

# How Toyota's Mentorship Program Fuels Supplier Diversity Efforts

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Rey Grand was only 14 years old when he became paralyzed from the waist down due to spinal meningitis. Despite contracting the bacterial infection and using a wheelchair for mobility, the Boston native didn't let his circumstances dictate his outlook on life. He admits suffering from moments of despair and bouts of depression — believing that his dreams of becoming a professional basketball player and CEO were lost forever. But he didn't give up; instead, he powered through and persevered.

Ultimately, Grand harnessed that same drive and tenacity to fuel his dreams of becoming a business owner. His company, Ray Grand Apparel, joins 44 other businesses that have participated in Toyota's Mentoring Program.

What started as a custom apparel company that provided branded attire for organizations has since pivoted during the pandemic. Its focus is now on empowering people with disabilities through speaking engagements to celebrate them as well as help them overcome adversity.

## **Igniting a Path to Success**

Launched in 2015, the Toyota Mentoring Program is a year-long initiative designed to create a culture that

consistently supports and promotes diverse supplier engagement. It's an opportunity for small- and diverse-business owners like Grand to get hands-on advice, guidance and support from leaders at Toyota whose insights and experience can help take their businesses to new heights.

"We want them to have the best understanding possible of how we conduct business," says Tim Yamada, strategic and operations sourcing manager and supplier diversity manager at Toyota. "From that perspective, I'm talking about our pillars, like Respect for People and Continuous Improvement."

Every year, 10 mentees are selected and vetted through various diversity councils that partner with Toyota, like the Women's Business Council Southwest, North Texas LGBT Chamber of Commerce, Women's Business Enterprise Council West and Disability: IN. Grand's company is a disabled-owned business enterprise (DOBE) that is certified through Disability: IN, which notified him about Toyota's program.

"I received an email about the mentorship program and immediately thought it would be a good idea to seek guidance in my business endeavors," he says. "So, I applied for the mentorship and was accepted."

### **Unparalleled Enlightenment**

Over the course of the 12-month program, Grand met monthly with his mentors, Jamie Watson, national manager of Dealer Relations and Sales, and Ana Meade, director of Global Risk Compliance at Toyota. He would also email them when he had questions or needed advice about his business.

For Grand, everything worked out wonderfully indeed. Thanks to his mentors' guidance, he left the program with invaluable knowledge that will help propel his business endeavors forward.

"My experience with the Toyota mentorship was meaningful," he says. "It was challenging; however, I gained lots of insights on corporate ideology and operations, which helped me make better decisions on how I want to approach my business."



Rey Grand

Grand is also thankful to have been paired with two leaders whom he greatly admires. “These women are very thoughtful and caring souls. I am very grateful to have met them and learned from them,” he says.

Grand’s three top takeaways? Leveraging assets and resources. Being as straightforward and simple as possible. And honing leadership skills.

“The mentorship gave me insight and perspective for profit and nonprofit businesses,” Grand says. “I am currently working on setting up a foundation based on our conversations.”

### **Two-Way Street of Enrichment**

It's not just a learning opportunity for mentees. The program benefits the participating mentors, who learn what these smaller certified suppliers have to offer.

"It's really a two-way learning," says Yamada. "I can tell you a lot of the mentors will say, 'I've learned as much from my mentee as they have learned from me.'"

Grand agrees, "You can learn from corporations, understand business practices and expand your thinking. The mentorship is a two-way street. You will learn from each other and can expect to learn more from experiences rather than seek business opportunities."

Still, the partnership does open potential pathways.

Yamada says that some of the mentors, after working with the companies, will keep these companies top of mind if there is ever an opportunity for their services.

### **Driving Unmatched Benefits**

Putting a spotlight on diverse suppliers by giving them the keys to drive their own paths to success is what fuels this program.

"Hard benefits of mentorship programs like this one help mentees leverage the experience and know-how of their mentors by generating operational savings and mentored execution of growth strategy," says Yamada. "Soft benefits include personal growth in executive presence, expanded networks and leadership. In addition, mentors were able to exercise innovative and entrepreneurial muscle via the program, further strengthening their leadership capabilities."

As for Grand, he's excited about the future. And as a company, he strives to advocate for and motivate people with disabilities.

"My goal is to continue to impact the disability community to keep going and growing — by being a resource of inspiration," he says.