all, I am deeply grateful to the individuals, mentors, sponsors, and organizers within both FAI and the IFA who made this experience possible. When I entered this program, I was looking for a viable path to financial independence and a way to secure my future—for myself, my family, and my community. Because of their investment in me, that path is no longer blurry. I now see the path clearly and I'm walking forward with confidence.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“Having worked with Rocki through FAI, I’ve seen her approach franchising with thoughtfulness and a genuine curiosity where she asks the right questions, applies what she learns, and shows the kind of strategic mindset and integrity that makes her exceptionally well-suited for successful business ownership.”

-Michele Popelka, Brand President, Next Day Access



Lisa Mulrain

Bethesda, MD

Explorer

Personal Reflection

My experience as a cohort member in the Franchise Ascension Initiative program has been a transformative bridge between my 30 years of legal leadership and my future as an enterprise builder. The curriculum provided a rigorous deep dive into the mechanics of the franchise ecosystem, from the analytical scrutiny of Profit & Loss statements and balance sheets to the strategic art of locating and vetting high-potential opportunities. Presentations from industry leaders like Profit Soup and direct engagement with established franchisors dismantled the "theory" of business ownership and replaced it with a practical, high-stakes roadmap for scaling wealth.

A profound impact of the program came through the mentorship of Larry Layton. In our sessions, he challenged me to look beyond the financials and anchor my ambition in my "Why." He single-handedly guided me in architecting the four pillars of my enterprise—the core values that will now govern every facet of my operations. These pillars are not just abstract concepts; they are the standard I will use when staffing my team, the promise I make to my clients, and the litmus test I will apply when evaluating business acquisitions. Larry's encouragement to pursue the dual path of both franchisor and franchisee has fundamentally expanded my vision for Legacy Building LLC and Mulrain Law.

Larry's commitment to our success went far beyond advice; he demonstrated the true power of executive networking and advocacy. When I expressed a desire to attend the Profit Soup sessions at the convention, he personally leveraged his influence to ensure that not only me, but seven additional members of my cohort were granted complimentary access. His leadership by example—balancing strategic toughness with genuine support—has made him an invaluable asset to my journey. I have already referred him to several of my fellow cohort members, and I look



forward to making those formal introductions at the upcoming conference to continue fostering this culture of excellence.

Key Takeaways

- Franchising is an amazing opportunity to build generational wealth
- Franchising has rules and requirements that each franchisor and franchisee should be aware of
- Franchising takes time, energy and determination
- Expanding and tapping into your network is a critical part of your journey
- Understanding the franchise you are buying into is an integral component of your franchising success

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Moving beyond this cohort, my objective is to translate this educational foundation into a scalable, multimillion-dollar enterprise that integrates legal protection with professional business ownership. My next steps are anchored in the four pillars we established, ensuring that every move toward growth is strategic, values-driven, and focused on **Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition (ETA)**.

Short-Term Plan (6–12 Months)

- **Targeted Acquisition & Launch:** My primary goal is to identify and acquire a high-performing business that complements the existing infrastructure of **Mulrain Law** and **Legacy Building LLC**. I am currently requesting CIMs and financial statements to find a target with strong EBITDA and low owner-dependency. This ETA strategy allows me to bypass the "startup" phase and move directly into managing an asset with proven cash flow.
- **Systematizing the "Sync Strategy":** I am hosting a webinar on February 17th to continue to crystalize my position as the "Legal Architect" of generational wealth. This period will focus on building a lead generation engine through AI tools to reach my revenue target across my legal and acquisition ventures.
- **Operational Staffing:** I will begin "staffing up" according to the governance values Larry helped me define. This is critical as I prepare to transition from a solo practitioner to the head of a multi-entity enterprise, ensuring my team embodies the stability and excellence required for elite leadership.

Long-Term Goals

- **The Dual Portfolio Model:** I intend to operate as both a franchisee within a proven system and a franchisor/owner of my own proprietary wealth-building methodologies. By focusing on acquisition rather than just creation, I am building a diversified portfolio that provides both immediate operational cash flow and long-term equity growth.

- **Institutional Legacy:** My ultimate objective is to transform the Legacy Building Enterprise into a multi-generational financial institution. This includes expanding real estate and business holdings across MD, MA, and DC, consolidating them under a master trust structure that serves as a permanent blueprint for legacy preservation.
- **Mentorship & Industry Leadership:** I plan to evolve from a mentee to a mentor within the acquisition and franchise communities. I will share the "Four Pillars" framework to help other diverse professionals navigate the complexities of buying businesses and institutionalizing their wealth.

Leveraging Support and Resources

- **Strategic Mentorship:** I will continue to leverage the guidance of mentors like Larry, particularly regarding the "Why" of my enterprise and strategic networking at national conventions. His insight into the values that govern an acquisition is the lens through which I view every potential deal.
- **Diligence & Technical Tools:** I will utilize specialized financial request checklists and due diligence protocols to vet potential acquisitions. My legal background provides a unique advantage in identifying liability risks that other searchers might overlook.
- **Advanced Executive Education:** I will maintain my edge by utilizing resources from Profit Soup and executive programs at Harvard and Wharton to stay at the forefront of financial analysis, ETA trends, and global leadership.

By maintaining a focus on **Institutional Stability, Radical Transparency, Generational Advocacy, and Elite Executive Excellence**, I am moving beyond this program not just as an individual attorney, but as a sophisticated entrepreneur dedicated to the disciplined acquisition and preservation of wealth.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

*“Serving as a mentor in the IFA Ascension Program has been the privilege of watching a deeply capable leader -Lisa Mulrain, Esq.- gain clarity about who she intends to become ten years from now, designing her path by working backward with intention. Seeing her name, her strengths, define the “what,” and step forward with growing confidence has been the true reward — a reminder that progress creates meaning, meaning builds momentum, and **mentorship transforms both lives.**”*

-Larry Layton, MBA, CFE

Business Advisor, Consultant

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Additional Highlights

A Transformative Experience: Complementing the Program



My time as a cohort member has been nothing short of amazing, offering a tremendous opportunity for anyone serious about becoming a business owner or expanding their existing enterprise. The program's ability to bring together like-minded, high-achieving individuals from across the country to learn and grow together is a phenomenal advantage that extends far beyond the classroom. My experience has been so transformative that I have already begun sharing these insights with my clients and personal network, advising them to sign up for future cohorts to secure their own professional evolution.

I want to extend a sincere thank you to **Omar and Raynya Simmons** for their selfless act in creating such an outstanding opportunity for us. Their vision has not only provided the technical tools for **Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition** but has also fostered a supportive environment where executive leadership and legacy-building can thrive. This program is a cornerstone for anyone looking to bridge the gap between their current professional standing and the institutional ownership of a multimillion-dollar enterprise. For that I say THANK YOU!



Antoinette Nelson

Washington, DC

Explorer

[Antoinette Nelson, Ph.D. | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

My journey through the Franchise Ascension Initiative has been both affirming and transformative. I entered the program driven by a desire to pursue entrepreneurship as a way to gain greater control over my time and direction, while expanding ownership opportunities in Black communities, particularly in SE Washington, DC, where I lived and served. I was motivated by the potential to create jobs and increase access to resources in a growing community.

As the program progressed, several life changes prompted me to reassess aspects of my personal and professional goals. That reflection led me to more carefully evaluate different franchising models, reconsider my initial geographic focus, and explore alternative pathways to ownership. Rather than narrowing my vision, this process expanded it.

One of the most important lessons I gained is that there is no singular route to franchise ownership. Hard work, discipline, creativity, and adaptability are constants, but the structure and strategy for success vary depending on individual goals, risk tolerance, and lifestyle priorities. This insight shifted my approach from searching for the “right” opportunity to identifying the opportunity that best aligns with my long-term vision.

The most impactful element of FAI was the access to mentors and peers who have already taken steps into ownership. Through 1:1 conversations and group dialogue, I sharpened my ability to evaluate unit economics, scalability, operational risk, and sustainability. Guidance from Mr.

Geoffrey Goodman, particularly around identifying strong franchise systems and thoughtfully transitioning from full-time employment into business ownership, reshaped how I assess timing and readiness. His counsel reinforced the value of patience, strategic thinking, and properly timed execution.

Like any meaningful growth experience, the program required resilience. Balancing coursework with professional and personal commitments strengthened my focus and time management. Technical challenges that temporarily limited access to course materials pushed me to be resourceful and proactive. Working through those obstacles reinforced a core entrepreneurial principle: persistence and problem-solving are non-negotiable to be successful.

As I conclude this phase of the FAI journey, I see franchise ownership not only as a pathway to wealth creation, but as a platform to build jobs, mentor others, and reinvest in communities. The program has equipped me with more clarity, tools, and relationships that will guide my next steps with intention and purpose.

Key Takeaways

- There is no single path to franchise ownership; alignment between model, goals, and capacity is essential.
- Mentorship and peer engagement accelerate growth and strengthen strategic decision-making.
- Resilience, discipline, and proactive problem-solving define effective entrepreneurial leadership.

Action Plan - Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Over the next 6-12 months, my focus will be on structured exploration and relationship-building. I plan to deepen my financial analysis capabilities, particularly as they relate to evaluating franchise models and entrepreneurship-through-acquisition (ETA) opportunities. Further understanding unit economics, debt structures, cash flow durability, and scalability will be critical as I assess risk and long-term viability. In parallel, I will continue strengthening relationships with mentors cultivated through FAI and intentionally expand my network by interviewing franchise brokers, speaking directly with franchisors/franchisees and engaging financial institutions to clarify capital access and lending options. By beginning more formal discussions with brands and owners I will be able to better understand what opportunities realistically exist. This period will also include completing personal and leadership assessments to ensure alignment between my strengths, lifestyle goals, and the operational demands of the models I pursue. While there is a natural “chicken or egg” dynamic in opportunity identification, I recognize that momentum is created through getting started!

Long term, my goal is not simply to acquire a single franchise, but to build a scalable ownership platform that creates economic mobility for myself and for others. Over time, I aim to expand into multi-unit ownership or acquisition of complementary businesses. I also intend to one day become involved as a mentor within programs like FAI, helping demystify ownership pathways for other professionals who are considering entrepreneurship.

To support these goals, I will leverage the FAI alumni network, including 1:1 mentor relationships, financial advisors, lenders, and industry operators who can provide candid insight. I will also continue structured learning in financial modeling and small business acquisition strategy. This next step will focus on building my network with intention, filling the knowledge gaps identified and taking consistent steps forward.



Blair Underwood

Salt Lake City, UT

Explorer

Personal Reflection

My FAI journey ultimately became a mirror—one that reflected not just how I think about franchising, but how my wife Josie and I envision building a life together. When I entered the program, I knew we shared a deep commitment to entrepreneurship, personal growth, and serving others, but FAI helped bring those values into sharper focus. It slowed me down in the best possible way, forcing me to think beyond ambition and ask harder, more meaningful questions: What kind of business do we want to build? What kind of life do we want that business to support? Franchising emerged as a powerful answer—not as a shortcut, but as a framework for intentional growth.

As the program progressed, our interest in cleaning and laundromat franchises became more than a financial decision—it became personal. These businesses represent something steady, dependable, and human. People will always need clean clothes and clean spaces, regardless of economic cycles or technological disruption. That realization carried emotional weight for me. In a world increasingly shaped by automation and uncertainty, there was something grounding about focusing on work that serves a real, everyday need. FAI helped me see that choosing a business that doesn't demand constant presence or massive staffing isn't a compromise; it's a conscious choice to protect time, partnership, and purpose.

One of the most meaningful lessons I took from FAI was the idea of stewardship, reinforced through the guidance of my mentor, Dustin Hansen. His insight, patience, and lived experience consistently reminded me that leadership is less about control and more about responsibility. Through mentor



conversations and challenging coursework, I began to understand that owning a franchise—especially one rooted in essential services—comes with a quiet but powerful obligation. A laundromat or cleaning business isn’t flashy, but it touches lives in small, dignified ways: helping someone show up to work clean and confident, or creating a welcoming, reliable place in the community. Navigating financial models, disclosures, and risk assessments was difficult at times, but those challenges strengthened my confidence and deepened my respect for what thoughtful ownership truly requires. This journey would not have been possible without Raynya Simmons and Omar Simmons, who introduced me to this world and invited me into the FAI program. What stands out most is the selflessness of their mission. They chose not to guard what they had built, but to teach it—to say, we want others to learn how to do what we have done. In opening that door, they allowed me to walk alongside them, to learn through observation, structure, and shared experience. That generosity fundamentally changed the trajectory of my thinking and expanded what I believed was possible.

By the end of the program, my perspective had shifted from simply owning a business to building something that matters. I now see cleaning and laundromat franchising as a platform for partnership with my wife, service to our community, and the creation of multi-generational income rooted in stability and care. FAI didn’t just prepare me to evaluate franchise opportunities—it helped me align my business ambitions with my values, my marriage, and my long-term vision. That alignment is the greatest takeaway of this journey, and it will guide every decision we make moving forward.

Action Plan: What Comes Next

Coming out of FAI, the next step is not movement for movement’s sake, but discernment. My wife and I are narrowing our focus between a cleaning franchise and a laundromat, listening closely to what the numbers tell us and what our lives are asking for. We are seeking a business that honors our partnership, supports the rhythm of our days, and allows us to build something meaningful side by side.

Preparation comes next, and we are approaching it with care. We will move forward with disciplined capital planning, a thoughtful review of the franchise framework, and honest conversations about our roles as owners and leaders. We want to build on systems that create freedom, not on urgency that creates strain—laying a foundation strong enough to support both the business and the marriage at its center.

From there, our aim is steadiness. We want to operate a business rooted in service, one that meets a real and lasting need in the community and runs quietly, reliably, and well. Growth will come only after consistency is earned, and expansion will follow intention, not pressure. FAI reminded me that the most enduring ventures are shaped patiently—guided by values, strengthened by partnership, and built to last.

Mentor Quote

“Blair has been amazing in his engagement with FAI. The thoughtful questions, which were always prepared in advance, allowed us to cover the right topics in a relevant and meaningful way. His thorough research was on point. It has been a blast to connect and dig in, especially as Blair started looking at specific brands. I have a very high level of confidence that Blair, if he pursues franchise ownership, would choose the right brand for himself & his family, and would be a great operator.”

-Dustin Hansen



Tierra Webley

Land O' Lakes, FL

Explorer

[Tierra Webley, MBA, ICMS | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

I entered the Franchise Ascension Initiative program with a clear but exploratory goal: to learn more about franchise ownership as my husband and I prepare for our next chapter. With his planned retirement in August 2028, we are intentionally evaluating what life, work, and purpose will look like beyond military service. We decided I was the right fit to attend the program because I had the flexibility at the time and because I am the strategist and architect behind the business decisions we make. Our shared interest is firmly rooted in fitness and wellness, and we began this journey with openness and curiosity.

At the start of the program, my husband and I read the *E-Myth*, a book recommended to me through a Small Business Administration program I previously attended. The book reshaped how we think about business ownership, emphasizing systems, processes, and the importance of working on the business rather than in it. As I progressed through the IFA program, I naturally compared what I was learning to these principles. One of the most significant insights I gained was realizing that not every franchise truly operates as a system.

Overall, the coursework was informative and exposed me to a wide range of concepts, brands, and perspectives. At times, however, the experience felt overwhelming without a clearly defined roadmap of the franchise journey. Learning materials were distributed across multiple platforms, often limiting opportunities to revisit content.

One of the most impactful components of the program was the mentorship. Being paired with a mentor significantly enhanced my experience and brought clarity to many aspects of my

franchise exploration.

Key Takeaways

- Not all scalable businesses are franchise-ready systems; successful franchising requires a repeatable, teachable structure and well-documented structure.
- Mentorship is critical for informed decision-making and real-world application beyond course work.
- Values alignment and clarity matter more than speed when evaluating ownership or expansion opportunities.

Action Plan - Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Although I am completing the program without finalizing a franchise investment, I leave with greater clarity. We are reassessing whether franchising a gym aligns with our creative vision. We are also exploring franchise opportunities that complement rather than compete with an independent gym, while remaining aligned with our values and commitment to the fitness and wellness industry in the Tampa area.

On a personal level, I am considering the development of a true system that could one day scale into a franchise model. Whether franchised or independent, our goal is to build a business that supports military families, promotes health, and develops the next generation.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“Tierra brings a thoughtful, systems-oriented mindset to franchise exploration. She asks the right questions, challenges assumptions, and approaches ownership decisions with clarity, discipline, and purpose.”

— J.J. Sorrenti, CEO, Best Life Brands, LLC



Raji Welch-Bey

Twinsburg, OH

Explorer

[Raji Welch-Bey | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

The Franchise Ascension Initiative has truly been a professional and personal blessing. This cohort of amazing individuals from around the country came together to learn, expand and solidify our knowledge of franchising. Through this initiative, I've learned that if you have a vision and a dream, there is someone out there to support, believe and assist you.

Our cohort started off virtually where we attended the University of Denver and Louisville for an Intro to Franchising and an Overview of the Business Plan. Shortly thereafter, we gathered for the first time at the IFA Advocacy Summit in Washington, DC. The vast array of FAI cohort professionals, all at different stages, sought leadership and guidance without disappointment. The conference gave access to amazing franchise professionals willing to support, share and provide knowledge and wisdom.

Throughout the course, the Financial Disclosure Document (FDD) was thoroughly highlighted. Perspectives on finding the best brand for your lifestyle and an array of brand affiliate presentations from "Zees and Zors", Brand Presidents and key franchise officials provided context and fill in our inquisitive gaps.

This program not only gave me an amazing community and network, but it also provided the tools, knowledge and confidence to support my next steps. I personally enjoyed the Brand Presentations which gave an honest, but different view of what it takes to succeed. Lafayette Square, New Majority Capital, Small Business Administration and more provided options to the popular questions of obtaining funding. I learned that there is more than

one way to buy a business. Creative financing efforts such as the Roll Over Business Startup (ROBS), Private equity funding, obtaining debt vs personal funding all provided different options to secure capital. The last six months have provided valuable lessons, training and curated conversations that you could not experience in any other place. Thank you, Omar, Rayna, David, FAI staff and everyone that has played a role in making this program a success.

Key Takeaways

- The Profit Soup session spoke about the importance of knowing your numbers and identifying your key metrics that drive profit. The Breakeven Plus module showcased building in your profit on the front end, instead of waiting to see what remains.
- This course has opened my mind to see just how deep franchising is embedded in the capital markets. I've learned how to evaluate deals, understand financial statements and find comfort in discussing the value and challenges of running a successful business.
- Franchising can be very tough but rewarding. I'm intrigued by the franchise model and the possibilities for learning, building and growing.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

My goals beyond the FAI program are to continue searching for opportunities in the Northeast Ohio region and beyond that make sense from a financial profitability standpoint, fit my lifestyle goals and provide community impact. The FAI has given me the confidence to evaluate deals and better understand proper profitability metrics.

Short-term plans are to continue searching for franchise opportunities through acquisition. Purchasing an existing cash flowing business seems to alleviate a lot of front-end issues and headaches. Hopefully this will allow me to focus on growing the business instead of the challenges in building a new location.

Long-term I would like to purchase at least 3-5 locations of a top brand in a tier 1 market. By planning properly on the front end and aligning myself with the best brands, I believe my potential for success is limitless.

The support and resources that I will leverage to achieve this goal are my mentor Lou Schager, the FAI cohort/staff and my local community resources. This program has opened a gateway to a network that I could never have established on my own. I look forward to keeping in contact with all the cohort members to provide insight, share wins/challenges and grow to heights we've never imagined.



Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“There is no limit to where a man can go if he doesn’t mind giving others the credit”

-Lou Schager, Brand President, Mosquito Joe

“Lou is a great mentor; I appreciate his wisdom and knowledge in the franchise industry. He is the president of a brand and is very effective in his role.”

-Raji Welch-Bey, Cohort #2 Participant, FAI

Additional Highlights

Coming out of your comfort zone is never easy. You must put yourself in uncomfortable positions to learn and grow. In this picture, I struggled with imposter syndrome, but throughout this course I realized that putting in the work, equip myself with the proper resources and tools, there is no need to discount yourself. Life is a journey and we might not all “feel” successful, but if we show up and continue our path, success has no choice but to follow. Thank you FAI for this amazing opportunity.



Wen Yong

Potomac, MD

Explorer

Personal Reflection

When I joined the Franchise Ascension Initiative (FAI) 2025–2026 cohort, I was close to zero in franchising. I was curious, but I lacked the vocabulary, a diligence process, and the confidence to have real conversations with franchisors. This half-year journey changed that. Through the kickoff, structured online learning, weekly Zoom sessions, and mentorship, I moved from “interested but unsure” to “prepared and decisive.”

The biggest change is clarity. I now know what I’m looking for—whether it makes more sense to buy an existing business or build from the ground up, which industries align with my strengths and goals, and which ones to avoid based on unit economics and operational realities. Instead of chasing ideas, I can define criteria and evaluate opportunities against them.

I also gained a practical, repeatable system for search and due diligence. I learned where to find opportunities (platforms, broker channels, and franchise networks), how to compare brands consistently, and how to ask better questions when speaking with franchisors, franchisees, and advisors. Most importantly, I’m no longer relying on feelings or hype—I’m learning how to verify fit with real data and structured evaluation.

The course experience was exceptional. The kick-off in-person classes brought us together and pushed us into our roles quickly. The online content was thoughtfully curated—engaging, the right length, and with strong depth—drawing from multiple sources and formats. The weekly Zoom meetings were equally valuable, giving me repeated chances to ask questions directly to brand owners, financial advisors, and business advisors. The weekly study pace was challenging at times, and it felt bad to fall behind, but I was able to catch up eventually.

Finally, the mentorship component was a standout. The mentor group Zooms and individual check-ins gave me both community learning and personalized guidance. I now have a stronger support network—mentors, cohort members, and other advisors—who I can lean on for introductions, feedback, diligence help, and real-world perspective as I move toward ownership.

Key Takeaways

- Buying an existing business may be a better path for me—especially in the “silver tsunami” era—because it is already established with performance history and operating systems.
- There are multiple ways to finance a deal (e.g., seller financing, SBA loans, and other structures). I should not eliminate a good opportunity prematurely based on initial funding assumptions.
- “Breakeven PLUS” reframed how I plan: work numbers bottom-up. Start with the take-home goal, then build the cost structure and revenue targets to reach a clear “magic number.”
- Sales and marketing are critical. I now understand different marketing approaches and the unique structure of franchise marketing—how franchisor and franchisee efforts combine to drive local results.
- I can read the Franchise Disclosure Document (FDD) with purpose and know which sections deserve the most attention during diligence.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Short-term plan (6–12 months):

- Deeply investigate 3–5 franchise opportunities using a consistent comparison framework (unit economics, support model, staffing demands, territory design, and scalability).
- Work with three brokers to source potential sellers of existing franchise locations that match my criteria.
- Strengthen my diligence workflow: a repeatable checklist for franchisor calls, franchisee validation calls, FDD review, and bottom-up financial modeling.

Long-term goals (within 2 years and beyond):

- Open or acquire a business within 2 years.
- Build toward multi-unit ownership over time—starting with one unit first to master operations, validate the model, and then expand with confidence.
- Continue leveraging mentors, cohort peers, and experienced franchisees as a trusted advisory circle for major decisions.

Mentor Reflection

Mark Kirsch is my mentor. He is the partner of Lathrop GPM. Mark has been incredible. Even with a packed schedule, he consistently made time for me. He encouraged me when I felt uncertain and helped me refocus whenever my thinking drifted. Each time we spoke, he clarified my next steps,

pointed me in the right direction, and even offered to review my FDD. I'm genuinely grateful for his guidance, insight, and support.

Seekers



Quiana Cloud

Atlanta, GA

Seeker

[Quiana C. | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

As a participant in the Franchise Ascension Program, I've gained an incredible amount of value, both educationally and through professional connections. Being part of a cohort that includes new franchise owners as well as individuals actively exploring franchise opportunities created a well-balanced learning environment and a platform to not only ask questions, but also explore opportunities collaboratively.

While many of the lessons are hands-on, the program reinforces a critical foundation: research, research, research. As someone who genuinely enjoys learning, I've found that conducting thorough due diligence supported by data is essential to making informed decisions. This includes narrowing down industries, evaluating how a specific franchise differentiates itself from competitors, and understanding its marketing strategies. I also pay close attention to how many franchisees are actively operating and succeeding compared to those who have exited the system.

Understanding the why behind a business is just as important as understanding the business itself, how it is structured, the responsibilities on both sides, the level of support provided and where gaps may exist between the franchisor and franchisee, particularly in education and ongoing assistance. Taking a holistic view of an opportunity is critical when deciding on an industry.

Equally important is evaluating how a franchise will weather change, whether that's shifts in the political climate, economic uncertainty, or rapid technological advancements. I pay close attention to how organizations adapt, pivot, and continue to educate and upskill their franchisees in an increasingly AI-driven, tech-enabled world. Given my background in marketing, technology, and strategy, I naturally take a deeper dive when reviewing franchise opportunities. If an organization is

not implementing modern technology or lacks a willingness to evolve, that is a key consideration for me when determining overall fit.

Beyond aligning with my interests, I'm intentionally exploring industries that may be considered "boring" but are essential, businesses that are more recession-resistant and capable of weathering economic or political shifts over time.

Key Takeaways

- Due diligence is non-negotiable
- Long-term viability matters more than initial excitement
- Acquisition + optimization is the strategic goal

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

At this stage, I've narrowed my focus to three industries and I'm most interested in acquiring an existing, established franchise or business within one of those spaces. I'm also open to exploring additional industries that align with my evaluation checklist. In parallel, I'm interested in gaining more experience acquiring existing businesses where the owner may be retiring or lacks a clear succession plan.

The one-to-one introductions to the founders and team through the New Majority Capital and Beta Program were especially valuable. Over the next six months, I plan to continue researching my target industries while actively exploring opportunities through the IFA network and the Beta Program to help narrow my search and secure my first acquisition.

Long term, my goals include continuing my education in franchising and business acquisition, becoming deeply acclimated to a new industry, and building a portfolio of businesses over the next three to five years. I'm also interested in eventually launching a franchise brand and/or working directly with franchisees to improve speed-to-lead, return on investment, and operational efficiency. This includes proprietary automated systems that allow franchisees to spend less time on the search and administrative work and more time growing their businesses, streamlining onboarding, accelerating process improvement, increasing responsiveness to customers, and ultimately saving time and money.

To continue fostering these relationships, I look forward to working closely with IFA, its partners, and the Beta Program.

Additional Highlights

During the Ascension program, I wasn't just learning about franchising, I was seeing the friction points in real time. Questions around business fit, compliance, marketing performance, financial analysis and operational efficiency kept surfacing. I found myself thinking, *there has to be a smarter way to streamline this*. That spark and sketch later turned into HeyFRAN™, *your best AI franchise friend* bridging the gap between franchisor systems and franchisee execution.



Julian Dickenson

Miami, FL

Seeker

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/juliandickenson/>

Personal Reflection

The Hero's Journey

I spent years watching my mother work tirelessly to make ends meet, only realizing years later that the struggles we faced were planting the seeds for me to become a successful franchise entrepreneur. While my classmates at Stanford pointed to their family's business success as their inspiration, my drive comes from seeing the proven playbook of hard work in action every single day.

The turning point came when I realized the businesses in my neighborhood weren't just places to spend money, but opportunities to build wealth. Franchising provided the game plan, allowing me to apply the same discipline I used as an athlete to a business. Learn the system. Execute relentlessly. Win.

The vision became even clearer when I saw owners who looked like me. Discovering Omar Simmons's story was both an inspiration and a blueprint. Joining Omar and Raynya's Franchise Ascension Initiative confirmed a truth I had always felt. Franchising is one of the most underrated paths to wealth-building in historically disadvantaged groups. In franchising, my background wasn't a deficit. It was my edge. I possess an intuition for the customers and frontline workers who actually make these businesses run. This is a perspective that can't be taught in a lecture hall.

The resources within FAI are elite, but the mentorship offers something far more rare. The gift of pattern recognition. My mentors are decades ahead of me, offering a vantage point that allows me to see around corners. There's a saying that the best mentors help you make "original mistakes" by steering you away from the pitfalls they've already survived. This guidance hasn't just compressed years of learning into months; it's given me the confidence to move faster. I know I'm navigating with a map drawn by those who have already conquered the terrain. The playbook is in my hands. Time to execute.

Key Takeaways

- **Selection is Strategy:** Building a business is like pushing a boulder. The franchise you choose helps decide whether you're pushing it uphill or downhill.
- **Validation is Key:** Franchising can offer a window into your business's future. It's an opportunity to gather intelligence and understand the reality of the commitment before you sign.
- **Choose Your Hard:** Instead of looking for perfect businesses, find ones with manageable problems. Clarify the downsides so you can unlock the upside.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

After evaluating dozens of franchises, speaking with hundreds of franchisees, and leveraging FAI, I've established clear criteria for selecting better opportunities.

- **Phase 1 (Years 1-2):** Acquire first franchise unit(s)/territory. Learn the playbook and the industry, develop as a leader, learn to attract and retain talent, and improve unit-level profitability through the core actions that drive success.
- **Phase 2 (Years 3-4):** Grow through acquisitions and de novo builds within my chosen franchise system, while building stronger operational and support teams.
- **Phase 3 (Years 5+):** Reinvest cash flow from the first franchise portfolio to become a Multi-Unit Multi-Brand Operator (MUMBO). Keep growing as a leader.

Through all phases, I'm committed to lifting as I climb and paying forward the generosity I've received from my mentors and FAI peers.

Mentor Quote

"There is no easy, simple answer that's going to fall in your lap. You are going to find an opportunity and make the best of it."

-David Humphrey, CEO/Board Member, DTH Ventures/Ignite Fitness

Hero's Journey Explained

During FAI, I read *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho at exactly the right time. It's a story about leaving comfort behind to pursue your true purpose. The real treasure isn't gold, but the personal transformation that comes from facing trials along the way. I traded a comfortable, lucrative career in finance for franchise entrepreneurship. The draw wasn't as much what I would build, but who I would become building it.



Sylvester Everhart

Decatur, GA

Seeker

[Sylvester D. Everhart, CHA, CHIA | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

My journey through the Franchise Ascension Initiative has been both affirming and transformative. Franchising is something I have been drawn to since childhood, even before I had the language or framework to fully understand it. The idea of ownership, scalability, and building something enduring has always resonated with me, particularly within the hotel space, where I have long aspired to one day own a franchise property. The inclusive nature of FAI, paired with access to mentorship that has often been difficult to find, made this program a meaningful opportunity.

One of the most important lessons I learned is that although franchise opportunities are plentiful, success requires clarity, discipline, and tenacity. Ownership is not simply about selecting a brand, it is about committing to the hard work of building a scalable operation supported by the right systems, partners, and long-term strategy. Throughout the program, I began to see franchising not as an abstract aspiration, but as a structured and achievable path when approached intentionally.

A breakthrough for me was realizing how much support exists within the franchise ecosystem. Organizations like the IFA, along with the openness of experienced franchisees who are willing to share insights when approached thoughtfully, reinforced that aspiring owners do not have to navigate this journey alone. The importance of networking, relationship-building, and learning directly from operators became increasingly clear.

My mentor, Pete Palmisano, provided particularly impactful guidance. His insights around family considerations, personal financial security, and the long-term ramifications of franchise commitment helped me expand my perspective beyond the business model itself.



The greatest challenge I faced during the program was narrowing my options. With so many potential concepts and directions available, focus became essential. By the conclusion of FAI, I now feel that franchise ownership is far more accessible than it once seemed. I am more strategic, more informed, and have greater clarity on where to direct my efforts. Most importantly, I leave the program with a defined three-year plan and confidence in my next steps.

Key Takeaways

- *Franchising is scalable with the right systems, partnerships, and operational discipline.*
- *Mentorship and networking accelerate clarity and shorten the learning curve toward ownership.*
- *Having a clear franchise thesis is essential to staying focused amid abundant opportunities.*

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

In the short term (6–12 months), my primary focus will be on preparation and relationship-building. This includes saving additional capital, strengthening my financial foundation, and establishing relationships with franchise development teams across major hotel brands. In parallel, I plan to build early connections with the SBA office and local banking partners to better understand lending pathways, requirements, and timelines for acquisition.

Over the next three years, my long-term goal is to acquire my first franchise unit and successfully transition from corporate leadership into franchise ownership. My intent is to approach this shift strategically, leveraging my hospitality and revenue management background while building the operational infrastructure required to scale over time.

Post-FAI, I will continue leveraging key resources including the IFA network, the cohort network and relationships with lenders and experienced franchisees. I also plan to remain engaged in mentorship, both as a learner and, eventually, as someone who can support future aspiring owners coming through programs like this.

FAI has provided both the foundation and momentum to pursue ownership with clarity, purpose, and discipline.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“Franchise ownership is a powerful path, but it requires thoughtful commitment. The most successful owners build checks and balances that protect their families, ensure financial stability, and align the business with long-term values. Focus, preparation, and clarity of purpose will ultimately define success.”

-Pete Palmisano, Director of Franchise Administration, Miracle-Ear



Talayah Jackson

Washington, DC
Seeker

Personal Reflection

Before FAI, franchising felt like something other people did. Burgers. Pizza chains. Big money that I didn't have. I didn't understand the mechanics and I didn't know how anyone actually got into franchising. It felt distant.

What changed was exposure. The breadth of the franchise space surprised me. It's not just massive restaurant brands with million-dollar buildouts. There are varying service models, emerging brands, lower entry points. Once I understood the mechanics - like discovery calls, FDDs, territories, etc. - it stopped feeling abstract and started feeling like something attainable.

The capital conversation hit hard - not one session or speaker, but all the conversations related to capital. Once I understood the mechanics of being a franchisee, it became obvious that cash matters, liquidity matters, and credit matters. Which means some opportunities are out of reach for me right now - and that's okay.

But here's what sat underneath those conversations for me.

Most of our cohort is made up of people of color. Most of the speakers were white operators and executives who have already navigated these systems. I appreciated every single one of them for showing up. And at the same time, it highlighted why FAI exists in the first place. Access to capital, networks, and information has not historically been evenly distributed.

There was one Wednesday session that stuck with me. I was toggling between my 9-5, picking up my son, planning his birthday party, figuring out dinner, and listening to a speaker say something along the lines of, "You just have to work hard." It hit wrong that day. I am working the

hardest I’ve ever worked in my life. We all are. We wouldn’t be here otherwise. Hard work isn’t the missing ingredient. Positioning and capital are.

Personally, the biggest shift was mental. I moved from thinking like an operator to thinking like a portfolio builder. I started thinking about asset stacking, structured income, systems that run without me at the center of everything.

That shift forced me to look at my own situation more honestly.

I’m capable. I can run things. I understand operations. But I’m not liquid right now. I’m carrying too much debt. I’m cash constrained. I’m a single mom navigating real-life curveballs without the financial cushion I’d like. Adding a franchise tomorrow would be irresponsible. But putting the financial pieces in place now so I can move decisively when the timing is right is absolutely within my control. That’s where my focus is.

Key Takeaways

- **Franchising is accessible** – it’s not reserved for insiders. It’s structured and navigable, but it requires preparation and capital
- **Franchising is simply a business model** – that was an “a-ha” moment, I realized I could evaluate it through the same operational and financial lens I use in my professional career
- **Seeing the mechanics changes everything** – once I understood how franchising works, it became something I could evaluate and plan for
- **Curiosity isn’t enough – fit matters** – numbers and intangibles: the work, the brand, the people. Passion and practicality have to line up.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

ACTION PLAN: OWNERSHIP | EXPANSION | LEADERSHIP

SHORT-TERM (6–12 MONTHS)



Continue brand discovery conversations with a focused short list.



Strengthen liquidity and credit position.



Finalize selection criteria based on unit economics, operational complexity, and long-term scalability.



Identify financing pathway (SBA, partnerships, or hybrid structure).

LONG-TERM



Launch and stabilize first unit within 12–16 months.



Build toward multi-unit ownership.



Position franchise ownership as one pillar of a diversified wealth strategy.



SUPPORT & RESOURCES



Continued engagement with FAI alumni network.



Franchise brokers, lenders, and operators I've met through the program.



My existing background in project management, operations, and construction to support disciplined execution.



FAI clarified what ownership requires. The next 6–12 months are about handling what’s in front of me – strengthening liquidity, tightening up debt, and continuing focused discovery so I can move confidently when the timing makes sense.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

I connected with my mentor, Tom Shoolbraid, multiple times throughout the program. Our conversations were thoughtful and grounded. He helped me narrow my thinking and focus on what truly fits my current capacity and long-term goals. He was transparent about his own path and generous with his perspective. I came to those conversations prepared with specific questions and ideas, which made them productive and focused. He also introduced me to a franchise broker, which expanded my discovery process in a practical way.

Tom Shoolbraid, Director of Franchise Sales | AAMCO Transmissions & Total Car Care

Additional Highlights

FAI didn’t change my ambition. It refined my strategy. I’m clearer on what franchise ownership requires — and clearer on the steps I need to take next.



Brooke McGilvery

Lancaster, TX

Seeker

[Brooke McGilvery | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

The ebbs and flows of business ownership can take you down a winding road, often leaving you questioning whether you are on the right path. As an educator for over two decades, I was accustomed to stepping into systems and policies that were already established, shaped by the long-standing structure of public-school districts. Entrepreneurship was different. There was no roadmap waiting for me and I had to build it myself. As I transitioned into this new space, I became intentional about reading business literature and attending seminars to prepare myself to build something greater than what I had known before.

When I received an email about a workshop titled *Pathways to Franchising*, I registered out of curiosity, not fully understanding how impactful that decision would be. During that workshop, I had the opportunity to hear franchisors from Dallas, TX share their journeys, stories that reflected many of my own experiences, challenges, and aspirations. For the first time, I could clearly see a pathway that connected my passion for education, my entrepreneurial drive, and my long-term vision of building generational wealth. That experience led me to apply to the Franchise Ascension Initiative. Becoming a franchise owner had always been a personal goal, and after opening the first Montessori preschool in Lancaster, Texas, I knew franchising could be a powerful way to diversify my business portfolio and expand my impact.

Now, as a member of Cohort 2, I am surrounded by extraordinary individuals and connected with people who have a blueprint for financial freedom. One of my greatest takeaways has been understanding my magic number. While I was already familiar with systems and procedures, learning my magic number helped me understand that break-even is not simply zero, it means reaching a point where the business sustains itself and generates true financial stability.

Throughout the last six months, as I progressed through the modules, met with my mentor, and

clarified my goals of becoming a franchisee, I began interviewing franchisors to determine the right fit. I listened carefully, looked for alignment, and learned to look beyond the surface. It became clear that evaluating a franchise is about more than reviewing the FDD; it requires understanding the people, the culture, and whether it is a business I could commit to long term. This opportunity has been beyond anything I could have imagined. Having access to so many resources, mentors, and lived experiences has been remarkable. I am an inner-city girl from Dallas, Texas, with a vision that once only existed in my mind, and now I have the opportunity to bring that vision to life. Listening to my cohort members share their challenges and successes has strengthened me, and I now have a network of leaders who are only a phone call away.

I look forward to celebrating the grand openings of my fellow cohort members, just as I know they will celebrate mine. This is only the beginning. I am committed to applying everything I have learned and taking the necessary steps toward opening my first franchise, with many more units to follow.

Key Takeaways

- **Understanding my magic number provides financial clarity and decision-making discipline.** It defines the minimum income needed to sustain my personal and professional responsibilities. This allows me to evaluate franchise opportunities based on net profitability, scalability, and alignment with my long-term wealth goals, ensuring expansion decisions are strategic and financially sustainable.
- **Franchise ownership requires an investor mindset rather than an operator mindset.** It involves evaluating return on investment, scalability, risk, and long-term asset value. This shifts my focus from working in the business to building an asset that generates income, creates equity, and supports future expansion or exit opportunities.
- **Unit economics determine true success, not just total revenue.** Evaluating startup costs, operating expenses, break-even timelines, and net profit per unit is essential. This helps ensure each location contributes meaningful financial value and prevents growth that increases workload without increasing profitability or long-term financial stability.
- **Lifestyle Brand.** This is a state of mind of how you want to live and run your family. You are disciplined and have a laser focused approach. This outlook is powerful and helps to compartmentalize your goals and create the vision and make it plain. This was shared by Sam Ballas, East Coast Wings and Grill.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Over the next six to twelve months, my primary goal is to identify and acquire a franchise that aligns with my financial goals, leadership strengths, and preference for low overhead and operational flexibility. I am specifically interested in service-based or home-based franchise models that do not require an immediate brick-and-mortar location, allowing me to scale strategically while minimizing initial fixed costs and financial risk.

As part of my initial exploration, I have already begun speaking with franchise organizations such as New Mom and RCG Behavioral Health (which is a brick-and-mortar but ties directly to my current business) to learn more about their franchise models, operational expectations,



and support structures. These conversations have helped me better understand the importance of strong systems, mission alignment, and sustainable unit economics. I am also interested in continuing mentorship conversations with Stratus Building Solutions to gain further insight and apply those learnings to my decision-making process.

My next steps include defining my investment criteria using my magic number, target return on investment, and operational capacity. I will continue researching franchise opportunities, reviewing Franchise Disclosure Documents (FDDs), and speaking with current franchisees to evaluate profitability, scalability, and long-term growth potential. I will strengthen my financial readiness by organizing capital, exploring funding options, and leveraging mentors and resources from the FAI network.

By the end of the 12-month period, my goal is to complete due diligence, secure financing if needed, and acquire or launch a franchise that positions me for long-term sustainability and future multi-unit ownership.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

"It's been a pleasure working with you through the IFA cohort, and I've been impressed by the clarity and strategy you've developed in your thinking throughout the program. In particular, I've seen meaningful growth in the way you evaluate opportunities, narrow your focus, do significant market research, and connect your long-term goals to a practical ownership path. Your ability to move from broad interest to a more strategic lens — especially within education and home services — Your research and thoughtful questions have been a clear indicator of your readiness for the next step. I've also appreciated the way you've approached specific markets nearby to explore franchise concepts as a thoughtful first ownership. You have a very disciplined and intentional research approach when still exploring opportunities."

-Jotham Hatch, V.P. of Operations, Stratus Building Solutions

Highlights

"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it." - Habakkuk 2:2 (NKJV)

"I built my own table so others would know they have the power to build theirs too. #PullUp" - Brooke McGilvery



Roy Quezada

Providence, RI

Seeker

[Roy Quezada | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

The International Franchise Association Ascension Initiative has been an enlightening experience to be part of these last six months. The detailed curriculum covered everything from choosing the right franchise to becoming a success. Of all the many things we learned, most importantly, was how to best select the business that aligns with your interests and goals. Through these courses we learned about the not only about the size but the impact of the International Franchise Association.

The course work taught us how to evaluate franchises. Starting with how to properly read Franchise Disclosure Documents and the right questions to ask franchisors in any system. We received invaluable training on how to best defend our rights as franchisees and protect ourselves from bad actors. We learned about what level of support a good franchise provides from before opening day to daily operation guidelines. Not all franchises are created equal, some want to see you succeed, others just want the franchises fee. That is why it is important to take your time when selecting a brand and how to spot any red flags when evaluating any company. We received tips on how to better manage our company and how to get the most out of what your franchise system has to offer. We learned about all the options for funding that exist and why Small Business Administration is likely to lend to franchises. The courses helped us understand and use Profit and Loss Statements and balance sheets necessary to run our businesses.

The trip to Washington D.C helped to put in perspective the limitless growth potential in franchising. I was able to see firsthand the community of franchise owners and how they work together to help each other grow. The cohort itself is made up of a diverse group of individuals all on their own paths willing to help one another. We thrived, learning from

everyone's unique experience. Even sharing resources outside of what was provided from this program. Meeting them in person has inspired me to keep pushing because we may run different businesses, but we can still provide support to each other. I am looking forward to partnering up with a few of the other members on future projects and business ventures.

My mentor Jackie Adams has helped me understand what it takes to run a successful home services business. With her years of experience, she provides insight into franchisor and current franchisees in the home services business. She reviewed my business plan and ensured my financial projections included all relevant figures. She had me secret shop future competitors in your area to learn more about them and how to best set myself apart from them. The knowledge I was able to receive from someone with her level of experience is not something I take for granted.

This entire experience has confirmed that franchise ownership is the right path for me. From the support provided by everyone involved in this program to the communities of owners within franchising. I now have a much better understanding as to why franchises are so successful and what sets them apart from starting a business from scratch. I feel honored to have been selected for this program.

Key Takeaways

- The importance of doing your due diligence when selecting a franchise to work with
- The franchising network is greater than just the brand with which you are working.
- Relaxing that even with a national brand you can have such a large impact on your local community.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

In the next six to twelve months, I will be running my Mr. Handyman franchise in Rhode Island. I would like to be up to four vans and technicians by the end of my first year in operation. I would eventually like to have the entire state as my territory being that I will be opening the first one in the state. Later I can expand my business portfolio by buying into other franchise concepts both locally and nationally. I would like to work with The Black Franchise Leadership Council and The Hispanic Latino Franchise Leadership Council to educate people in my community about all the opportunities that franchising has to offer. Owning my own business has taught me the value of a network of support. I would like to become a Mentor for the Ascension Initiative once I have a few years of ownership experience under my belt.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“Over the past several months, Roy has been charging through the Discovery and Due Diligence process, zeroing in on the franchise brand that's the perfect fit for him. His experience as a business owner has sharpened his instincts and helped him navigate the nuances of evaluating each

opportunity. Now he's down to the final step—securing his financing—and he's on the brink of officially stepping into franchise ownership. Exciting things are just ahead for him!”

-Jackie Adams, Senior Director – Startup, Floor Coverings International



Johanna Torres

New Brunswick, NJ

Seeker

Personal Reflection

Participating in the Franchise Ascension Initiative has been a valuable professional development experience. The program provided a comprehensive way into franchising, but what stood out most was the depth behind each component of the learning journey. The curriculum blended technical knowledge and leadership development in a way that built both competence and confidence. As I progressed through each module, I gained a clearer understanding of what it truly takes to evaluate, launch, and sustain a successful franchise business.

One of the most impactful elements of the program was the opportunity to hear franchise owners and industry leaders share their personal stories. Their transparency about challenges, decision-making, and long-term resilience helped me appreciate the realities of franchise ownership beyond the theoretical models. These stories also reinforced the importance of adaptability, strategic thinking, and maintaining strong relationships within the franchise system.

Throughout the program, I experienced meaningful personal growth. The financial modules, particularly the Profit Soup series, strengthened my ability to interpret financial statements and understand the operational implications. The compliance and Fran-Guard sessions emphasized the importance of ethical leadership and regulatory awareness, which are essential for protecting both the brand and the franchisee community.

Overall, the Franchise Ascension Initiative has deepened my understanding of franchising as both a business model and a leadership opportunity. It has strengthened my strategic



mindset and expanded my technical skills. Most importantly, it has shown me that successful franchise ownership is built on continuous learning and a genuine commitment to people. I am grateful for the experience and feel better prepared to pursue future opportunities in the franchise sector.

Key Takeaways

- The most impactful learning came from hearing franchise owners and leaders share their personal journeys. Their stories provided practical insight into the realities of franchise ownership.
- The program significantly strengthened my technical and strategic capabilities, particularly in financial literacy and operational planning. These skills deepened my understanding of what it takes to evaluate and sustain a successful franchise business.
- The cohort experience reinforced the importance of community and collaboration in franchising. Engaging with peers, mentors, and industry experts broadened my perspective and emphasized that franchising thrives on shared knowledge.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

In the next 6–12 months, my primary focus is to continue building the foundational skills and clarity needed to move toward franchise ownership. This includes refining my business plan, deepening my financial readiness, and continuing to evaluate franchise concepts that align with my long-term goals and values. In the short term, I will prioritize strengthening my operational and financial competencies, ensuring that I am fully prepared to make informed decisions when the right opportunity emerges.

Looking ahead, my long-term goal is to pursue franchise ownership. I hope to apply the leadership principles, compliance frameworks, and financial strategies learned throughout the FAI program to create a business. Beyond ownership, I aspire to support others who are navigating the early stages of their franchise journey.

To support these goals, I will continue leveraging the resources provided through the FAI program, including the IFA Academy, mentor network, and the broader franchise community. Overall, the FAI program has given me the roadmap to take meaningful steps forward.



Beshon Trusty

Crofton, MD

Seeker

[Dr. Beshon Trusty | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

"Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today."

-Malcolm X

The above quote reflects my sentiments after spending the past six months with the Franchise Ascension Initiative (FAI). Every learning experience, every guest speaker, every franchise presentation, and every discussion with my cohort members represented an additional stamp on my passport as I venture towards a future of franchise ownership.

I joined FAI at the recommendation of a multi-unit, multi-brand franchise owner who I became acquainted with at a community networking event. She described FAI as a great opportunity to learn more about the industry and meet like-minded people. I am forever grateful for that encounter and the gift of FAI that she introduced me to.

FAI exceeded my expectations. The quality of my experience, the depth of the curriculum, the richness of the discussions, the transparency of the guest speakers, and the intentional connections, all allowed me to finish the program with a level of confidence, courage, curiosity, and competence that I did not have when I entered the program!

Key Takeaways

- **Preparation mitigates fear-** With the assistance of a franchise broker, I have explored over 11 franchise opportunities in the past two years. I've had many meetings with franchise developers and reviewed numerous FDD's but never felt ready to make a purchase. After experiencing FAI, I understand that I was afraid to venture into franchising because I didn't know enough. After just six months of FAI empowerment, my understanding of franchising and its many risks, rewards, and requirements has quadrupled, and I am ready to become a franchise owner.

- **There will be difficulties-** Entrepreneurship is hard work, is unpredictable, and will require me to give my all, but I must trust the process. Prior to FAI, that reality induced a fear and hesitation that kept me from my dream of franchise ownership. Now, I can embrace that truth and move forward armed with knowledge, understanding, and a new network of individuals that I can turn to when things get tough.
- **There are not enough Black people in franchising-** While the coursework, presentations, and events we had the privilege of indulging in as the second FAI cohort were transformational, the lack of diversity was glaring. I am grateful for the genius and courage displayed by the Simmons' when they created FAI! I look forward to seeing the successful graduates of the program moving through the various ranks within the franchising industry.

**Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other
What's Next for Me**

I am going to be the owner of an educational franchise! Over the next six months, I will aggressively explore relevant franchising opportunities. I hope to be able to continue meeting with my assigned mentor as I move forward in this journey. But, if that is not possible due to other obligations on his end, FAI has introduced me to many individuals who I believe I can reach out to for advice and/or guidance.

My ultimate goals are to be a multi-unit franchise owner, a speaker at the annual franchise convention, a panelist at the annual IFA Advocacy Summit, and a mentor and presenter for FAI.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“I don't think anything you just said is unrealistic. You can get there, you just need to be realistic about what it takes to get to that level, and how long it may take to get to that level. But you can get there”

-Tom Monaghan, CFE |Chief Development Officer |Green Home Solutions & Central Bark

New Owners



Ranette Bryant

Chesapeake, VA

New Owner

[Ranette Bryant | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

Reflecting on my journey through the Franchise Ascension Initiative, I feel a deep sense of growth and accomplishment, but also that I'm nowhere near the finish line. One of the most impactful aspects of this experience has been the *Profit Soup* series. The materials provided opened my eyes to the intricacies of financial management within a franchise. Not only did I learn how to generate profit, I also learned how to recover from profit loss. Learning the breakdown on how financial statements serve as a mirror, reflecting both the strengths and weaknesses of the operation. This newfound understanding has made me feel much more confident as I prepare to open my first franchise location.

This cohort has also equipped me with invaluable insights into the world of franchising, particularly aspects I was previously unaware of. As a first-time franchise owner, it was eye-opening to realize how many responsibilities fall on my shoulders. Learning alongside the curriculum has been incredibly helpful, allowing me to immediately apply what I was learning to real-world situations. Despite this, I do wish I had taken more advantage of the mentorship opportunities available to me. I recognize that mentorship plays a pivotal role in franchising, and I see now how connecting with someone more experienced could have eased my journey further. That being said, the journey itself has reinforced my belief that franchising is a life-changing opportunity for building generational wealth, provided you stay disciplined and resilient.

The most challenging breakthrough moments for me centered around financing my location. There were numerous references and personal stories shared throughout the cohort that offered me

guidance when I was struggling to secure financing. However, the reality of obtaining resources was much harder than anticipated. Many of the tools and advice I received were presented as easily accessible, but I found that actually obtaining them required much more perseverance and effort than I had initially expected. Yet, the "no's" and the uncertainty of my own experience have only fueled my resolve to push forward, and they've given me a stronger commitment to helping others in similar situations.

Ultimately, what stands out most from this journey is the sense of community within the franchise world. It has been incredibly fulfilling to connect with so many incredible individuals who share the same passion and drive. Franchising, in my view, is not just a business model, it's a community that fosters growth, perseverance, and, most importantly, the chance to leave a lasting legacy. With hard work, discipline, and mental toughness, I truly believe anything is possible in this space.

Key Takeaways

- **Resilience is Key:** As a minority in this industry, it's vital not to take setbacks personally. Rejection or negative feedback, whether it's the first, second, or third "no," should never deter you from pushing forward. Perseverance is crucial to breaking barriers and eventually dominating the industry.
- **Embrace the Learning Journey:** It's okay to not know everything at the start. This doesn't reflect ignorance, but the natural process of growth. Through this journey, I learned valuable lessons about my leadership qualities, identifying both strengths and areas for improvement. How to build others, create meaningful change, and add value to my community and the franchise industry.
- **Profit Drives Success:** "If it doesn't make money, it doesn't make sense". The key to a thriving franchise lies in maintaining effective processes, protocols, management, safety, building a dedicated team, and never becoming complacent. A solid, committed team leads to higher productivity, which ultimately boosts profits and ensures long-term success.
- During one of the summit videos in our curriculum, one of the panelists said something that will stick with me throughout my continued journey. **"You serve by leading, you lead by serving,"** and I intend to do just that!

Action Plan: Moving Beyond the FAI Program and Paying it Forward

- **Commit to Daily Excellence and Resilience**
 - **Action:** Every day, dedicate myself to giving 100%, staying focused on my long-term goals and vision for success. Whether it's facing challenges or rejections, I will remind myself that setbacks are not a reflection of my capabilities but opportunities for growth.
 - **How:** Set daily priorities, track progress, and review long-term goals routinely to ensure I'm always aligned with my vision. Keep a positive mindset and reinforce my commitment through affirmations and self-reflection.
- **Expand Beyond the Initial 3-Store Commitment**

- **Action:** Create a structured plan to expand my franchise portfolio beyond the initial three locations, to include different brands. Research market trends, explore new territories, and focus on scalability.
- **How:** Develop a 1-3 year growth roadmap with clear milestones for financials, expansion, and team-building. Regularly assess the performance of my first three locations and use insights to guide my expansion strategy. Set a goal to add one new location every year.
- **Focus on Building Strong Leaders and Success-Driven Teams**
 - **Action:** Invest in leadership development programs for my team, foster a culture of growth, and prioritize mentorship and training to create future leaders.
 - **How:** Identify leadership potential within my teams and provide opportunities for growth through coaching and education. Implement regular team-building exercises, create a feedback loop, and promote a leadership pipeline from within.
- **Commit to Making a Positive Impact in the Community and the Franchise Industry**
 - **Action:** As I grow, I will remain grounded in my values and commit to being a force for good in the community. I will actively seek opportunities to give back and create positive change.
 - **How:** Develop initiatives that give back to the community, such as mentorship programs, youth outreach, or small-business support. Be a role model for others by ensuring that my success translates into opportunities for those around me.
- **Never Forget Where I Came From—Be the Change I Want to See**
 - **Action:** Continuously reflect on my journey and the people who helped me along the way. Use my success not just to elevate myself but to change lives and make a lasting impact.
 - **How:** Build a personal mission statement centered on “serving others,” and integrate this into every decision I make. Create a foundation for future entrepreneurs who come from similar backgrounds and offer mentorship or financial support when possible.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

Never stop doing your best just because someone doesn't give you credit. "Sometimes it's not about who...that doesn't mean your work will go unnoticed or unappreciated!"

-Angela Coppler, CFE, Primo Hoagies Franchising, Inc.

Additional Highlights

Two quotes that I use to stay motivated throughout life:

“When you want to succeed as bad as you want to breathe, then you will be successful,” and “Hard work, beats talent!”-Eric Thomas



Catrina Burgess

Silver Spring, MD

New Owner

[Catrina Wright Burgess PMP MSPM | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

The Franchise Ascension Initiative (FAI) has been more than a program for me, it has been a turning point in how I see myself as a franchise owner, leader, and builder of legacy. When I first applied, I was excited but unsure. I questioned whether this was the right time to commit, whether I should focus solely on my existing franchise, and whether my voice would truly belong among prospective and emerging owners. I wondered if this journey would bring me closer to the future I envisioned or simply add another responsibility to an already full plate. Over these 27 weeks, I learned that FAI doesn't just teach franchising; it reshapes how you think, decide, and lead.

From the moment I was accepted, my confidence shifted. I realized I wasn't "lucky" to be chosen; I was ready to be developed, stretched, and equipped. The curriculum, conversations, and community worked together to strengthen the foundation I stand on as a franchise owner. I entered with years of business and life experience, but FAI reminded me that growth often requires returning to the basics, unlearning, relearning, and allowing yourself to be a student again. One of my biggest breakthroughs was acknowledging that even with twenty years of experience, I didn't need to perform as though I knew everything. I needed to be honest about what I didn't know so I could grow. That mindset shift unlocked a new level of humility, courage, and readiness to build something sustainable and scalable.

The program reflects core values: education, resources, and commitment. The founders, leaders, mentors, and facilitators did more than deliver content; they modelled dedication. Their presence and support made it clear that our success matters, that emerging and diverse franchise owners belong in this industry, and that we are not expected to navigate this journey alone.

Key Takeaways

1. Personal Growth — Learning Never Stops: This program was a masterclass in continuous learning. From the professors at the University of Louisville to the Profit Soup Team, the depth of teaching and knowledge from history to operations, finance, and brand-building was substantial. But the greatest impact was how it sharpened my decision-making.

2. Franchising Is an Ecosystem, Not a Solo Act: Before FAI, franchising felt like something you simply “jump into.” Now I understand it as an ecosystem with its own language, expectations, and support structures.

→Lessons Learned:

- You don’t know what you don’t know—and that’s okay.
- Resources exist and using them is not only acceptable it's wise.
- Fit matters. Your franchise must align with your values, goals, and lifestyle. FAI confirmed that I invested in the right franchise (Taste Buds Kitchen).

3. Franchising Is More Than Running a Business—It’s an established Business Model: Passion is powerful, but passion without a plan is not enough. A franchise requires discipline: strategy, execution, and performance tracking. Systems matter, and consistency matters even more.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

As I complete the program, I am committed to applying what I’ve learned. In the short term, I will continue evaluating my brand honestly, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and gaps. I will prioritize what needs immediate attention and what can be phased in. This includes refining systems, clarifying roles, and ensuring daily operations reflect the standards required for long-term success. I will intentionally leverage the resources available to me:

- The International Franchise Association community, events, and tools
- My mentor’s time, guidance and experience
- The network I’ve built through FAI—peers, leaders, and supporters

Through discussions on multi-unit development, my interest has grown significantly. I plan to build a financial roadmap for expansion by the end of 2026. Growth matters to me because it aligns with my vision for generational wealth, ownership, and representation—and I recognize that the work begins now.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

My mentor, **James Rousso**, a Franchise Consultant for Chicken Salad Chick, was an ideal match. From day one, he expressed his support, availability, and commitment to my success. Here’s a snippet of his words of reflection.

“It is with a clear vision and a deep-seated respect for Catrina that I provide a moment of reflection. Beyond the surface-level appeal of her passion and drive, I feel as though her interest in this opportunity stems from a commitment to becoming a true student of the franchise ecosystem—one who understands that success in this arena is built on the pillars of partnership, operational discipline, and financial mastery, and I have been more than happy to assist her in her efforts.”

— **James Rousso, Franchise Consultant, Chicken Salad Chicken**

Additional Highlight

In the words of Maya Angelou, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.” This quote captures my FAI experience. I now know better, and I am committed to

doing better as an owner, a leader, and a steward of the opportunities this program has helped unlock.



Aaron Hall

Huntsville, AL
New Owner

Personal Reflection

Although my educational background is in accounting, my professional experience has not traditionally been on the corporate side of business. In 2017, during a break from active-duty military service, I served as a Civilian Pay Supervisor with the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) supporting the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA). This role was short-lived, as I returned to active duty and ultimately retired from the U.S. Army in 2024.

During the final years of my military career, I was fortunate to purchase several properties through multiple relocations. This created my first substantial exposure to entrepreneurship through real estate—managing one long-term rental and one short-term rental property. While I had prior entrepreneurial exposure through selling on eBay during my college years, my involvement in real estate management was significantly more demanding and formative.

When I entered this program, I had already signed a franchise agreement with the emerging quick-service restaurant (QSR) brand, Kolache Factory. At the time, I was unfamiliar with what qualified a franchise as “emerging” within the QSR industry. Although I had thoroughly reviewed the Franchise Disclosure Document (FDD), I lacked a full understanding of the legal, regulatory, and marketing protections afforded to franchisees through government oversight. The early years following the agreement were largely characterized by learning through trial and error, often under considerable emotional and mental strain. Limited access to structured resources left me uncertain and challenged in clearly communicating key components of my business plan, particularly during multiple unsuccessful SBA loan applications.

This repeated cycle ultimately led me to join my local Chamber of Commerce, where I was introduced to the International Franchise Association (IFA) and its Franchise Ascension Initiative (FAI). After being accepted into the program, I anticipated that the resource gaps I had previously experienced would be addressed—and that expectation was largely met. The program began with a comprehensive breakdown of critical financial and operational considerations from both franchisor and franchisee perspectives. The “Talk Soup” portion of the coursework proved especially valuable,

exposing me to new financial concepts such as “break-even plus” and “profit interest.” These insights significantly strengthened my business plan and enhanced my ability to communicate balance sheet and cash flow considerations during lender discussions.

Equally impactful was the opportunity to directly engage with representatives from a wide range of franchise businesses. Comparing lender concerns across QSR and non-QSR models highlighted how variables such as property, plant, and equipment (PP&E), location, and working capital requirements vary by industry and directly influence overall project costs and capital injection requirements. This exposure introduced me to alternative ownership pathways, including Established Business Acquisitions (EBA) and financing platforms such as New Majority Capital. These options offered valuable alternatives to traditional startup funding challenges.

My own business project was no exception. While my initial goal was to secure the additional 15% capital required to meet a lender’s 30% equity injection requirement for a 7(a) SBA loan, the program broadened my understanding of more diverse ownership strategies. One such alternative involved capital partnerships facilitated through organizations like WeFranch, which connect vetted owner-operators with investors targeting specific franchise brands. Although I ultimately declined the opportunity due to brand and location misalignment, this exposure provided a valuable option for future ventures that I had not previously known existed.

Key Takeaways

- Despite my background in financial analysis, I recognized that my discomfort with fully understanding and articulating the nuances of my business’s cash flow projections—particularly concepts such as break-even plus and profit planning—was a significant barrier to SBA loan approval. I learned that regardless of how compelling a product or concept may be, a business owner’s ability to clearly manage and communicate financial performance is essential to both operational success and lender confidence.
- This program reinforced the importance of balancing passion with financial realism. An ideal business concept must align with appropriate timing, market conditions, and return-on-investment expectations. External factors such as market pricing, political environments, and unforeseen life events can introduce delays or detours, and successful entrepreneurs must remain adaptable. The ability to identify and leverage alternative opportunities is often the key to overcoming these challenges.
- Additionally, my exposure to the broader franchising ecosystem was eye-opening. Publications such as Entrepreneur’s *Franchise 500* revealed the extensive diversity of franchise models across numerous industries, including more capital-efficient and internet-based concepts that I had not previously considered. This expanded perspective has fundamentally reshaped how I evaluate future business opportunities.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Unfortunately, the original ownership plan for the Kolache Factory franchise in Huntsville, Alabama was ultimately derailed. Upon completing this program, my intention was to open my first franchise location pending the acquisition of additional equity capital. However, due to a stipulation in the



letter of intent allowing continued marketing of the approved site until SBA funding was secured, the location was leased to another business in early 2026.

Despite this setback, the program has left me confident that my business plan was well-developed and execution-ready. The FAI pitch presentation represented the type of opportunity I had been seeking for several years. While timing and brand flexibility remain critical considerations, this experience has encouraged me to pivot strategically. I am now focused on developing a well-branded, scalable product with replicable operating processes.

I believe I have identified a potential opportunity within an underrepresented manufacturing-related industry that aligns with NAICS codes 31–33. Recent SBA initiatives, such as the Manufacturers Access to Revolving Credit (MARC) program, have made capital more accessible for businesses in this sector. I have already begun early-stage development of this new venture and anticipate completion within the next six to eight months.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“Do you have a tag line?”

-Gerald Steen, Mentor, FAI

Gerald Steen served as both a trusted business mentor and an essential source of support throughout the emotional and strategic challenges of my entrepreneurial journey. His ability to challenge my assumptions while encouraging broader consideration of operational support limitations—particularly between emerging and established franchises—was invaluable. His forward-thinking perspective and extensive franchising experience pushed me to explore industries experiencing growth and offering more capital-efficient entry points. I am deeply grateful for the guidance provided through this program and for mentors like Gerald who empower aspiring entrepreneurs to discover purpose and direction through meaningful experience.

Additional Highlights

This program is exceptionally well-designed and benefits from strong promotion through local and national Chambers of Commerce. However, I would not have discovered it without prior involvement with my local Chamber and Small Business Development Center (SBDC). I believe there is significant opportunity to expand the program into a more technically focused pathway for individuals transitioning directly from high school who are seeking alternatives to traditional university education. While I am not an expert in education reform, earlier exposure to franchising as a viable career path could meaningfully change outcomes for many aspiring entrepreneurs.



Clarence Herry

White Plains, MD
New Owner

Personal Reflection

When I signed my Pool Scouts franchise agreement in October 2021, I embarked on a journey that would fundamentally transform not just my business acumen, but my entire identity as a leader. The Franchise Ascension Initiative (FAI) arrived at a pivotal inflection point in my entrepreneurial evolution—having progressed from \$100K-\$130K in first-year revenue (2022) to projecting \$695K-\$722K+ in my fourth season (2025), I stood at the critical threshold between being a hands-on operator and becoming a visionary business architect.

The FAI experience catalyzed breakthrough realizations that extended far beyond tactical business strategies. Most fundamentally, I began viewing my business not merely as a service operation, but as a wealth-building vehicle with compounding value. This mindset shift—from managing day-to-day operations to architecting long-term enterprise value—has reshaped every decision I make.

Equally transformative was the cohort environment itself. FAI created safe space for vulnerability, where I could openly acknowledge struggles with seasonal labor shortages and confront the emotional complexities of entrepreneurship. Through our WhatsApp group exchanges and weekly calls with industry experts, I discovered that sharing these challenges with fellow cohorts didn't signal weakness—it unlocked collective wisdom and genuine support that continues beyond the formal program.

The program also deepened my financial literacy in ways that transcend basic P&L comprehension. I entered the cohort with LivePlan forecasts and revenue projections; I'm leaving with sophisticated understanding of metrics that actually drive decision-making—Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC) versus Customer Lifetime Value (CLV), 13-week rolling cash flow forecasts, and gross margin analysis across service types. These aren't abstract concepts but daily decision-making tools guiding everything from hiring to territory expansion strategies. More importantly, the peer network has become an invaluable resource for problem-solving, encouragement, and accountability that extends far beyond program completion.

Key Takeaways

- **Leadership Identity Shift:** Success is not measured by how many pools the business owner can clean, but by how the business owner empowers the team to see the ultimate goal at hand. I've learned to build a culture of ownership rather than compliance-driven management, recognizing that my role is to develop leaders, not just manage workers.
- **Financial Sophistication:** Implementing data-driven decision frameworks using CAC, CLV, 13-week cash flow forecasting, and service-type profitability analysis has transformed how I allocate resources. I now view technology investments (CRM systems, automation tools) as growth enablers rather than expenses—a shift that has unlocked operational efficiency and scalability.
- **Strategic Partnership Power:** Through my mentor Toni Harris Taylor's guidance, I've transitioned from a competitive scarcity mindset to one of collaborative abundance. She has been pivotal at this growth stage, teaching me that being involved within my community and establishing authentic relationships creates opportunities that competitive positioning alone never could. Sustainable growth requires ecosystem thinking—leveraging complementary business partnerships, peer networks, and industry associations.
- **Vulnerability as Strength:** Perhaps the most counterintuitive lesson: authentic leadership emerges from honest engagement with challenges, not projecting false confidence. Creating space for team contribution and fostering innovation requires the courage to admit what I don't know and invite others into problem-solving.
- **People Development Priority:** Investing in employee growth through Certified Pool Operator (CPO) certification, Pentair training programs, and clear career progression pathways from part-time technician to Field Supervisor builds both retention and service excellence. This winter season alone, I invested substantially in training for my key staff (Assistant Operations Manager and Repair Technician)—an investment that has already yielded returns in team capability and engagement.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Short-Term Plan (6-12 Months):

My immediate focus centers on scaling my franchise to Stage 6 Growth, targeting \$1.3 - \$1.5 million revenue in 2027. Achieving this requires proactive capacity building ahead of demand rather than reactive hiring that compromises service quality. Specific initiatives include:

- Implement weekly financial review rituals every Monday—analyzing 13-week cash flow forecasts, key metrics (CAC, CLV, gross margins by service type), and making data-informed decisions rather than reactive choices. This discipline ensures we scale profitably, not just rapidly.
- Develop a leadership pipeline in partnership with my Assistant Operations Manager, creating clear career progression paths from part-time technician → Lead Technician → Field Supervisor with defined competencies and development resources at each stage. Building bench strength now prevents bottlenecks later.
- Launch strategic partnership initiative: schedule quarterly meetings with 3-5 complementary businesses (landscapers, real estate agents, property managers) to explore co-marketing and referral opportunities. These partnerships create mutual value while expanding our reach without proportional marketing investment.



Long-Term Goals (2-5 Years):

My vision extends beyond single-business optimization to building transferable enterprise value and enabling potential multi-territory expansion. This requires developing documented processes, strengthening management team capabilities, diversifying our customer base, and creating systems that position the business for eventual sale or transition if desired.

Specific objectives include:

- Scale systematically to \$1.5M+ revenue while maintaining 25%+ net profit margins through operational efficiency, pricing optimization, and service diversification (recurring services, repairs, advanced installations). Growth without profitability is unsustainable.
- Explore additional territory acquisition or a second brand complementary to pool services, leveraging existing systems, team capabilities, and market knowledge to diversify revenue streams and reduce seasonal vulnerability.
- Become an active mentor for aspiring franchisees, giving back to the FAI community and Pool Scouts system by sharing both successes and failures with next-generation entrepreneurs. The support I've received compels me to pay it forward.

Support & Resources:

I will leverage the FAI peer network through our WhatsApp group for ongoing collaboration, continue utilizing Pool Scouts franchisor support and training resources, engage the Pool and Hot Tub Alliance for industry certifications, and allocate 2-4% of revenue to continuous learning—business coaching, industry conferences, and advanced technical training. Most importantly, I'll maintain the growth mindset cultivated through FAI by embracing challenges as learning opportunities and staying connected to the collaborative spirit that defines this cohort.

Additional Highlights

Pool Scouts of Southern Maryland and Annapolis Journey at a Glance:

- Franchise Agreement Signed: October 2021
- First Season Revenue (2022): \$100K-\$130K
- Fourth Season Revenue (2025): \$695K-\$722K+ (Stage 4 Growth)
- 2026 Projection: \$896K (expanding to Stage 5)
- 2027 Target: \$1.3-\$1.5M (Stage 6 Growth)
- Current Team: Office Manager, Assistant Operations Manager, Lead Pool Technicians, Part-time/Full-time Technicians across two territories
- Service Differentiation: No long-term contracts (cancel anytime), Scout Guarantee satisfaction policy, technology integration through personalized reports, charity partnership with Hope Floats

Mentor Endorsement:

“Clarence Herry is the definition of a committed franchisee and a serious business owner. From day one, he has consistently shown up, leaned into coaching, and done the work required to grow. What I respect most about Clarence is not just his drive, but his character. He is humble, coachable, and genuinely committed to building something bigger than himself. During the Franchise Ascension Initiative, Clarence made a powerful shift from operating in competition to leading through relationships. He now understands that real success in business comes from collaboration, community involvement, and building trust with the right people. Clarence is building

a scalable business, but more importantly, he's becoming the kind of leader franchise systems need. I'm proud to mentor him and I fully endorse him as a franchisee who is positioned for long-term growth and legacy"

-Toni Harris Taylor | Owner/Founder | Drastic Results Marketing & Sales Coaching

Personal Philosophy:

"Growth lives in the uncomfortable spaces. Franchising didn't change who I am—it revealed who I've always been capable of becoming. The journey isn't meant to be easy; it's meant to be transformational."

-Clarence Herry | Owner/General Manager | Pool Scouts of Southern MD and Annapolis



Melina Owusu

Bloomfield, NJ

New Owner

[Melina Owusu | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

When I entered the Franchise Ascension Initiative, I expected frameworks and worksheets. What I gained was a sharper way of thinking: franchise ownership is less about passion and more about disciplined execution. FAI pushed me to move from "doing everything" to building a repeatable operating system—one that can run with or without me in the room. The program also reframed how I define leadership. In sales development, momentum comes from clarity: the right targets, the right message, and a consistent cadence. FAI helped me translate that same rigor into ownership—where the "pipeline" is partnerships, the "sequence" is follow-up, and the "close" is a family feeling safe, supported, and confident in their next step. One of my biggest personal takeaways was this: the only way I can truly grow is by hiring. I spent more time than I expected finding the right person, and the process forced me to get clear on roles, expectations, and what "good" looks like. Just as important, I learned to make tough calls sooner—hire intentionally and, when needed, fire fast—so the business stays protected.

FAI also challenged me to goal-set with intention. When the goals are specific, time-bound, and tied to weekly activity, it becomes easier to hold myself accountable—and to coach and manage my team with the same clarity. That structure ultimately creates better outcomes for the families I serve and a healthier, more scalable business. Finally, FAI helped me think farther ahead and more long-term. As I evaluate future franchise opportunities, I now know to pressure-test the business model: is it a recurring-revenue model (contracted monthly revenue) or a transactional, project-based model that relies on constant new customer acquisition? I also know to dig into the real numbers—unit economics, ramp time, seasonality, required owner involvement, and the true working-capital needs to reach break-even. That includes being realistic about access to capital

and what those cash-flow assumptions actually look like in the first 6-12 months. I'm walking away with a clearer due-diligence lens: the questions to ask, the red flags to watch for, and the confidence that comes from making the next move with data—not just excitement.

Key Takeaways

Build the system first: consistent routines, documented processes, and measurable activity standards create stability and scale. Relationships are a strategy, not a tactic: trust is earned through frequency, follow-through, and value (especially with referral partners). Lead like an operator: protect time, focus on the highest-leverage inputs, and let data—not emotion—drive decisions.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Short-term (6–12 months): Strengthen my referral engine by deepening relationships with hospitals, rehab facilities, elder-law attorneys, home care agencies, and community groups. I will standardize my outreach cadence, improve lead qualification and follow-up, and tighten my operational rhythm (weekly priorities, scorecards, and pipeline reviews). The goal is to increase qualified family inquiries and improve conversion through clearer timelines and expectations.

Long-term (12–36 months): Build a brand known for trust, speed, and outcomes in senior placement while expanding capacity through a small, high-performing team and repeatable playbooks. I plan to invest in stronger marketing infrastructure (content, community partnerships, and digital presence), develop leadership bench strength, and pursue adjacent growth opportunities that align with my mission and my market.

Support and resources: I will leverage my FAI network, mentors, and peer accountability; continue skill-building in operations and finance; and use AI-enabled tools to streamline research, follow-up, and content creation while keeping the human experience at the center.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“I’m incredibly proud of Melina Owusu for successfully completing the Franchise Ascension Initiative Accelerator while simultaneously running a multi-unit CarePatrol territory. That level of execution speaks volumes about her discipline, leadership, and strategic mindset. Throughout FAI, we consistently emphasize the importance of being able to pivot—strategically identifying solutions, removing barriers, and creating forward momentum in the face of real business challenges. Melina exemplified that principle at every stage of the program, and her ability to balance growth, operations, and vision is exactly what sustainable franchise leadership looks like.”

-Richard Snow, CEO, Amplify Franchise Financing

Additional Highlights

A moment I am proud of: choosing focus over busyness—implementing a simple weekly operating rhythm that keeps my outreach, partnerships, and family support moving forward, even during unpredictable weeks. I also want to sincerely thank the team behind this cohort. Each program leader and peer has been a genuine blessing to me and to my business. Being able to have personal access to some of the program leaders has been a game changer—it made the learning feel practical, personal, and immediately applicable.



Andrew Oyedeji

Charlotte, NC

New Owner

[Andrew Oyedeji | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

The Franchise Ascension Initiative challenged me to rethink my role as a franchise owner. I entered the program focused on growth and expansion. I soon realized that success is not defined by revenue alone—it comes from financial clarity, operational discipline, and mitigating unnecessary risk. One of my biggest mindset shifts was learning to think like an investor, evaluating decisions through the lens of long-term enterprise value rather than simply building units. This perspective has reshaped how I prioritize opportunities, allocate resources, and drive sustainable growth.

FAI also expanded my perspective beyond my individual business. Learning from experienced operators and industry leaders gave me access to proven frameworks and hard-earned lessons. I shifted from managing day-to-day operations to leading with a focus on capital allocation, territory development, and building an organization capable of performing independently. Experiencing the collective advocacy of franchisees and franchisors reinforced that strong businesses are built on trust, alignment, and brand stewardship at every level.

Most importantly, the program highlighted that impact and performance are inseparable. I leave FAI with a clearer vision for scaling responsibly, creating opportunities for employees and communities, and building a platform that extends beyond units and numbers.

Key Takeaways

- **Systems create freedom.** Scalable systems and clearly defined roles allow leaders to work on the business, empower their teams, and build durable enterprise value.
- **Culture is a competitive moat.** Becoming an employer of choice and aligning teams around shared purpose drives performance, retention, and long-term brand strength.
- **Leverage multiplies impact.** Access to mentors, peers, and proven operators expands perspective, increases asymmetric opportunity, and accelerates disciplined expansion.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

In the next 6–12 months, I will prioritize team development, build scalable systems, and define roles that drive ownership, freeing up bandwidth for growth and cost efficiency. I will expand the fleet to support service operations and implement a localized marketing plan that emphasizes creating community value rather than one-off transactions. These steps will strengthen the foundation of my



current territory while preparing for future expansion.

Beyond the next year, I will launch my remaining territories and build a platform to invest in dynamic, service-based businesses throughout the Southeast and beyond. To achieve this, I'll leverage the FAI and IFA communities, mentors who've navigated multi-unit growth, strategic partners, and capital resources.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“As a multi-unit owner, your job is to develop territories, not execute tasks. Build systems that empower your team and free you to lead.”

- Andrew Seid, Senior Consultant, MSA Worldwide

Additional Highlights

One of the most impactful aspects of FAI was access to leaders who shared both their frameworks and lived experience. Seeing how disciplined systems, strong unit economics, and intentional culture drive consistent success provided practical insights I can implement across my territories. The program also gave me a blueprint for leveraging mentorship, peers, and proven operators to navigate multi-unit growth. When built with discipline and purpose, franchising can provide stable careers, meaningful leadership opportunities, and a path forward for individuals who may not have otherwise seen what is possible.



Ashish Patel

Bee Cave, TX

New Owner

[Ashish Patel, MS, RPh | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

Participating in the Franchise Ascension Initiative helped me step back from daily operations and think more strategically about leadership and growth. I learned to move from reactive decision-making to building systems that create consistency, accountability, and long-term stability.

One of the biggest shifts for me was understanding that growth is not just about increasing revenue, but about strengthening processes, developing people, and creating a culture that supports performance. Mentor guidance and cohort discussions highlighted how leadership style directly impacts team engagement, customer experience, and profitability.

The program also reinforced the importance of reviewing financials regularly, understanding key metrics, and prioritizing improvements. This has given me more confidence in planning, budgeting, and executing with intention rather than relying on instinct alone.

Key Takeaways

- Leadership is about systems and people, not just daily operations
- Financial awareness drives better business decisions
- Clear expectations improve team performance
- Consistent improvement leads to sustainable growth

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Short-Term (6–12 Months): Strengthen operational consistency, improve onboarding and training, and review financials monthly to identify improvement opportunities.

Long-Term Goals: Build a scalable business model, grow into multi-unit ownership, and develop leaders who can operate the business independently.

Support & Resources: Leverage mentor guidance, cohort connections, and continued leadership and financial education.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

After multiple attempts, I was able to connect with a new mentor and look forward to meeting him at the IFA Convention. I am excited to learn from his experience and guidance as I continue my franchise journey.



Additional Highlights

I wish I had the opportunity to be part of this initiative when I first began my entrepreneurial journey and invested in a franchise. Without thorough knowledge or a mentor, I made several decisions I would approach differently today. Being part of FAI has given me clarity, confidence, and a stronger foundation. I look forward to learning from my peers and mentor as I work toward becoming a successful multi-brand, multi-unit franchisee.



Ben Rogers

Charlotte, NC

New Owner

[William "Ben" Rogers | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

Completing the Franchise Ascension Initiative is a profound turning point in my life—the spark that ignites a bold new future. This program didn't just teach me about franchising; it instilled in me a deep sense of purpose. I learned how to dissect every layer of the Franchise Disclosure Document, mastered profit planning through income statements and balance sheets, and I connected with CEOs, SBA leaders, and top brand executives. Each conversation was a window into the heights franchising can reach, and a personal mentor gave me the confidence to navigate any twists to come in the road ahead.

I never imagined how vast this world was. I once thought franchising was a shortcut—easy, passive income. Now, I see it as a journey of grit and determination—one that transforms not just businesses, but lives. I see the possibilities it creates for people, and I feel the fire it ignites in those willing to hustle. Today, I stand on a foundation built not just of knowledge, but of faith—faith in God's timing, faith in my growth, and faith in the future I'm building—one bold step at a time.

Key Takeaways

- Leverage the Income Statement and Balance Sheet to understand the full financial narrative of your business. These reports reveal performance trends, operational strengths, cash position, and areas that require strategic adjustment.
- Maintain an accurate and optimized Google Business Profile to strengthen search engine visibility, improve local SEO performance, and enhance customer acquisition efforts.
- Identify and prioritize the marketing channels that generate the highest return for your specific brand and target demographic, ensuring resources are allocated efficiently and strategically.

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

Over the next 6–12 months, my focus is to successfully launch my first unit under the Fuddruckers brand. With the development process already underway, I will apply the financial discipline, operational strategy, and industry relationships cultivated through this program to execute a strong market entry and build a profitable, sustainable operation.

Long term, I intend to grow into a multi-unit franchisee across multiple brands while intentionally creating pathways for aspiring and ambitious minorities to pursue ownership.

My vision extends beyond personal success—I am committed to becoming a trusted resource and mentor, pouring into others the same knowledge, access, and belief that the IFA FAI poured into me.

Through the Franchise Ascension Initiative, I've built a powerful network of financing partners, commercial real estate professionals, and seasoned franchising executives. I will continue leveraging these relationships to drive strategic growth, secure capital, and scale with purpose as I build a lasting presence in the franchising industry.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

"It has been such a pleasure to be acquainted with and mentor Ben Rogers as part of the Ascension initiative. Ben approaches business conversations with genuine thoughtfulness and depth. He carefully evaluates



decisions, thinks analytically, and demonstrates strong judgment when assessing opportunities and challenges. He is curious, open to learning, and engages with real intention. Our discussions were never surface-level, he consistently wanted to understand the “why” behind strategic decisions, which speaks to his long-term leadership potential. I truly enjoyed our mentoring connection and look forward to meeting him in person at the conference. I hope he keeps in touch and I have no doubt that he will go on to achieve great things, and I wish him every success in all of his endeavors.”

-Michelle Biddick, LLB CFE MFP, Subway



Shania Seibles

Columbus, GA

New Owner

[Shania J. S. | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

A thorough glance at my franchise ownership journey, if I am being honest and transparent, starts with a successful and accomplished physician who knew nothing about this entrepreneurial space and what it actually takes to survive the day to day and create success. I became a franchise owner with MassageLuXe for all the right reasons, with great intentions, and had no idea that this was just the beginning of a life-changing journey. Mistake after mistake, painful and excruciating growth, and amazing experiences in my first 2 years taught me what being an entrepreneur is all about – stepping out on faith and through fear every day to create your dreams. And I felt myself shifting, wanting more from this space, and realizing that I could create the life I actually wanted and I found purpose and joy and passion in something different than medicine. Once I knew that this was the foundation for my franchise journey, I sought to find ways to educate myself as much as I could with how to be better – better mindset, better leader, better coach, better boss, and better franchisee. This brought me to the doorstep of the Multi-Unit Franchise conference in 2025, where I was introduced to the array of diversity within the franchise space and eventually introduced to the IFA and the FAI cohort.

This cohort has been an amazing experience for me in so many ways. The energy amongst fellow entrepreneurs is infectious, inspiring, and so much fun. Meeting other people from varied walks of life, different demographics, interested in different industries and franchises, with different thought processes, all seeking the same entrepreneurial success is an amazing experience to be a part of. Simply experiencing the multitude of different franchises that are even available was eye opening to me, because I naively only looked at ONE! I have learned that franchising can look so many different ways and have gotten so much advice from people at all stages of this journey, that will undoubtedly help me moving forward. My mentor, Jonathan Hill, helped solidify my mindset of growth and success. During this cohort, I opened my 2nd unit and became an actual multi-unit franchise owner and started work on my 3rd and 4th units.

Some of the biggest lessons that I have learned from this process and the multitude of speakers who invested their time to help others is to relentlessly focus on my mindset and resilience, scaling requires the right people and the right processes, and I must learn to command unit level economics and financial analyses of my franchise units. The biggest breakthrough experience during this cohort was the Profit Soup educational sessions and realizing that my financial statements were an afterthought and a task for tax purposes. Realizing that these contained such valuable information and that I can and will be using them on a monthly/quarterly/yearly basis to truly assess the financial status of my units and set profit goals is already a huge change I am implementing currently. I also found the discussion on real estate to be quite eye-opening and will utilize that to make sure I am a less passive component of that process for any unit I construct moving forward.

Overall, my perspective of franchising has changed dramatically since this cohort began. My mind thinks even

bigger now, in terms of multi-unit, multi-brand franchise ownership, and what I am truly capable of in this space and what franchising can mean for me: freedom.

Key Takeaways

- Importance of Business Financial Literacy and Unit Level Economics
- Strategic Growth – Construction/Buildouts and Acquisitions
- Location, Location, Location – How Important the Real Estate Selection Process Truly Is
- Scale or Fail – having 1 unit really is NOT where it's at for me; multi-unit growth, once you have established yourself and your knowledge, is the way to grow and DO NOT be afraid to command multiple brands before you command multiple geographies

Action Plan – Ownership | Expansion | Leadership | Other

As the FAI Cohort wraps up, I am eagerly working my tail off to restore my recently acquired unit to a profitable and successful state while working on additional construction projects for additional units in the Atlanta metropolitan area. I am also reviewing a potential acquisition in the South Florida market that would make an excellent companion to my Downtown Miami location. As one of 8 current franchise owners recently voted to the franchise advisory council for MassageLuXe, I plan to continue to grow as a franchisee, with an overall goal to be their largest franchise owner in the next 3-5 years with at least 20 units. Once I attain 5 profitable units that can then carry forward the ability to utilize equity to leverage future growth, I plan to seek franchise ownership in a 2nd franchise brand yet to be determined. Eventually, I plan to be a franchise owner 100% of the time and fully retire from my medical career, within the next 5-10 years.

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

“Shania represents what real franchise leadership looks like. Through the second cohort of the Franchise Ascension Initiative, she didn't just absorb information — she applied it immediately. From tightening operations and rebuilding culture to strategically selecting non-competing, high-end territories for expansion, she's scaling with intention. At Morrow Hill, we're proud to mentor owners like Shania who think critically, execute boldly, and turn lessons into leverage.”

-Jonathan Hill, Co-Founder, Morrow Hill

Additional Highlights

I am so excited for 2026 and beyond! Franchising has provided me with a unique platform for passion and purpose that I never knew I had. Creating opportunities for myself and others by utilizing the platform my parents provided for me brings a level of joy I find difficult to describe. I know that my parents are extremely proud of the physician that I have become, and also extremely proud that I have stepped outside of my comfort zone and created an even better future than I could have anticipated. More to come!



M. Denise Simmons

Miramar, FL

New Owner

[M. Denise Simmons | LinkedIn](#)

Personal Reflection

Participating in the Franchise Ascension Initiative (FAI) has been one of the most transformative professional experiences of my entrepreneurial journey. While I entered the program seeking clarity and growth as a franchise owner, I left with something far more profound: confidence, conviction, and a renewed sense of purpose in franchising—not just as a business model, but as a vehicle for generational wealth, leadership, and legacy.

One of the most immediate and noticeable outcomes of my FAI experience was a significant increase in my confidence—both personally and professionally. I now have a much deeper understanding of what franchising truly is and what it means to me as a franchisee within a franchise system. Before FAI, I often felt intimidated when engaging with franchise owners who operated multiple units or managed portfolios of 100+ locations. Today, I feel empowered to stand confidently in those conversations, equipped with knowledge, language, and strategic insight that allows me to engage as a peer rather than an observer.

Like many members of my cohort, the most transformative component of the program for me was the Profit Soup portion. While it provided a foundational understanding of financial statements, its real impact was emotional and psychological. For the first time, I truly understood my profit and loss statement—not just as numbers on a page, but as a story of my business. I learned how to project financially, how to interpret profit margins accurately, and—most importantly—that if I didn't like what the numbers were telling me, I had the power and responsibility to change them.

This realization was empowering. I gained clarity around how labor efficiency, system optimization, and strong leadership directly influence profitability. Profit Soup gave me confidence not only in managing my current business more effectively but also in evaluating future opportunities. I now feel prepared—and excited—to engage potential franchise brands for my next franchise investment. I know what questions to ask. I know what red flags to look for. And I am intentionally building stronger infrastructure so that when I open my next Wisdom Senior Care location in South Florida, it will outperform my first. This confidence feels different from before; it is no longer aspirational or passive—it is grounded in data, systems, and strategy.

One of the most challenging yet enlightening lessons I faced during the FAI program, was confronting the question: *Am I in the right business model?* Early in the program, I found myself frustrated as we explored franchise philosophy, franchisor-franchisee relationships, and compliance. These were areas where I had experienced tension within my current brand, and initially, that frustration felt personal. FAI helped me reframe that perspective. I came to understand that these challenges are not personal, but inherent aspects of the franchising model. There are many ways to do business, and I chose franchising intentionally—for leverage, for infrastructure, and for the advantage of operating within a proven system.



The program also helped me recognize that brands exist at different stages of maturity, each with its own benefits and challenges. More importantly, it clarified what I need in my next investment-not just financially, but in alignment with my personality, leadership style, and desired lifestyle. That clarity alone has been invaluable.

Another deeply meaningful growth moment during this journey was the opportunity to bring my oldest son, Christian, with me to Washington, DC for the IFA Advocacy Summit. Watching him engage with high-level political figures with confidence, charm, and grace was one of the proudest moments of my life. That experience crystallized the "why" behind everything I am building. Through franchising, I am not only creating financial opportunity, but also exposing my children to leadership, advocacy, and possibility. As the daughter of a Haitian immigrant mother, this journey represents legacy-honoring where I come from while building a foundation for where my family is going.

FAI also helped me fully embrace a vision that once felt intimidating: owning 100+ franchise units. That ambition no longer scares me. Instead, it excites me. Leaders like Omar and Raynya Simmons created this program to give people like me the tools to not only dream big, but to build responsibly, strategically, and sustainably-while giving back to our communities. Because of FAI, I now believe that vision is achievable.

As a direct result of the insights and tools gained through FAI, my next step is to expand into a second Wisdom Senior Care location in Florida while simultaneously exploring ownership of an additional franchise brand. One of my greatest realizations was my inability to manage labor costs effectively. Through Profit Soup, I learned that labor accounted for 67% of my revenue-severely compressing my profit margins. Understanding why this was happening allowed me to take decisive, informed action.

I implemented immediate scheduling and utilization strategies that I could confidently communicate to my team. As a result, we shifted from having multiple caregivers assigned to a single client to a model where one caregiver serves multiple clients. I also created a new KPIs tied directly to caregiver utilization, which is now actively managed by our scheduling department. This metric is directly linked to profitability, and my team understands both the target percentage and its impact on the bottom line. To reinforce accountability and motivation, quarterly bonuses are awarded when targets are met or exceeded. These changes have already begun producing measurable, positive results-and they have given me the confidence to expand.

In addition, FAI helped me realize that my next franchise investment must align with my lifestyle goals. Through the weekly brand presentations-particularly insights shared by Sam Ballas of ECW Enterprises-I learned that it is not only acceptable, but essential, to evaluate franchises through the lens of lifestyle fit. I now know that I do not want another brand with a heavy labor component, and I am intentionally seeking opportunities with higher margins and less labor intensive. Conversations with Jeff Durdan and other advisors have already begun as I explore brands that align with my values, culture preferences, faith-based alignment, innovation in marketing, and the level of engagement among franchisees.

FAI has been pivotal in my personal growth as a franchise owner and leader. While I wish I had access to this knowledge before acquiring my first franchise, I am grateful to be equipped now-with clarity, confidence, and a deeper understanding of both franchising and myself. This experience has not only sharpened my business acumen, but it has reaffirmed my vision for the future. I am ready for what comes next, CONFIDENTLY!

Mentor Reflection / Endorsement / Quote

"I believe the sky is the limit for you! You have shown that you can follow a system and a model, and that is the biggest factor in being a successful franchise owner"

-Brian Woods, FAI Mentor



"Your dedication to professional development and commitment to excellence, as demonstrated by the significant time and effort invested in this rigorous program, is truly commendable. It underscores your ambition to not only grow your own Wisdom Senior Care Fort Lauderdale location but also to contribute meaningfully to the advancement of our entire Wisdom Senior Care franchise system."

-Carolyn Thurston, Wisdom Senior Care Franchisor/Mentor

"M. Denise Simmons demonstrated a high level of receptiveness to feedback during our session, particularly around streamlining elevated labor costs to improve bottom-line profitability and operating margins. She has shown promising revenue growth through the disciplined execution of her marketing strategy and a clear understanding of unit-level economics. Denise was also highlighted during our discussion with CEO Carolyn Thurston as one of the franchisees well-positioned for future multi-unit growth within the Wisdom Senior Care system."

-Richard Snow, FAI Mentor