

By Glenda Lassiter

Shantae Brown is working hard, dreaming big, and surrounding herself with good people. If the power of dreams can predict the future, her success will be phenomenal, and Shantae's future self will one day thank her. She is eager to make a seat at the table for Aqua Green Cleaning Company & Lawn-Care, LLC, her residential and commercial cleaning business. Brown's drive is fueled by the trusted professional guidance of mentors who understand her vision and the competition she faces.

One person with whom Brown has shared that relationship is Kimberly Tucker, a Norfolk-based government and private sector contractor. There's also Lisa Parks, a straight-shooter and business specialist with the Business Development Center at Old Dominion University (ODU). Lastly, Brown also has the push and advisement of Reggie Mack who is a ship preservation CEO in the naval yard industry and an open book when it comes to sharing lessons learned. Brown takes the culmination of their sound teachings and champions tirelessly for Aqua Green, swinging determination like a hammer, learning to reduce any barrier to a manageable challenge.

Brown, wise about the work it takes to reach her goals, is a product of what the [Women's Business Center \(WBC\) of the ODU Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship](#) intended when it designed DreamBuilder. That is a nine-week course that unveils business guidance and connections for a selected class of Virginia female entrepreneurs. [Hampton University's Virginia Workforce Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center \(VWIEC\)](#) gives the WBC support services to ease challenges that might hinder participants from attending the bountiful DreamBuilder session. When COVID-19 became the pandemic that essentially shut down the world, it was a period that opened doors for Brown. With more time to research how to build her dream, she learned of DreamBuilder. She was accepted and granted a free opportunity, with assistance for childcare, through the WBC-VWIEC partnership.

Brown who graduated from that program in 2021 recalls DreamBuilder as a tipping point for her business. Among its many goals, the syllabus prepares entrepreneurs to present their polished business spiels to a panel of local businesspersons. A goal for Brown is to expand her business into Northrup Grumman and the Norfolk Naval Shipyard. Her pinnacle accomplishment would be expansion into all United States Navy shipyards.

"I told everyone what I wanted to do with my business then and in the future," Brown said of that day she described her plans, including related certifications, to the committee. I also explained things I saw a need for and that need to be improved. The feedback included to narrow my target market, and make sure when I'm presenting to people that what I want to do is in the business plan and website."

Brown's certification repertoire includes [SWaM](#) and Section 3, and in the works is the [Small Business Administration's Women-Owned Small Business](#) distinction and the Women's Enterprise Business certification. SWaM is the acronym for Small, Women- and Minority-owned, a distinction for a business that has been certified by Virginia's Department of Small Business and Supplier Diversity and is listed in the SWaM Vendor Directory. The [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Section 3 program](#) pairs certified businesses with contracting opportunities. Also on Brown's must-do list was securing her contractor's license and scoping buildings that could be the home for her business.

The point of those who personally influence her business direction is for Aqua Green to become a shipyard mainstay. There is a long checklist between now and the future Brown envisions, but emphasis must be on the *correct* work. Tucker said she counsels Brown on correctness over beating the clock "because there are things she's got to learn. I want to mentor her through the insurance aspect, the bidding process, the whole gamut." Mack has shared connections for business structure, payroll firms, and accountants, and has preached the importance of comprehending the government's Federal

Acquisition Regulations direct impacts on Aqua Green's supply and service offerings. Like the other mentors, he holds Brown accountable. "I ask for her bucket list, and we'll go through it. I'll give her a deadline and say I'm going to call her in five days. In five days, I'll check in for status."

Said Parks, whose work to usher people through the business-owning process is associated with the VWIC grant: "She accepts responsibility and wants to be held accountable, but you really don't have to tell her things over and over because she's going to take care of it the first time.

"She is going places," Park said, brightly. "She is well rounded and well grounded. She knows what she wants, and she wants to do it the right way. When it comes to business, she wants to learn everything there is. She does not waste your time, she's all business. I don't sugar coat anything for her, but she doesn't need building up because she knows who she is and is just looking for the opportunity to thrive. She does take advantage of every opportunity. She doesn't leave a stone unturned."

With a goal of submitting 50 proposals this year, Aqua Green is working to grow its residential and commercial work. Having personally done labor from sheet metal work to tank cleanings, Brown knows of countless opportunities for talent growth. Her lessons from DreamBuilder better set her foundation to make this possible. "In the DreamBuilder class, I saw they are actually working with me to make sure I get to the next step," she said. "Before DreamBuilder, to be honest, I knew the foundation wasn't laid the way I knew it had to be. I had done some things on my own like business cards and paying taxes. I'd made a few contacts, but I felt like everyone wasn't taking me seriously. After being in the class, I was able to build a much stronger foundation than what I had before. With DreamBuilder, the resources and help are beyond unbelievable. Everything is at your fingertips, but you have to want it and work for it. And, want it as much as you're working for it.

"The advantage of a mentor relationship," Brown said, "is knowing that I'm not alone trying to do things the right way. I don't have any doubts at all that I'm going to be okay, because I have a group behind me making sure I get to the next level."