

**QUENESHA NICOLE SMITH**  
THE REI MENTOR

“The first day of our flagship program—the six week intensive training—was the first day the governor suggested that everyone stay in and socially distance,” says Quenesha Nicole Smith, owner of Charlotte-based The REI Mentor. Her agency trains real estate investors and entrepreneurs, a program built on a simple offering: an intimate environment.

Smith is one of many North Carolina small-business owners who have recently received an emergency bridge loan through the NC COVID-19 Rapid Recovery Loan program. The program is a statewide consortium of partners—including the Golden LEAF Foundation, the NC Rural Center, and a consortium of nonprofit lenders—working across the state to support small-business owners struggling with the economic impact of COVID-19. The program was launched at the onset of the pandemic and is structured to provide loans with a low-interest rate and no payments required in the first 18 months.



“We’re really focused on small businesses.”

“I started this agency out of passion of mission: I am a third generation investor,” says Smith. “My grandfather was a land developer and my mother was a machinist by trade. I come from a small town with two stop lights in eastern North Carolina. My mother, through her real estate investment, was able to afford college tuition for me, giving me a great education with opportunities that otherwise wouldn’t have been available through her salary or her hourly wages alone.”

**PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS**



When Smith began building a real estate portfolio of her own she was approached by others, women especially, asking, “How can I get started? What should I do?” Instead of working with them all one-on-one, she decided to create a program and curriculum that allowed her to train in a group setting. Since 2015, Smith has been passing on her expertise to new investors.

When the flagship conference was upended by lockdown, Smith quickly shifted the in-person gathering to a digital platform. But she knew she needed resources to make that transition stick. “I knew we had a huge undertaking that we weren’t really prepared for,” says Smith. The REI Mentor employs one full-time and part-time employee each, along with a strong team of independent contractors across the state.

When she learned about the Rapid Recovery Loan program in the *Charlotte Business Journal* she saw a possible bridge to this new strategy and applied immediately. “The lender I worked with from BEFCOR asked, ‘What are you gonna do with the funds?’ I told him ‘I know exactly what I’m going to do: we’re bringing on an online ad agency and we’re going virtual,’” she says.

Smith says the loan has already paid for itself. “Because we have invested in this online infrastructure so it gives us more room to grow. And I think that’s one of the medicines from the poison of COVID-19. Although we had to abruptly change the way we do things, when you look at the silver lining it’s like, ‘ok, we can do things more efficiently, we’re able to see what works and what doesn’t.’ It created a more data-rich process that gives us a chance to grow better.”



*Smith’s loan was administered by the Business Expansion Funding Corporation (BEFCOR), one of the nonprofit Rapid Recovery lenders. To learn more about the NC COVID-19 Rapid Recovery Loan, visit [www.ncrapidrecovery.org](http://www.ncrapidrecovery.org).*