

# Business in Black: Jazmin Norman, Founder of Proud 2 Be Me

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*NJ Urban News had the pleasure of speaking with Newark, NJ-based entrepreneurs, **Dominique Harris** and Jazmin Norman, who are recipients of The Coalition to Back Black Businesses Grant (CBBB). Launched in the Fall of 2020, this multi-year grantmaking and training initiative founded by American Express and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, in alliance with the nation's leading Black business associations, seeks to assist qualifying Black-owned businesses in post-Covid-19 pandemic recovery and charting a path forward by providing long-lasting mentorship and online resources. CBBB has awarded \$1.62M in grants (\$5,000 each) to 324 Black small business owners across 34 states. We wanted to chat with the ladies about how the grant has made a difference in ensuring their business's longevity and continued success in a two-part series.*

**Jazmin Norman** always wanted to launch a summer camp because that's where her source of happiness was as a kid; she constantly looked forward to making new friends, exploring, having fun, and enjoying the warm weather.

In 2009, Norman brought her vision to life by founding Proud 2 Be Me, a state-licensed childcare center based in Newark, NJ.

What initially began as an extensive summer camp program for inner-city children expanded into Norman's business being all-year round and providing afterschool transportation; homework help; tutoring; art and enrichment courses; virtual learning; and extracurricular

activities, such as dance and coding classes for school-aged kids in the local community.

Addressing children's needs by instilling self-love and positivity, showing care and compassion, devising constructive lessons, providing them with tools they may lack at home, and speaking to them with respect are just a few of the many unique facets of Norman's business.

Norman has always worked with children, whether in pediatric offices or other environments, possessing the ability to bond with them and earn their parents' trust.

"I'm just originally a people person, but I'm very into children," Norman said. "I love children, they gravitate towards me, and it comes naturally, I'm like a social worker, I always go above and beyond."

Offering a multitude of services that will empower, elevate, and nurture underserved children was always Norman's passion and goal, regardless of the income the endeavor generated.

"Proud 2 Be Me is all about building [children's] confidence, [and] having them be proud of where they're from and who they are. A lot of our programming is based on self-esteem, social and emotional [needs], connections to their city, and just providing some of the things that they might not get at school or at home," Norman said.

Like the children she serves, Norman was born and raised in Newark and wanted to center everything around her hometown.

After a decade of finding new locations to host her summer camp program, Norman secured a brick-and-mortar spot in the heart of downtown Newark and officially opened her learning center in 2020.

With the proper funding, resources, and growth, Norman would also love to expand to other locations within Newark.

“When I started looking for brick-and-mortar locations, I didn’t consider anywhere else but Newark, New Jersey; that’s where I’m from, where I wanted to build, and what I wanted to do,” Norman said.

Besides treating the local children who attend Proud 2 Be Me and their families like her own, Norman wants to boost and fortify their self-confidence and mindsets by combating the detrimental stereotypes and narratives that comes with growing up in the inner-city.

“There are so many negative things that people think they know about Newark that I’d like to get out of [the children’s] heads; I’d like to expose them (especially in the summer, that’s one of our goals) to all the beautiful things that’s within their city,” Norman said. “Sometimes they get negative energy about, ‘oh, Newark is this, Newark is that,’ but we have some beautiful things in our city, so we do a lot of local trips.”

Norman notes that one of the benefits of doing the line of work that she does in her community is encountering former participants, “the highlights have always been seeing the children grow up, I can be out and about, and they will always notice me. [They’ll go], ‘Hi Ms. Jazmin, when is this? When is that?’ I love to be local and for them to see me.”

Another one of Proud 2 Be Me’s initiatives is helping children convey their feelings through creativity and expression, which is why Norman hired an art instructor to conduct art therapy with the children as part of the afterschool program.

During the summer, Norman’s learning center arranges a variety of interactive activities that promote health and wellness for the

children; provides nutritious plant-based meals that introduce children to different diets; and offers cooking classes that allow kids to meal-prep and use ingredients on different budgets, therefore aiding them in becoming responsible adults when they grow up.

Although Norman has experienced plenty of milestones in her business, there have also been some challenges, such as funding, staffing, state-mandated inspections, and consistently providing affordable services, especially during Covid-19.

“Everything can’t be free, but I love to provide services for people in need,” Norman said. According to Norman, Covid taught her much about people’s needs, budgeting, and finances. Norman’s business remained open throughout the pandemic, giving kids a safe and sane space to pursue their studies while giving single, essential, and working-class parents a childcare option.

Often, Norman was a one-woman operation, surviving solely off of profits and her funds for years. “I did a lot of work myself during Covid, and it was a lot of free work because I didn’t have enough to pay myself and still do certain things,” Norman said. “It all worked out, I was very proud of myself for just making it through that phase, because that was primetime...We basically opened when Covid exploded.”

As a result of the pandemic, Norman had to reduce her business’s childcare hours, cancel aftercare, temporarily halt the summer camp program in 2020, implement restrictions, order equipment that aligned with Covid safety protocols, and adjust her entire lesson plan, later incorporating a virtual learning curriculum, which proved to be an immense achievement.

Norman and her staff still managed to monitor the children’s educational progress by helping them stay on track with their work

assignments. They ensured that they remained in constant communication and were in good spirits.

Norman connected with many resources to continue fulfilling her business's mission, including the Coalition to Back Black Businesses (CBBB) Grant. She had an American Express business card and was on their website and discovered an ad for the grant.

When Norman found that she had won, she felt nothing but gratitude. "I was very appreciative; I'm always appreciative in general. Minority-owned businesses are rewarded for staying resilient, we don't have as many resources as others, and I feel very honored," Norman said.

The grant money has helped Norman with her childcare center's daily operational costs, such as lead and air quality inspections, to guarantee that the building complies with the state.

In addition to the funds, Norman also enjoys the resources and tutorials the grant offers, which she plans on using towards long-term staff development, paying decent wages, and assembling a solid and qualified team.

"I love the training aspects of [the grant], I have my login and everything and I'm like 'alright when I have more time, I'm just going to dive into this thing and get all the knowledge that I can get from the training that provided,' because I think that's very helpful for us to figure out how to stay afloat because some businesses start, but they don't survive," Norman said.

A major source of pride for Norman is witnessing the children make progress.

"I love to see results. When I go and see that this person has improved socially, [or] students have improved academically because we also have individual and group tutoring," Norman said. "Just to see the

improvement, just to see the appreciation of all the families that are there, of having the flexibility of going to work and knowing that their kids are in good care, I just really feel rewarded with seeing the outcome of how much we're able to help families.”