

Jalan Ward squints into the sun as he surveys the Rogers Family Skate Plaza in Apex, NC. He was waiting for an opportunity to drop in when a small nasally voice broke the chaos.

“Hey! Watch out, I’m going!” a young boy with a scooter, maybe 7 or 8 years old, yells as he prepares to launch himself off the ramp Ward is standing on.

“You got it! Go go go!” Ward steps back and hollers in return.

The young scooter-rider rolls down the ramp in front of him, axles rattling as he rapidly picks up speed. He then launches himself an impressive few inches off the ground directly in front of Ward.

“Hey, that was pretty sweet man! You had some speed on that one too.” Ward shouted in approval. The boy then approaches Ward and asks to stand on his skateboard, which he gives up without hesitation.

“Do you have a skateboard?” Ward asks.

“No, my dad broke it, but I really want one,” the boy says as he cautiously prepares to roll down the small incline in front of them. He does so, prompting more words of encouragement from Ward.

Nearly 15 minutes passed as the boy rolled from left to right across a flat section of the park. Ward waited patiently for him to finish, occasionally offering pointers. He didn’t interject and ask for his board back, he couldn’t care less about skating as long as there was a kid who needed a little push in the right direction.

Jalan Ward is many things. He is an entrepreneur, an artist, a skateboarder, a philanthropist, a scholar, a mentor, and a friend to all. It’s difficult to pin down exactly who Ward is. Even he says it’s a near-impossible task. But one thing is certain. Ward is someone with an intense drive to help others, and he will stop at nothing to do so.

Ward is the CEO and creative director behind Proud Black Brand (PBB), “an inspired brand with the purpose of inspiring others.” At first glance, PBB may simply look like an online clothing company, but PBB is far from just that. Ward’s goal with Proud Black Brand is to inspire others through stories, ideas, and community engagement. He does this by creating clothing that tells the stories of black historical figures. He organizes events to uplift the community, like the first annual “Kidz SK8 Day,” a skateboard drive and instructional opportunity for children. PBB also posts articles on black culture and historical figures through a forum on its website, The Writer’s Block.

“I would say that we’re like a community organization, disguised as a clothing company,” said Chris Tazewell, a friend of Ward’s and a writer for The Writer’s Block. “Like the merchandise, the shirts, the product that we sell, it’s really just our way of telling a story.”

Because stories bring people together. They instill hope. They inspire.

Ward’s story begins on the southeast side of Raleigh, where he was raised in a single-parent household by his mother, Tonya Wilkerson. He watched her work long hours to provide for him and his younger brother. Her strength and selflessness inspired Ward, and when he was old enough, he began doing what he could to help around the house.

When Ward’s mother was working, he watched television and searched the web, learning about anything he could get his hands on. He found inspiration in everything from architecture to symphonies, to skateboarding, and the more he learned the more he craved. Ward was also passionate about athletics. He looked up to his coaches because they listened to him and took the time to offer him guidance, whether it was on or off the field.

One time when Ward was playing basketball he badly chipped one of his front teeth. Instead of getting it fixed, he decided to wait out of nervousness; fearful that fixing the chip would somehow make it look worse. Years passed until it was time to take his senior high school portraits, then Ward finally made a trip to the dentist’s office.

“When they did it and it came out perfect, I think I almost cried in the chair,” Ward recalls. “I told him ‘thank you,’ over 100 times and everything. I was just smiling from left to right.”

Ward’s dental visit left such an impact on him, he asked to shadow one of the dentists out of curiosity. When he saw how important the work was, and how impactful it was on people’s lives, he knew exactly what he wanted to do for a living; he wanted to make others feel the same way he felt in that dentist chair.

In college, Ward pushed hard into dentistry. He was president of the dental organization, he frequented dental conferences, and he even organized educational events for kids to teach them proper dental hygiene. After graduating in 2019 with his M.S. in biology, all he had left was to pass the Dental Admissions Test (DAT) to get into dental school, until something happened that changed the course of his life.

One night around three in the morning, Ward’s eyes snapped open and he reached for his phone, it’s screen illuminating his then-girlfriend’s bedroom as he opened his notes app. He frantically typed out a name: Proud Black Brand. Thoughts poured out of him uncontrollably, and his fingers struggled to keep up.

“Black History Picture Puzzles. ‘Curating Timeless Pieces.’ Website Content,” they wrote.

Eventually, Ward gave up on sleep and left the bedroom to avoid waking his girlfriend, opting to pace in the living room instead. Others might wake up, jot a few notes down, and go back to bed, but there was no calming the waves in Ward’s mind.

“I just couldn’t believe that everything was just spilling out of me,” Ward said. “It was like an out-of-body experience, and it was something that I needed to take seriously.”

When the sun crept above the horizon and the birds began to sing, Ward ventured back to bed and tapped his girlfriend on the shoulder.

“I think I have it. I think this is going to be the one that is going to change lives.”

The rest of the week passed in a blur, Ward’s days and nights were consumed with thoughts about his potential future, and at the end of the week, he filed the paperwork to make Proud Black Brand an LLC. Except there was one problem, he still had to pass his DAT.

“Truth be told, I don’t even think I cracked open that study book,” Ward laughed. “I tried, I think like, a couple of weeks later, but I think I just had the realization like, look this brand, man, It has my mind right now and I can’t even focus.”

Due to low test scores, Ward wasn’t accepted to any dental programs, then in 2020, COVID-19 swept the globe and Ward lost his job. Refusing to accept defeat, he decided to bet on himself. He put dental school on hold and he put everything he had into PBB. But Ward’s drive to help others didn’t fade away, he was just going about it his own way.

“With dentistry, the fact that you’re able to impact so many different people’s lives, shift their lives, give them confidence, and then be able to give back and serve underrepresented communities, it’s literally the same dynamic,” said Ward

When Ward told his mother, she was upset at first given all the work her son put into dentistry, but she was still supportive. She observed from afar as Ward took step after step to make his dream a reality.

“When I sat back and watched him design his own page, I watched him do his paperwork and just everything that consists of being a business owner. I saw the characteristics and I said, ‘Well, he’s got it,’” said Wilkerson. “The work just got better and better and better, and I said, ‘Well, if it’s his passion, and it makes him happy, I’m gonna support it.’”

As a way to give back to his mother and other black women in his community, Ward dedicated PBB’s first merch campaign to the celebration of black women. Ward partnered with Girls For a Change, a Virginia-based nonprofit dedicated to empowering black girls, and donated 25 percent of their site-wide sales to solidify his commitment.

PBB began to take off, and just four months after its launch the first clothes made it into stores. But Ward believes the best is yet to come. In the near future, he plans to open the first official PBB store, but it won’t simply be another store, just like PBB isn’t simply another clothing brand. There may be retail up front, but the back will be a communal space for having discussions, hosting panelists, and teaching people valuable skills like graphic design and public speaking. There may even be a space to take off your shoes because Ward just wants people to “feel included and feel at home.”

“I would say the brand is really focused on being an extension of the black community,” said Tazewell. “He’s not using it as an opportunity to put himself on a pedestal.”

Ward wants his story and the stories shared by Proud Black Brand to be a beacon of inspiration for the black community. He wants to show others that they don’t have to put themselves in the box handed to them. They can explore, and choose their own path.

“I want to say his passion is what separates him,” said Jaland Swain, a friend of Ward’s and a collaborator with PBB. “Passion for the community and the passion for what he’s doing. I think a lot of people will change gears if they weren’t finding anything profitable... I think Jalen would still be doing the same exact thing.”

“I could care less about money,” said Ward. “My biggest thing is that if I do not leave an impact on this world, I did not do my job.”

And Ward’s impact is already showing.

On Thursday, Nov. 13, Ward received an email saying that a billboard he designed in April was up at last. In a frenzy, Ward threw down his phone, jumped in the shower and bolted out of the house. He set his directions for the intersection of Atlantic Ave. and Hodges St. in Raleigh, then peeled out of his driveway at a speed that would rival Doc’s DeLorean.

As he neared his destination his mind began to race, so he changed his music from jazz to Playboi Carti, and cranked the volume as the distorted 808s of Stop Breathing rattled his car. When Ward finally reached his destination, his hair stood on end as he gazed up at the sprawling cursive words before him. “Proud Black,” they read, and in that moment, Ward couldn’t be more proud.