

# GROOMED TO LEAD: THE NEXT GENERATION OF PRESIDENTS

*By Damon Autry*



E

ntrepreneurship, with its allure of independence and the chance to have one's level of desire be the only impediment to success, has been at the core of the African-American community since the 1600s. Indeed, African Americans have attempted to forge their own economic liberation through business activities for centuries. Both enslaved and free Africans in America seized every opportunity to develop enterprises and participate as businesspeople in the commercial life of a developing new nation. It's not a surprise, then, that African American entrepreneurs today, particularly here in Detroit, have adopted the capitalistic ethos that is apparently embedded deeply in their DNA.

Success stories abound of how many entrepreneurs in the Motor City have established thriving enterprises that provide quality goods and services to consumers. Whether it's the automotive industry, media, hospitality, human capital, construction, or a myriad of other fields, African Americans in Detroit have fashioned economic viability by way of developing prosperous business ventures that, in some cases, employ hundreds of people.

There's a common theme that is echoed by many entrepreneurs in Detroit—a theme that most often reveals itself in a vision that is much larger than what is immediately in front of them. This theme speaks of creating a business legacy that is passed on to the next generation. It's a noble gesture to be sure, but nobility is not their chief aim. Rather, it's about becoming self-sufficient, and it is this autonomous vision that leads most Detroit-area, black-owned businesses to orchestrate a succession plan that keeps the enterprise in the family. And no, these heirs to whom they pass the business aren't necessarily coddled, privileged individuals who expect life's road to be devoid of challenges and difficult circumstances. These are eager professionals, hungry to forge their own path and continue the successes that their parents set in motion.

Before a succession plan can be executed, however, it's obviously a necessary step that the offspring of these business leaders have a role in the organization. There are numerous examples of how the newer generation is preparing for the inevitable move to the corner office. For starters, Walter Douglas became a minority owner of Avis Ford in 1986 but eventually became majority owner in 1991. The Southfield dealership sits on Telegraph and 12 Mile Road, one of the busiest intersections in Southeast Michigan. His son Mark began working for the company in 1997 after a six-year stint as an electrical engineer at General Motors. It was always expected that he, along with his brother Edmund, would join the family business. Mark held various positions in the company—porter, salesman, and assistant general manager—before ascending to his current position as president of Avis Ford. While his dad remains a presence in the business as its chairman and CEO, it is Mark who essentially guides the day-to-day operations. “It's truly a blessing to work in the family business,” Mark says. “Ultimately, it's an opportunity to stand on the shoulders of someone who came before me and be able to offer that same opportunity to my children, and my children's children.”

*“...I want to continue to help this (business) grow so that one day my kids can take over. I don't want to let my dad down.”*

*Stephanie Burnley*

David Burnley Sr. started Devon Industrial Group in 1998 and has clients in the automotive, educational and healthcare industries. The appeal of having his children involved in the business was so great that he decided to name the company after his son. Devon and his sister, Stephanie, are heavily engaged in the business. Specifically, Stephanie has been in the business since 2007, and there are indeed plans for her to eventually earn the responsibility of teaming with Devon as

they build on the legacy established by their father. “My dad has developed a solid business in the construction industry that I don’t want to see it fail,” Stephanie says, “so I want to continue to help this grow so that one day my kids can take over. I don’t want to let my dad down.”

*“I took pride in working for the family business, and my father saw me as an asset. Working there was a privilege.”*

*-Elizabeth Mays*

For more than 60 years, Mays Printing helped meet the printing needs of both individual consumers and businesses alike. Founded by J. Caulton Mays in 1946, he later passed it on to his son, James. Over time, the company carved out a solid niche in the printing field. They concentrated on education, government, political campaigns, book publishing, and they essentially had the obituary market cornered in the city. Elizabeth Mays, daughter and granddaughter of James and Caulton, respectively, literally grew up in the family business. She shadowed her father and grandfather and developed a great interest in learning more. “I took pride in working for the family business, and my father saw me as an asset,” she remembers. “Working there was a privilege.” Mays Printing closed in July of 2011 for restructuring purposes, but there are plans for the business to come back. Meanwhile, after consulting with family, Elizabeth started a new venture, MCS Multimedia. This firm was started to continue the momentum that Mays Printing had established and maintained for more than 65 years. MCS has many of the same customers that Mays had, and in addition to printing, it offers services such as advertising, consultations and graphic design.

Bankable Marketing Strategies is a full service, integrated marketing communications agency started by Sharon Banks in 1998. The company boasts clients in the public and private sector, delivering everything from brand identity strategies, to brand redevelopment, public relations, crisis management, video production, web development, social media and other concepts. After a nine-year stint performing various marketing duties at other agencies, Sharon’s daughter Erica joined BMS in 2011 as its director of communications. Any talk of an imminent succession plan is many years away, but that still doesn’t preclude mother and daughter from broaching the subject. “Every day (my mother and I) talk about ways to transition the business to me,” Erica says. “I look forward to that day when she’s ready to take more of a backseat role and allow me to be more at the forefront.”

There are many other companies in the area where succession plans are indeed part of that business’ vernacular. It’s important to the forward-thinking visionaries who started these enterprises that their children not only become part of the business, but also become so entrenched in the everyday activities of the organization that preparation for taking over the reins becomes an inevitable fact. Jim Jenkins III of Jenkins Construction, a company started by his father Jim Jenkins Jr; Lorrone James of James Group International, a company started by his father John James; Linda Swanson of Swanson Funeral Home, and Sharon Madison of Madison International are just a few additional businesses that are either being groomed for the next generation to lead or has already taken place.

Ironically, though, statistics show that only one-third of all family businesses are successfully transferred to the next generation, and only 13 percent are transferred onto the third generation. This is a sobering fact, not only for the families, but also for the nation's economic health, because much of the country's economy is made up of small, family-owned businesses. Mark Douglas of Avis Ford has an idea why those numbers are surprisingly low. "I think a lot of that has to do with the next generation not really being passionate and motivated to take over the business. If the kids are forced into the family business, that has a way of creating some problems down the line." Erica Banks agrees. "You have to determine if the family business is really your passion, or are you just taking over because mom and dad want you to. I actually started pursuing an education career first but decided to transition to marketing. So in my situation, this is something that I love and wanted to do."

*"Every day (my mother and I) talk about ways to transition the business to me, I look forward to that day when she's ready to take more of a backseat role and allow me to be more at the forefront."*

*-Erica Banks*

Business succession plans for African-American enterprises are a vital part of not only the American economy, but the vibrancy of African-American communities. It's important, however, to have a succession plan in place. Of the 2.1 million black-owned businesses in the country, less than 15 percent have a viable succession plan. That number must increase if we are to better insulate our families and communities from possible economic struggle. But through it all, despite the documented challenges of business succession, despite the economic turmoil that may surface, African Americans in Detroit have forged ahead to create and build thriving enterprises that have become the envy of all. ■

*Title page photo of David Burnley Sr. provided by Bill Sullivan*