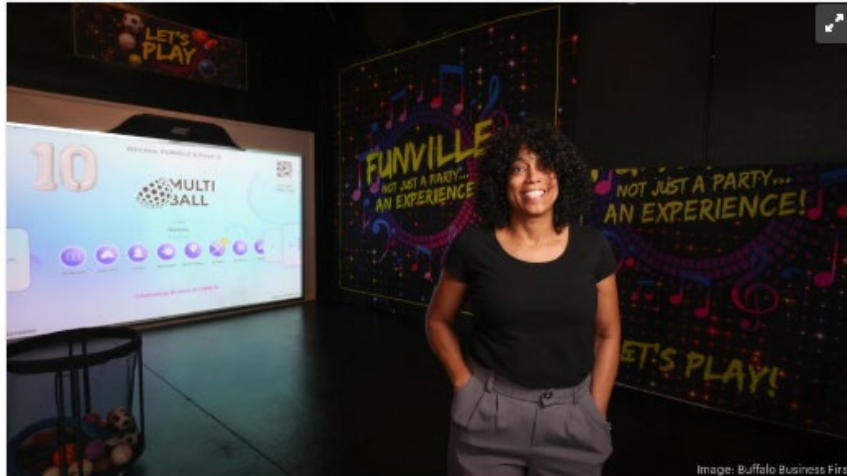


Nurse turns lifelong business dream into 'fun' reality



Yolanda Fonville-McKnight, owner, Funville Family Fun Center
MARK MULVILLE

By [Jacob Tierney](#) – Reporter, Buffalo Business First | Apr 30, 2026

Story Highlights

- Yolanda Fonville-McKnight opened Funville Family Fun Center in Buffalo.
- The University at Buffalo's M&T Bank Emerging Entrepreneurs Program helped her launch.
- She secured a \$240,000 Small Business Administration loan to open the business.

Yolanda Fonville-McKnight has always had a passion for entertaining and an entrepreneurial outlook.

When she was a kid she set up carnivals in her backyard. As an adult she's hosted concerts in her basement and set up a photo booth rental business.

"I've always had a side hustle," said Fonville-McKnight, who works full-time as a nurse.

She dreamed of establishing a brick-and-mortar business, and now she has: Funville Family Fun Center recently opened at 68 Tonawanda St., Buffalo. The private party rental space includes immersive arcade games and virtual reality rides.

“I began going to amusement conventions, entertainment conventions, restaurant conventions,” she said. “I think that just really sparked me, because once you walk into that building, you see all the excitement and things there. I just felt like a kid in a candy store.”

She’s been working on establishing a business for nearly a decade. She credits a long-running program organized by the University at Buffalo School of Management's Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership with helping her get to the finish line.

“I’ve met a lot of wonderful people, a lot of great connections, and I believe that those connections and those people are what got me here today,” she said.

Fonville-McKnight enrolled in UB’s [M&T Bank](#) Emerging Entrepreneurs Program, which has been running for 22 years.

“We take founders and provide them with a nominal-cost program that goes for 10 months and gives them an opportunity to learn all the basics of running a business,” said Susan Steffan, executive director of the Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership.

According to the [U.S. Small Business Administration](#), half of new businesses close within five years. About 90% of those that participate in the center’s programs last that long, according to data from UB.



People play a VR game at Funville Family Fun Center in Buffalo.

MARK MULVILLE

One of the most notable businesses to go through the program is [Top Seedz](#), which went from a home business to an operation with about 75 employees, selling crackers and seeds in Wegmans and other major retailers.

The program takes founders with a fledgling business — typically 40 a year — and teaches them how to build a business plan, manage their financials and market their services. It

also connects them with others who can help them take their business to the next level, people like Shannon Johnson, business banking relationship manager at M&T Bank.

M&T sponsors the program, and Johnson and other bankers work with program members to help connect them with banking resources. Fonville-McKnight approached Johnson after graduating from the program and asked him to be her mentor.

“When we met in person for the first time after that, she showed up with her vision board and her business plan, and it was as thorough as it could possibly be,” he said. “She did a lot of the work that I would normally kind of guide a client with.”



People play a VR game at Funville Family Fun Center in Buffalo.

MARK MULVILLE

He helped her secure a \$240,000 Small Business Administration loan through M&T and helped her find a home for Funville.

Fonville-McKnight took on travel nursing assignments to save up enough money to launch the business.

Funville can be rented for private parties and is open for public events. It serves food and offers a variety of games and activities, including virtual-reality roller coasters, a light-up dance floor and karaoke stage, and arcade games.

Fonville-McKnight encouraged other would-be small business owners to reach out to people who could help.

“I would tell them to do their research, get a mentor if they can, because I got like two or three different mentors through the program that helped me,” she said.