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Holding the License Ourselves: The Black-Owned Licensees Rewriting the HBCU Merch Business

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There is a difference between being the picture on the product and being the name on the license. For decades, Black culture supplied the picture — the style, the slang, the homecoming energy — while the license, the royalty contract, and the retail shelf belonged to somebody else. The most important development in HBCU merchandise is not a sneaker. It is a small class of Black-owned companies that went and got the license themselves.

Start with the student who became the standard. **Tahir Murray** launched **Legacy History Pride (LHP)** in 2019, as a Howard University student, funding his first samples with money earned DJing and hosting campus parties — a founding story this publication, run by a DJ, prints with respect. LHP is a family-owned, Black-owned brand, and by reported accounts it now holds licensing partnerships with more than 30 HBCUs, including Howard, Morehouse, and Spelman. Its own give-back page states the mechanism plainly: through official collegiate licensing agreements, a portion of proceeds from every LHP collegiate sale benefits the respective college or university. When Chris Paul wore LHP during the 2020 NBA playoffs, the sellout that followed was not just a fashion moment — it was royalty-bearing product, designed by an alumnus, moving at national scale. Murray went on to win Pharrell Williams' Black Ambition Prize in 2024.

Then there is the graduate who walked her license into stores that had never carried one like it. **Ashley Jones**, Norfolk State University class of 2015, founded **Tones of Melanin** in 2017. Norfolk State's own account credits the brand with roughly 40 HBCU clients, and describes it as the only HBCU brand created by an HBCU graduate sold at Fanatics, Belk, and Dick's Sporting Goods — making it, in the university's words, the only Black- and woman-owned HBCU company in any

of those stores. Read that sentence twice. The barrier was never talent, and it was never demand. It was the door. Jones got the licenses, did the paperwork, met the retail standards — and the door opened onto the same shelves the majors use.

And there is the founder who treated the license itself as a public lesson. **Lanny Smith** of **Actively Black** — a premium Black-owned athleisure brand — explained to his own customers in September 2025 why some schools were missing from his HBCU collection: the brand had applied for licensing agreements with every HBCU, and only the schools that granted permission are represented, because using a school's trademark without a signed agreement would be illegal. His advice to frustrated alumni was the whole licensing gospel in one line: don't email the brand — email your school, and ask them to grant the license. Actively Black's officially licensed HBCU line sells today alongside collaborations as large as the Harlem Globetrotters' centennial fashion program, facilitated by IMG Licensing.

Three companies, one blueprint. **Get the license. Pay the royalty into the school. Hire from the community the clothes are about.** That is what ownership looks like when it is done with paperwork instead of slogans — and it is the standard against which every future "celebration" collection from a global brand should be measured. When the big names come to the yard, the question is no longer whether they showed up. It is whether the deal they signed looks anything like the deals these three signed when nobody was watching.

This is the beat this publication is assigned to cover at the show: the licensees, in the room, on the record.

Sources

- Legacy History Pride (shoplhp.com), "My HBCU Give Back" — family-owned, Black-owned collegiate apparel brand; "through our official collegiate licensing agreements, a portion of proceeds from every LHP collegiate merchandise sale benefits the respective College or University."
- Black Therapy Today / Forbes reporting on Tahir Murray — Howard alumnus; LHP launched 2019 from his dorm room, funded by DJing and campus parties; Chris Paul's 2020 playoff wear and the sellout; licensing partnerships with more than 30 HBCUs; Pharrell Williams' 2024 Black Ambition Prize.
- Norfolk State University, "Now Is Our Time — Ashley Jones" (nsu.edu) — class of 2015; Tones of Melanin born 2017; about 40 HBCU clients; "the only HBCU brand that is created by a HBCU graduate that is sold at Fanatics, Belk Stores, and Dick's Sporting Goods."

- Essence, November 2, 2026 — Tones of Melanin as "the first Black- and woman-owned HBCU collegiate apparel line carried in major national retailers like Dick's Sporting Goods, Belk and Fanatics"; LHP in the same homecoming survey.
- Actively Black (activelyblack.com) — "Official Licensed HBCU x Actively Black Collab" product line; founder Lanny Smith's September 27, 2025 statement that the brand applied for licensing with every HBCU and only licensed schools appear in the collection.
- Harlem Globetrotters, October 21, 2025 — Actively Black named a centennial-season fashion collaborator; collaborations facilitated by IMG Licensing.

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