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CEO WOMAN

Building a Legacy

Cheryl McKissack Daniel is the CEO of one of the largest minority-owned construction companies in the United States

BY ERIN CHAN DING

CHERYL MCKISSACK DANIEL HAD only to rip open her presents as a young girl to know the future awaiting her.

She and her twin sister, Deryl McKissack, woke up on Christmas mornings to gifts of Leroy Lettering sets, T squares, and all kinds of drafting tools.

When it came to deciding on a degree at Howard University, where McKissack Daniel and her sister went to college, “I had no choice,” she says, laughing. “My father actually charted our classes for our first couple of years at Howard.”

Her father, William DeBerry McKissack, put them on the path to dual degrees in architecture and engineering, she says.

Fortunately, McKissack Daniel found that math came to her with fluidity. Civil engineering, which she chose over architecture, became her forte, so much so that she got bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the discipline.

Her inclination toward engineering positioned her to take over the family business, McKissack & McKissack, which at 116 years old, is one of the oldest minority-owned construction firms in the United States. McKissack Daniel’s grandfather, Moses McKissack III, founded the firm in 1905 with his brother, Calvin McKissack, and her father took it over in 1968. McKissack Daniel traces their family’s ancestry to an enslaved man, Moses McKissack, whose owner taught him how to make bricks.

As president and CEO of McKissack & McKissack, a construction management and general contracting services firm, McKissack Daniel employs a staff of about 150 people in New York and Pennsylvania and has contracted more than \$50 billion in construction in the past decade. (Her sister, Deryl McKissack, serves as president and CEO of an architectural firm based in Washington, DC, also named McKissack & McKissack, which led the building of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial on the National Mall.)

McKissack Daniel’s New York-based McKissack & McKissack has applied its construction management expertise to some of the most recognizable projects in the five boroughs, including the new Studio Museum building in Harlem and Pacific Park Brooklyn/Atlantic Yards/Barclays Center (including the infrastructure to make way for the arena). This year, she expects to break ground on one of McKissack & McKissack’s biggest projects: Terminal One of New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport.

Diversity Woman spoke with McKissack Daniel about the magic of Howard, speaking out, navigating through a pandemic, and the responsibility she feels to create opportunities for communities of color.

Diversity Woman: Our first female, Black, and South Asian vice president, Kamala Harris, went to Howard University. So did Chadwick Boseman, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Zora Neale Hurston. You have two degrees from Howard. What about Howard makes it so special in shaping leaders, particularly leaders of color?

Cheryl McKissack Daniel: We consider it the Black Mecca. You know, Howard was very good for me in that growing up [in Nashville], from I would say pre-K to 12th grade, my twin sister and I went to an all-white private school, and we were among the first four or five Black people to actually go to that school. Our teachers didn't look like us either.

At Howard, all of my teachers pretty much were of color. That's a real impact when you are a student and your teachers look like you, and they're entrepreneurs and leaders in the world. The other thing was the students. Howard at the time was 99 percent Black. You were among all of your peers, and that was a new experience for us.

All of that matters: the positive energy, the positive affirmations you get from your teachers, and the leadership at Howard.

DW: You've been a part of projects that are especially significant to Black communities. What pride or honor or responsibility comes with that?

CMD: I would say a lot of our contracts are predominantly in communities of color. When we first started working in Harlem, we couldn't help but think, "This is Harlem, USA!" And there is a certain responsibility that comes with working in a community that's your own.

It was probably 2005 when I started working in Harlem, maybe earlier. One day, I saw all of these individuals coming in, ages 20 to 60. I didn't know what they

were doing. The secretary said, "They're all applying for jobs." And I'm like, "You're kidding me." The number was overwhelming. We had, like, six or seven thousand people, just in Harlem, looking for work.

They had a desire to work—maybe not all the skills—but absolutely no opportunity. So we were able to put in place a workforce program with Harlem Hospital. There has to be a desire to develop that relationship with Black contractors.

DW: As a CEO, when do you decide you have to take moral stands or speak out about equity and justice?

CMD: You know what? I feel like I have been speaking out my entire career, bringing awareness to the fact that I am a Black female with a qualified firm. That may sound simple, but in the communities where we work, a lot of the white counterparts do not believe that Black firms are qualified. Even though I will speak out anytime, anywhere, I prefer to talk about why we need to have MWBE [Minority and Women-owned Business Enterprises] programs.

DW: This past year, the Covid-19 pandemic has upended everything. How have you led through this?

CMD: It's the whole digital transformation pivot that we all had to take. Fortunately, we started our process before New York shut down. We started getting in place all of the IT requirements and policies and procedures so we could work at home.

Most of our work was deemed essential because it was infrastructure, hospitals. The things that weren't essential were, like, K through 12 [school buildings] and higher ed. Some of those projects were put on hold.

More than that, it's going to shape our future. Our office-space lease is up next year, and so we are in the process of redefining what our workspace will be. It will probably be some hybrid of what we're doing right now. To me, that's great because this adds more of a life-work balance to people's lives. If I finish my last call at 6 p.m., I can cook my dinner

instead of starting my commute at 7 p.m. and getting home at 8:30 p.m.

DW: You're in a sector that's male dominated and white dominated. How do you navigate a world where there are so few people who look like you? What's your encouragement for women of color?

CMD: I first would say to women of color that construction is a worthwhile pursuit. It's not going to be an overnight thing, but in time, you will get there. As for any other business, you have to get qualified, and you have to get the right training and experience. You have to identify with someone and say, "If she can do it, I can do it."

DW: What did you learn from your mother, who took over McKissack & McKissack without any construction experience after your father had a stroke, about how to lead a business?

CMD: I learned from her how to trust my gut, that my intuition is not lying to me. I also learned from her perseverance. She did not quit. She's 90 years old. If she's trying to get something done, she will not sleep until she gets it done.

She was not qualified. But she took what she had, and she made the most of it. And what was that? That was a master's degree in psychology. Well, guess what? That helped her read people and learn how to deal with them. She became an excellent business developer and manager.

DW: How have you been able to hire a high percentage of people of color, more than 50 percent, at your firm?

CMD: You know what? I have never stood up on a podium and said, "We need to diversify!" Where I started was senior management. I diversified. And then it all trickled down from there. **DW**

Erin Chan Ding is a freelance journalist based in the Chicago area who writes features and profiles and covers national news, and who's passionate about exploring race, identity, equity, and justice.