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BUILDING A LEGACY

CONSTRUCTION
BOSS
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McKISSACK
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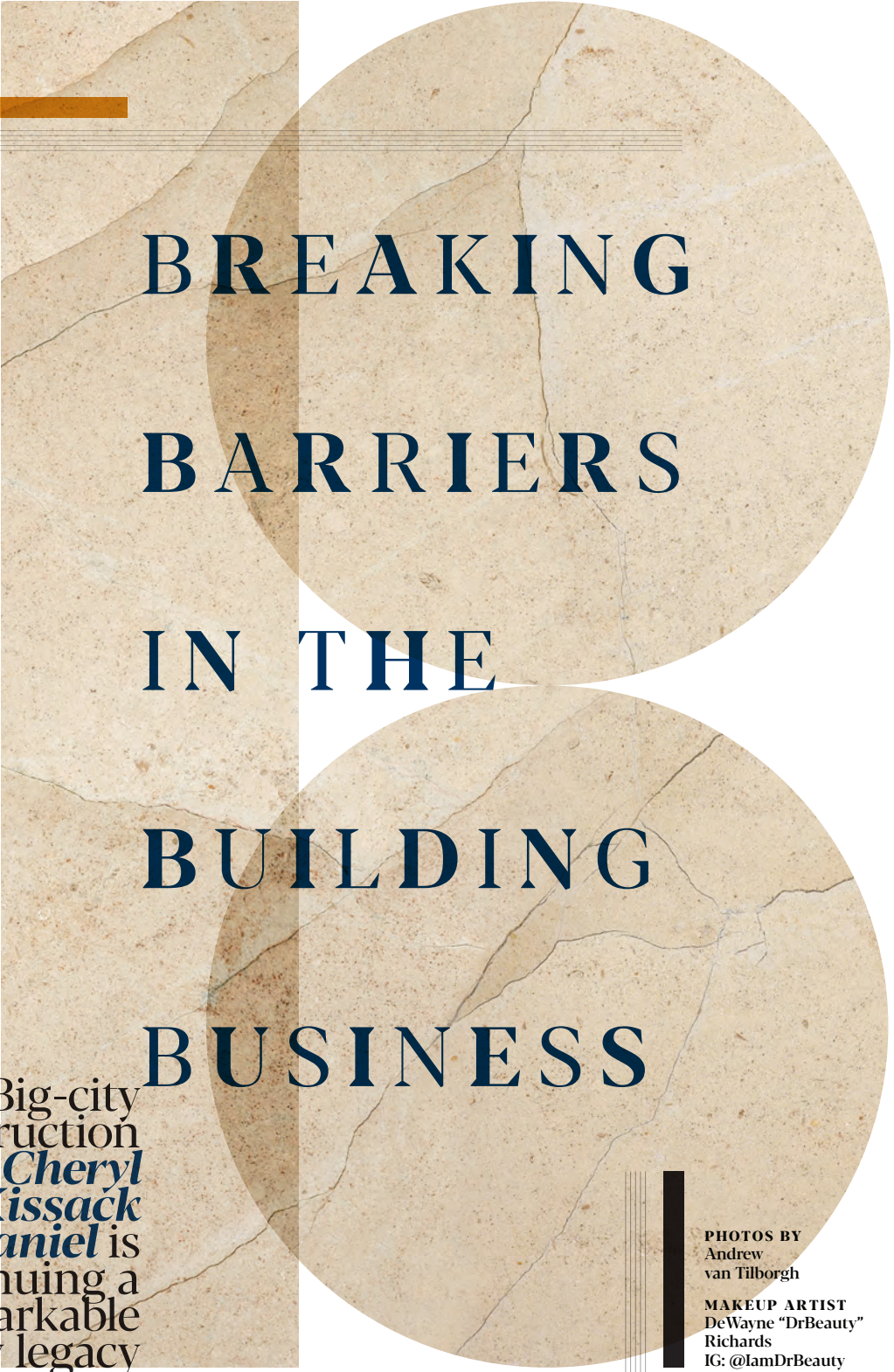


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CHANGE THE WORLD



**BREAKING
BARRIERS
IN THE
BUILDING
BUSINESS**

Big-city
construction
boss **Cheryl
McKissack
Daniel** is
continuing a
remarkable
family legacy

PHOTOS BY
Andrew
van Tilborgh

MAKEUP ARTIST
DeWayne "DrBeauty"
Richards
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SOUNDS ALMOST FAR-FETCHED. The forthcoming Paramount+ drama *Construction* will center on a successful fifth-generation Black, female construction boss and “the hard-knuckled, male-dominated world of a trillion-dollar industry in which she navigates big money; city and state politics; and above all else, family.”

But the series is actually inspired by the very real world and life of Cheryl McKissack Daniel, who is president and CEO of the largest and oldest Black- and female-owned design and construction company in America. McKissack & McKissack was formally established in 1905, but its roots go back more than two centuries to the founders’ grandfather, Moses McKissack, an enslaved African who took his name from his owner and became an expert brickmaker.

Today, as a major player in one of the nation’s largest building sectors, the company’s high-profile projects have included the Pacific Park/Atlantic Yards Barclays Arena, Harlem Hospital and The New Terminal One at JFK Airport in New York City and Philadelphia’s school system. McKissack Daniel’s 20th-floor offices on New York’s

Avenue of the Americas may be a long way from the business’s humble beginnings in Tennessee, but she keeps a reminder of the many obstacles the family has had to overcome close by. On the wall hang the architectural licenses awarded her grandfather and his brother in 1922—the first ever given to Black men in the country, but not without a fight.

The brothers were repeatedly denied permission to take the exam, until they finally persuaded the governing body to relent. “I find this story just so interesting because there are still government officials today, in 2022, who want to deny Black people opportunities,” says McKissack Daniel.

The brothers saw their business grow despite the challenges of the Depression and racism. In part that was due to the loyalty and dedication of their work crews, “and, I also have to say there was definitely the hand of God,” McKissack Daniel adds. “They built churches at cost and that was their tithing. They built 6,000 churches and that’s what I believe the longevity came from, because most companies can’t make it to the third generation. I think it’s like 4%, and here we are, the fifth generation.”

Playing builder, not house

McKissack & McKissack has fingerprints on plans and physical structures all over New York City. But despite the company’s growing and impressive portfolio, McKissack Daniel still faces skepticism from time to time. She speaks of dealing with construction firms working on big projects that claimed they had to do all the early work because those hired to comply with minority- and women-owned business (MWBE) requirements “can’t be creative. And it just sends me to the moon. I say, ‘No, the law in New York State requires MWBEs for every phase of the project—every part.’ If you don’t start capturing MWBE points in the beginning of a project, by the end

you will be behind and unable to meet the MWBE goal.”

McKissack Daniel’s parents were a major influence. As children, she and her twin sister didn’t get dolls and tea sets to play with, they got train sets and T squares and “everything associated with building.” They would accompany their father to work on Saturdays and walk construction sites with him. “So, we were very embedded in the business,” McKissack Daniel says. “I believe that our parents were guiding us to be who we are today.”

After attending majority-white private schools in Nashville, the girls wanted to go to Ivy League schools with their friends. Their father told them they could go anywhere, but he would only pay for his alma mater—Howard University. “He loved historically Black colleges and he put his money where his mouth was.”

That turned out to be “a wonderful Black experience,” McKissack Daniel says. “It was extremely grounding. For the first time, I had Black teachers and they really cared about my well-being. At Howard you became the children of the teachers, you weren’t just a number. . . Howard prepared me for everything.” McKissack Daniel did eventually get her Ivy League experience, however. After earning her bachelor’s, she was encouraged to stay on and get her master’s, which involved a consortium with MIT.

McKissack Daniel took over running the family’s legacy business in 2000, leading its involvement in New York’s big Atlantic Yards development project that included making way for the infrastructure to build the new Barclays Center and major reconfiguration of the Long



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Island Rail Road yard and subway. The company’s first contract was around \$230,000. By the time work was completed, it had earned some \$20 million.

There was pressure to perform, including getting a bridge in place in time for the Jay-Z concert opening the new arena in 2012. “We were working around the clock, but we got it done,” remembers McKissack Daniel. “I hadn’t slept in a week.” But she relished the challenge. “Because,

if it’s in the construction arena, I can figure it out: I’m a civil engineer. It’s all about solving problems and that’s what I like to do.” Part of her can-do attitude she attributes to her Howard experience, laughing that “if you can get through the bursar’s office and register for your classes at Howard University, you can do just about anything.”

Learning from Mom

If any single person paved the

way for McKissack Daniel’s business success, it would be her mother. Leatrice McKissack had been a stay-at-home mom for almost 20 years when her husband, who was running the company, suffered a debilitating stroke. She was advised to sell. But she was determined to keep the business going, even though she had no experience, and this was in the day when women couldn’t get bank loans.

By this time McKissack Daniel had left Nashville for larger businesses elsewhere, “vowing never [to] come back and run the family business.” She went to Weidlinger Associates, an engineering firm that designed silos for missiles, and then the large Turner Construction Company. “And then one day, my mom called up my boss and informed him, ‘Cheryl is quitting today.’ And then she called me and told me, ‘You are relieved of your duties [as] of Friday at five, and you need to fly to Nashville.’ And I have been with the family business ever since.”

McKissack Daniel runs it now from New York, however, a city she fell in love with at the age of five, when her parents took her there to see a play. “From that point on, I knew I wanted to live here, have my professional career here, and so I feel as though I’m living my dream. At five I said, ‘I’m going to work in one of those tall buildings in Manhattan.’ I didn’t know I was going to build them.”

McKissack Daniel credits her mom (who was named National Female Entrepreneur of the Year in 1990, and for whom McKissack Daniel is now caretaker) with teaching her to sell business. She

recalls going with her to meet with the head of construction for a school district in Alabama. Mom told her that she, McKissack Daniel, would be making the sales presentation.

“So, this guy’s sitting there, his head is down—won’t look up at me,” she says. “His face is like a roadmap. Of course, he’s a white guy and I’m scared to death, but I go ahead because I’m more scared of my mother than I was of him, and I give the McKissack pitch.”

The man never looked at her once, but when McKissack Daniel had finished he told her he would love to do business with her firm. “I was shocked,” she admits. When they got back out to their car, her mother told her, “That’s the lesson for you: never judge a book by its cover. You are an expert in who you are, and you go up and you tell everybody what we do. I don’t care if you think they’re listening. I don’t care if you think they’re interested. You have your TED Talk, so to speak, ready, your elevator pitch. And you tell everybody.”

That’s what McKissack Daniel did when she moved to New York, setting up a desk in a friend’s office. “I told everybody my story. I told them about my ancestors. I didn’t have one project in New York City, but I had projects all over the South, so I told my story and people loved the fact that, in America, people like us can overcome.”

The art of focus

How would McKissack Daniel boil down her hard-earned business wisdom? Three things, she says—education, confidence and focus. “Education is important because it gives you competence,” she says. “No one can talk to me about construction in New York and I am not able to go toe to toe with them, because I’m educated. There have been times when I wasn’t as strong as I am right now in my confidence, but I always was able to get up every morning, shake off a bad situation, a bad conversation, a bad comment and say, ‘Cheryl, you can do this.’”

CHERYL MCKISSACK DANIEL: MY WAYMAKER

My mother. She did not have a degree in engineering or architecture, but she was a smart businesswoman. She was very strong. As much as I did not like her telling my boss that I was quitting [so I could go and work with her], it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me, because I came back to the family firm.

Having the skills and know-how is the foundation for confidence, because “you have to believe in yourself,” she continues. “I have to sell to my bank, the bonding company, my employees, my board, and then I have to sell business to the outside. And so that confidence factor is very key.”

McKissack Daniel’s last point may surprise some who think that highly successful people can do it all. “I don’t focus on a lot of things,” McKissack Daniel admits. “I have one or two things I’m trying to do, period, and I put all my eggs in that basket.” Right now, that’s the big new Hudson River tunnel between New York and New Jersey. “That’s what I put all my energy [into]. I attend every seminar, I talk to everybody who has anything to do with it and I let them know I’m here for business.”

There was a time when she wanted to “check the box on a bunch of things for the day,” but no more. “Hey, 90% is still an A,” she says, “and so that’s what I go for. And I go for the 20% that’s going to make 80% of the difference.”

And what would she advise her younger self? “Don’t waste your time hanging out, Cheryl, because New York is busy,” she begins with a laugh before pivoting. “But then, I





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have to say that’s how I met a lot of people, by going out, by going to the events, by going out to dinner.”

She would add something else. “The future is bright. The opportunity is huge. Just stay in your lane and stay in the game. I don’t worry about a whole bunch of the small stuff. I have learned all those things work themselves out, but you have to stay focused on what you’re doing. You’ve got to shoot for the stars. You

may not get one, but you’ll be with the moon, right?”

That kind of approach increases your capacity, she observes. “What is interesting about what happens when you have all this responsibility, it’s kind of like you’re able to take on even more responsibility. If I could get through having toddlers and at the same time running a business. . . whatever else was out there that I needed to do, I got through it.”

Sometimes that meant washing clothes at midnight and still catching the 6 o’clock train for a meeting the next morning. “So once I got through that everything else is easy,” she says. “My kids are grown, my husband and I are in a groove and so now everything, it’s easy, but back then, yes, it was long nights. . . Women, we persevere.” ●

From an interview with Louis Carr