

Providing a Safe Place for Children

SMALL BUSINESS: Onika Miller Focuses on Childcare – and Education

By
KAREN PEARLMAN
February 24, 2023



The bold and busy set up inside My Space & Early Learning Time daycare center in Lemon Grove colorfully matches business owner Onika Miller's theme of "Children Learning In Their Space." Photo courtesy Onika Miller

Nearly 20 years after she came to the U.S. from Guyana seeking greater opportunities to learn, grow and work, Onika Miller is doing all of that.

Miller earned associate degrees in small business management/accounting and business studies from San Diego City College in 2009. Miller later earned both a bachelor's degree in finance in 2012 and a master's degree in organizational leadership in 2014 from Ashford University.



Onika Miller
Owner
My Space & Early Learning Time

Now nearly 10 years later, with two teenagers at home, Miller, 44, heads two businesses in San Diego County. But the former credit union employee isn't working in finance – she has found career satisfaction in the field of childhood development and education.

Her businesses, My Space & Early Learning Time, LLC, and Carter's Family Childcare & Early Learning Academy, are focused on the care and education of children, and preparing the youngest hearts and minds to become happy and successful in life – much as what she has done for herself.

“I love what I do,” Miller said.

To that point, Miller is currently taking classes at Saddleback College in early childhood development as she seeks to expand her learning and become better adept at providing assessments and evaluations for parents to help their children progress in documented ways.

Carter's was founded in 2012 and is a California Department of Social Services-licensed childcare center for children up to 12 years old. The business is run out of a spot in Lemon Grove kept private to protect the children in the care of the staff of four.

Almost 10 years later, Miller founded a second child-focused business: My Space & Early Learning Time.

My Space & Learning Time, which opened in 2021 at 8079 Broadway, is a licensed Lemon Grove-based daycare center run like a preschool.

“Children learning in their space and time,” Miller said, describing her operating philosophy. “Our part is giving children the environment they need to thrive so they feel valued.”

Miller said the center also includes an important piece often missing from many others like it — family engagement.

“Parents don’t just drop off their child and leave. We aim to reach parents who don’t think their children are ready for school,” Miller said. “But (young) children are ready to learn. Learning can happen in any forum, but mainly at home. The child’s first teacher comes from home. Kids are anxious and excited to learn. We work with parents to show you how your child should be learning. There is structure in early learning, and we are there to help with that.”

The business’s aim also, Miller said, is to give children developmentally appropriate learning tools, exploration, play and experimentation along with age-appropriate furniture, equipment, materials and supplies. Miller said My Space & Early Learning Time also integrates diversity and cultures in its learning environment.

Miller gives much of the credit to her success in the second businesses to the independent nonprofit Community Development Financial Institution Accessity. Formerly known as Accion San Diego, Accessity provided a loan, workshops “and pointed me in the right direction of the right people to talk to.”

Miller worked in banking for a decade before she felt pulled elsewhere and realized that educating children had become a calling. She said that after she had her first child when she was 27, her career at a local credit union became less compelling, and she realized that her heart was going in a different direction.

“I was always a customer service person,” Miller said. “I never saw myself in the education field, but I did a 180-degree turn. I remember going to my child’s childcare provider in the morning and spending time with the kids doing stuff around the daycare center so my son would get settled in and feel a sense of being comfortable.”

She said the daycare center owner, Claudette Dublin, noticed Miller’s ease in the classroom and asked her if she’d ever considered working in the field. “She said, ‘I think you should think about it,’” Miller said. “And I took it to heart.”

Miller initially attended childcare classes at a local YMCA and continued with more training sessions for childcare workers.

“Early learning has been my passion for a very long time,” Miller said. “I have dedicated a lot of time to this. We can help shape the future when we are able to take of the early basics of life for children.”

She said that “just as adults want to make sure we’re heard,” children want the same thing.

“They’re just mini people just coming up,” she added. “They also need to feel secure, welcome, appreciated and valued. We make sure they feel safe, that they can show their emotions and be safe with that and give them the environment they need to thrive.”