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“No Such Thing as Can’t”: Dr. Lisa Adams on Her Rise from St. Croix to National Optical Franchise Owner

Recognized as one of the most influential women in the optical industry, Dr. Lisa Adams broke barriers as the first local optometrist to open a national franchise in the USVI, expanded into Puerto Rico, and has awarded over \$500K in student scholarships.

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Dr. Lisa Adams-Mahepath By. **WOMEN IN BUSINESS VI & CARIBBEAN INC.**

Young women who are aspiring to careers in healthcare or as an entrepreneur “should be prepared to work hard,” said Dr. Lisa Adams-Mahepath, co-owner of Sterling Optical, a national chain of retail opticians.

Dr. Adams, born and raised on St. Croix, sat down with host Laura Forbes as part of her “Live with Laura” Women's History Month special programming. She discussed her life and business, sharing insights into her success – as an optometrist, successful business owner, and family woman.

“In 1997 my husband and I purchased the retail chain Sterling Optical, and it happens to be the oldest optical retail in the United States,” said Dr. Adams. With that purchase, Dr. Adams became the first local optometrist to practice in the Virgin Islands. She is also the first to open a branch of a national retail franchise in the territory, and the first local woman to serve on the Board of Optometric Examiners in the Virgin Islands.

A year after the first Sterling Optical location in the territory opened on St. Croix, a second branch was launched on St. Thomas. A few years after that, the couple branched out into Puerto Rico, establishing a foothold on that island for Cohen Fashion Optical.

As Dr. Adams told Laura, running a successful business venture does not come easy. Monday through Saturday, her day begins at 6:30 a.m. By 8:30, she's at the office, with her first patient scheduled for 9 a.m. After her last patient at 4:30 p.m., Dr. Adams must still complete paperwork and catch up on phone calls. “I don't leave the office until about maybe 6:30, so it's 10, 12 hour days Monday through Saturday,” she disclosed.

“You have to be prepared to do it – six, seven days a week if you want to be successful,” Dr. Adams said, using her own schedule as evidence. She also leans into her faith and relies on self-confidence to see her through any challenges she may face. “Don't ever let anyone tell you you cannot do something,” the trailblazing optometrist advised. “As long as you work hard enough for it, you should be able to achieve your goals. There is no such thing as can't.”

A guiding principle for Dr. Adams is ensuring that Sterling Optical is best in class. A host of 5-star reviews online suggests that she is succeeding at that goal. “We always try to treat everyone walking through our doors as family members,” said Dr. Adams, explaining her dedication to quality service. “I always want the best for myself, so being from this island, I also want the best for my community,” she declared.

The commitment to excellence began from the very beginning, as the introduction of Sterling Optical into the territory sent prices for eyeglasses and optometry services tumbling. “When we opened up, we broke a monopoly in the Virgin Islands,” Dr. Adams disclosed. “I'm very proud of that fact.” She noted that because the company is a national chain, they can take advantage of bulk buying to pass on cost savings to their customers.

In 2020, Dr. Adams was recognized as one of 38 most influential women in the optical industry by Vision Monday, the leading industry magazine. The following year, she decided that it was time to give back to her community in a big way.

“My mother was the one that made education a priority in our life, and I feel that because of my good education, I was able to move forward in life.” Wanting to ensure that other young Virgin Islanders had the opportunity to acquire the same “good education” that she did, Dr. Adams and her husband established a scholarship program. “We wanted to plant that seed of education in the community because we feel that is one way to have stable finances, upward social mobility,” she explained. An initial grant of four scholarships in the first year has grown into 14 scholarship awards in 2024, with a cumulative total of over half a million dollars awarded over the 23 years. “We're always looking to improve that,” Dr. Adams said, as she looks forward to the 24th scholarship awards announcement this coming August.

Supported by her husband, who runs the business side of the operation, Dr. Adams said despite her many accomplishments, she remains grounded and connected to her roots by always staying true to herself. “Lisa will be Lisa no matter what,” she asserted. “I’ve had stumbling blocks in my life, but you just get up and go.”

The Live With Laura Women's History Month special series airs exclusively on VI Consortium platforms.

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