

In honor of Black History Month, the PVH Archives highlights a long-forgotten episode in our journey to power fashion forward—for good.

For this story, we go back to 1968, a year of extraordinary unrest, encompassing the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and tumultuous turns in the Civil Rights Movement and the opposition to the Vietnam War. Widespread poverty among Americans of color and the decline of urban areas concerned many, including the new president of Phillips-Van Heusen, Larry Phillips (great-grandson of the PVH founders.) An outspoken supporter of liberal causes, Larry soon looked for ways to integrate progressive ideals into his industry leadership.

At the 1968 annual meeting of the Menswear Retailers of America trade association, Larry addressed the members and challenged them to take action on behalf of minority entrepreneurs who often lacked the capital to effectively start their businesses. He quickly went to work, personally soliciting other apparel companies to amass an extended credit pool of \$20 million dollars available to applicants. In partnership with the Small Business Administration, the MRA's Ownership Opportunities Program provided additional business support, such as negotiating leases, securing financing, store planning, and employment training.

Later that year, the program was cited in Congressional hearings as an exemplary way to rethink economic growth through the empowerment of Black and Hispanic entrepreneurs. As one SBA representative testified, while immigrant groups such as Jews and Italians were able to own and operate the stores where they lived, that equal opportunity had long been denied to communities of color.

Did it work? At least 80 stores opened in the first two years of the program. One of the first was LeMans men's store on Amsterdam Avenue on New York's Upper West Side, already in planning when the essential assistance came. A *New York Times* reporter attended the ribbon-cutting and reported that Larry, "the godfather of the whole program," made the first ceremonial purchase.

From there, it becomes the entrepreneurs' story. LeMans prospered, opened a second location, and launched an in-house label aside the European tailored clothing they came to focus on. "It became a way of life, a philosophy, and we were happy to hear people talk about the LeMans look," co-owner Kermith Morgan told *New York* magazine in 1977. Many stores including LeMans faced multiple hardships of the 1970s but ultimately demonstrated the success and unique vision of Black apparel retailers, if only given that first fair chance.

Negro-Owned Haberdashery Opens With Group's Aid



The New York Times (by Don Charles)

Officers of Le Mans Haberdashery outside new store at 715 Amsterdam Avenue yesterday. From left are Ernest Floore, secretary; Kermith Morgan, president; Carl Davis, treasurer.

Photo from NYT story, Oct. 11, 1968

CLOTHIERS WITH A DESIGN FOR THE BLACK CONSUMER

Two Young Blacks Who Turned a Body-Type into a Business.



Kermith Morgan and Carl Davis, left, enjoy a leisurely moment in their clothing store, Le Mans.

LeMans profile from *Black Enterprise*, July 1975