

Successful Applicant: Mila

Awarded £10,000 for Signage, flooring, painting and decorating, and stud wall removal

Interview with our Grant Advisor,
Crover: crover.james@bristol.gov.uk

Tell me about yourself and Mila.

I'm Sam McKay (he/him) and Mila is a plants, homeware and lifestyle store at 30 Park Street, BS1 5JA.

We stock everything from tropical house plants to bath salts and candles made in Bristol. Our focus is circular-economy and sustainability. Keeping the buying power within our local economy, and reducing travel miles.

We're very open about being an LGBTQIA+ owned and operated business.

We originally started an e-commerce business in 2020 during the first covid lockdown. Initially this was a side-hustle to my career as a manager for a restaurant chain. I had nothing to do whilst on furlough, so I took my passion elsewhere!

The e-commerce business grew each day to the point where we've now opened two retail stores in Bristol in the space of 18 months!



How has your hospitality experience helped you in running a retail business?

I've always prided myself in customer service. For me it's really simple. Happy customers = returning customers. Returning customers means longevity of your business.

I'm a very chatty, outgoing person and I've always enjoyed the relationship building side of business. In a restaurant that's easy. Someone comes in, has a meal and you treat it like it's your house and make them welcome. I wanted to translate that into a retail experience. In retail you've only got the customer for 5 to 10 minutes but in that time you've got a chance to build a relationship and give them an experience, not just a transaction.

I don't care if they buy anything. I care about making them happy in our space. If a customer is having a bad day or not feeling great we ask with integrity how they're doing and really care about the answer.

'The team that serves you represents the diversity of Bristol'

How does Mila make Bristol a better place to live for all of our residents?

When I moved to Bristol from the Midlands 14 years ago, the thing that struck me was the friendliness of people and the diversity of the local community. I want Mila to embody those attributes in every aspect of what we do.

The team that serves you represents the different communities of Bristol. With our books we have a wide variety of authors from different backgrounds. We take pride in our city and everyone we come into contact with sees this and engages with our values.





Tell me about your commitment to sustainability

We've got two core principles in our business values that I embedded from day one. Integrity and Sustainability. It's great thinking about sustainability but if you don't have the integrity to back it up it doesn't mean anything.

All of our plants come from sustainability accredited suppliers. If we find a supplier is not meeting our expectations on sourcing or packaging we have that conversation with them. We give them the opportunity to take steps to change but if we don't see this translate into action we stop using them and move on to new suppliers.

We've also worked with Bristol City Council's waste collection team to make sure that every single product that we do dispose of is recycled.

We make all of our deliveries using either electric cars or on bikes, which are carbon neutral.

'If a supplier is not meeting our [sustainability] expectations... we stop using them and move on to new suppliers'

Are there any specific challenges that LGBTQIA+ business leaders face?

There's obvious discrimination. Last week someone stuck a TERF* sticker over one of the Trans Pride flags on our window. Knowing that we still have these kinds of people walk past our store that could potentially come in and endanger my staff is always in the back of my mind. We have a very diverse team in terms of gender, sexuality and ethnicity, and my biggest focus will always be their safety.

I'm so outwardly gay and so outwardly queer at work because I want my team to know that no matter how they present as a person, no matter who they are, however much of a challenge that is for other people on the outside, it should never be a challenge on the inside.

We get a lot of kids coming into the store who pick up our Pride books. They see the flags and start conversations about them, and we see them feeling comfortable in our space. For me I don't care if I sell a single plant that day. We've just made some kid feel seen! We've made them feel legitimised as a person. They realise 'My community is here. They care. They're happy. They're vibrant. They're older than me. I can grow up to be that happy!'

**Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminists believe that trans-women are not women.*

'...my team know that no matter who they are, however much of a challenge that is for other people on the outside, it should never be a challenge on the inside'



'This grant helped us get the doors open!'

How has Mila diversified Park Street?

We've got a massive Pride flag above our front door. As a gay child I went through a long period of my life without seeing people from my community visible in the real world.

I want LGBTQIA+ people to see that they have a safe space, that they are represented on Park Street.

I also want people outside of the LGBTQIA+ community to see that our community is here, and that it is beautiful!

If you buy a plant from one of my team, every time you look at it, you'll think of the experience you had in Mila and how that experience made you happy and feel part of a community.



Visit Mila

30 Park Street, BS1 5JA

Web: milaplants.co.uk

Tel: [07772 266939](tel:07772266939)

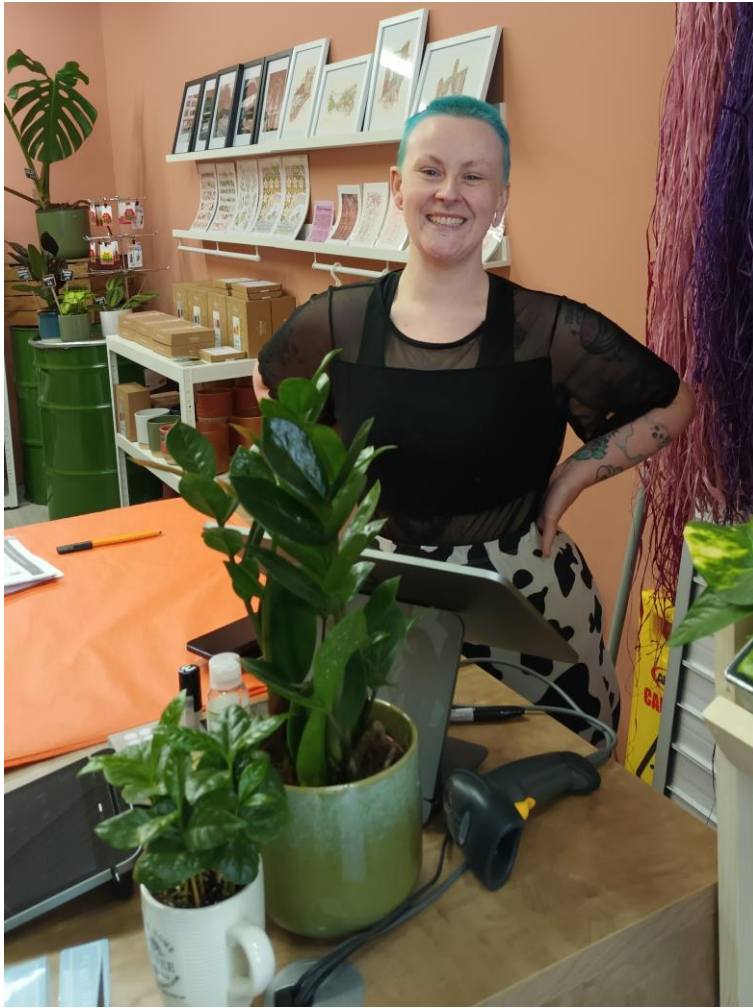


Bonus interview with Store Manager, Gemini (they/them) on next page!

How has this funding helped your business to trade and achieve your goals?

This grant helped us get the doors open! We used the money for a new floor, decorating and removing a stud wall that cut the retail space in half. As soon as that came down we had a great space!

There were big holes in the floor and accessibility is a big priority for us. It's really challenging on Park Street because the buildings are listed and the footpath is quite narrow. Since we couldn't get rid of the front steps we bought a removable ramp and put out a sign and bell asking people to buzz us if they need the ramp for access. Inside we've made sure the layout is accessible to everyone.



Bonus interview with Store Manager, Gemini (they/them)

Tell me about yourself and your journey to becoming a retail manager.

I'm Gemini (they/them). I started working for Mila in December 2020 as a part time sales assistant. I'd been buying plants from Sam for a while and saw a job advertised on Instagram. I already had a full time job elsewhere but dropped them a message asking if they'd take me on for 4 hours per week because the opportunity was too good to say no!

Every Sunday I turned up and did a little shift. My full time job had become very stressful. Sam and I talked and they offered me a promotion as full-time supervisor!

When the opportunity came up for Mila's second shop Sam asked me to be the manager straight away. I've got 10 years of retail experience and was really up for the challenge.

Are there any specific challenges that non-binary people face in the workplace?

Yeah, definitely. People can mean well but I've had occasions in which I've been approached for press features about women in business, and I'm like 'that's great but I'm not a woman so I can't help you with that.' No matter how hard I've tried to tell people what my identity is I've constantly been reduced to a 'woman in business'.

This is the first place I've worked where being misgendered isn't a huge issue for me. I can be me!

'If I'd have seen an openly queer person [like me] in business as a child that might have positively affected the trajectory of my life...'

what's your favourite thing about working at Mila?

Honestly just being respected in my identity as a queer, non-binary person. Working somewhere that not only respects but supports me is very rare. If I'd have seen an openly queer person in business as a child that might have positively affected the trajectory of my life and now I can give that to others.

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