

## Merchants Fund Emergency Grant Helps Neighborhood Boutique Stay in Business

By Bonnie Eisenfeld

Ethan Nguyen, owner of M Concept, an award-winning boutique at 1540 South Street, had big problems starting in January when construction closed his entire block to vehicular and pedestrian traffic. For two months he relied on social media to stay in touch with his customers. Then in March the COVID-19 shutdown occurred. He didn't know how his business would survive.

Just in time, The Merchants Fund provided Nguyen with an emergency relief grant to cover rent and costs to get e-commerce up and running. Now M Concept is taking online orders for same-day pickup or two-day shipping. Jill Fink, the fund's Executive Director, says, "His survival thus far is a testament to his savviness, determination, and ability to adapt—the same qualities that will help M Concept weather the current crisis."

Now Nguyen is helping The Merchants Fund review applications for emergency relief grants for other small businesses. "We've wanted to move towards a participatory grantmaking model and involve past grantees in decision-making," Fink says. "When the COVID crisis happened, we moved quickly from talking about it to making it happen."

According to Fink, The Merchants Fund has made 21 grants as of May 8, and was in the process of reviewing 40 more applications. "As many merchants are hearing that they've been denied funding elsewhere, and the shutdown lingers on, we're getting more and more inquiries and requests. That list grows as the funds dwindle. We expect that our current funds will be depleted by late May or early June."

"The Merchants Fund," Nguyen says, "has been instrumental in helping M Concept weather significant disruption from construction and COVID-19-mandated closure. With the Fund's support, we are looking forward to welcoming customers back into our space soon."

M Concept's offerings include face masks and a gift-box service, as well as clothing, jewelry and accessories. "Our clients love the uniqueness of our product selections that they cannot find anywhere else in the city," Nguyen says. "Our studios can even make a particular item to your specification in two weeks or less."

Since M Concept's opening in 2016, the boutique has won two "Best of Philly" awards from *Philadelphia Magazine* and was listed among the top ten in the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* "Best Shop in Philadelphia" list. <https://mconceptshop.com> (215) 839-9154.

Since 1854, The Merchants Fund has provided support to Philadelphia merchants and small businesses during times of financial need and hardship. When businesses have been at their most desperate, The Merchants Fund has been able to help ease that desperation. You can help The Merchants Fund help other small businesses by sending a tax-deductible contribution. <https://merchantsfund.org/>



Ethan Nguyen in front of M Concept, 1540 South St.



Courtesy of M Concept

M Concept gift box and face masks.