

Boss Ladies

By **Alexis Collins**

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March is Women's History Month and April is Black Women's History Month. As one month ends and another begins, ***NJ Urban News*** spotlights two dynamic women entrepreneurs in Newark.

Recent studies show the U.S. has 12.3 million women-owned businesses. Women of color launched about 64 percent of all women-owned businesses in 2019. Despite gender bias, women business owners continue to create groundbreaking achievements, advocating for gender equality through representation and embodying the true principles of sacrifice, hard work, and leadership.

Two women who exemplify these values are Newark-based entrepreneurs **Alisha Collins** and **Rhona Vega**. Both women have cultivated dynamic programs for children that encourage self-expression, improvement, communication, and opportunity while nurturing their talents and inner passions. Hailing from Brooklyn, New York, Collins is the founder and CEO of ***Creatively WE release***. A nonprofit she started in 2019. The organization offers creative art and dance programs to children and young adults suffering from mental health issues and low self-esteem. "[The nonprofit] is very effective, fun, and creative," Collins said. "Once you tune into that inner part of yourself, you'll discover your talent and what makes you happy, and you'll be healing yourself using natural resources." Collins used her master's in Childhood Development and Youth Studies to combine social services, guided mediation, mindful art and dance, painting and drawing, recreational music, and color therapy into a therapeutic experience. She devises positive and healthy outlets for children to recognize and convey their emotions, releasing underlying baggage. "We're all pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but we create this beautiful image when you put all of us together," she states.

Vega founded ***Parent Matterz*** in 2018. The educational and mentoring company offers comprehensive support systems, college preparedness, internships, study abroad, networking opportunities, and enrichment programs for junior high and high school students.

She was inspired to start the organization after her teenage son returned from a summer business leadership summit for students of color and asked why his friends weren't doing the same thing. "I want the community to pour into [students]," she said. "We need to help each other know these resources exist...There are so many things out here that we don't know about [and] most of them are free." The organization prepares parents and students of color with access to imperative resources and information. For example, college prep courses, scholarship and college applications, recommendation letter templates are some of the resources offered.

Additionally, an internal hub of mentors who can assist students one-on-one with college entrance essays and SAT practice exams is available. Weekly checklists and virtual zoom meetings with students who might be overwhelmed with the college application process are essential. Vega said she wants her company to become a global entity. "I want every young person [and] I want every parent to understand the mindset that we have to have and that we have to be involved with our kids' education," she said. Parents play a pivotal role in their child's education. "Let them say 'oh wow I like this,' and then when you see something that they're super passionate about, foster that, then let Parent Matterz connect them to a mentor," she concludes.

(In part 2, NJURBANNEWS will highlight Vega and Collins' reaction to the historic nomination of Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) and how all women should celebrate).

Unity is the key to success—especially when you are a woman of color and own a small business or are in Corporate America. **Alisha Collins** highlights that besides owning businesses, women of color are

flying planes, opening stores, running for government offices, and voting like never before. Not to mention being appointed to the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS). Earlier this month, Ketanji Brown Jackson was voted to the highest court—making her the first African American woman and 5th woman appointed to the high court. “I think it’s dope. Those barriers have dropped, you’re in the Supreme court, you’re a Vice President, so many of us are entrepreneurs, in media, and all these places that they said that we couldn’t and weren’t allowed,” she said. “It sends a big message that times have changed, and yes, we can.” Collins said one of the challenges she and other women of color face are being taken seriously as a businesswoman of color. “Dream big; there’s nothing wrong with being a dreamer, but it takes work, so if you believe in it enough, it will happen,” she said.

Also inspired by the nomination of Brown Jackson, **Rhona Vega** said the historic appointment is bittersweet. Despite being in 2022, women and Black people are still making firsts. Vega said people like Judge Jackson break color barriers and enforce crucial representation to little girls and young women that “they belong in these spaces and they could do it.” She adds that seeing women of color as the Vice-President of the country and a Supreme Court Justice sends a positive message. “As a {Black} woman, you’ve got to work even harder,” she said.

Collins also manages an artistic dance group of women called **Dance As if UCare**. Some of the women are entrepreneurs. The program encourages expressive body movements, forming a nonjudgmental environment where students practice meditation, beginners hip hop, basic ballet, reggae, contemporary, and other art forms. She emphasizes transparency while encouraging her dancers to enhance their emotional health in nonverbal ways. “There is no competition, again; we all have something to offer; we’re supposed to uplift each other,” she said. “Once you tune into that inner part of yourself, you’ll discover your talent and what makes you happy.”

Vega has an Instagram page called “More Than Enough,” derived from her Delta Sigma Theta sorority line name. She’s also in the early stages of her “**More Than Enough**” T.V. series on YouTube and podcasting platforms, where she will interview phenomenal women of color.

“We’ve got to hang up that idea of being superwomen because that’s not reality. You can’t do it all, you can’t have it all and asking for help is self-care, period.” Internalized misogyny and challenging situations in the corporate world prodded Vega to leave a job in Corporate America, and she vowed never to work for others again. “You should be in a toxic-free environment, and if you’re in a toxic environment, you got to get out of it,” she said. Vega adds that when a hostile work environment begins to affect your health, it’s a sign that it’s time to make a change.

Both women agree that financial support for minority and women-owned business enterprises (MWBES) continues to be the biggest obstacle to the sustenance of businesses of color. “A lot of things work against us in more ways than one, Collins said. For example, she gravitates more toward organizations specializing in crowdfunding for women entrepreneurs and Women of Color-owned businesses by researching the resources, coaching, and funding surrounding those companies. Collins envisions women entrepreneurs of color-producing more foundations that hand out startup grants and promote awareness, something she also plans on doing herself. “If more women of color see more women of color, they’ll start to tap in; that’s the type of generational cycle you want to create,” she concludes.