

Mike Ward Project Management Solutions Group

In 2005, when Mike Ward's brother called to tell him that his mother was dying, he immediately got on a plane from Phoenix to St. Louis. "My mother ended up holding on for a few more months, and we had the opportunity to talk out some issues, so I was at peace when she left," says Ward. "I had been here so long that anything I had going on in Phoenix was over."

So Ward decided to build a career in St. Louis, but finding a position to suit his qualifications was more difficult than he anticipated. "My experience was usually as good as or better than the person interviewing me," he says. "One person in particular said: 'I can't hire you, but I can do business with you. You're a minority and a vet. Go to the secretary of the state office and get an LLC. Then come back and we'll do business.' So out of frustration, that's what I did."

That's how Project Management Solutions Group, a full-service project management organization, was born. After struggling for a year and a half to break the ice in St. Louis, Ward was finally given a chance by a major player. "I went up to



Mike Ward

Bruce Holland of Holland Construction Services at a [Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois] meeting, and he said, 'Let's do business,'" says Ward.

Ward then became the prime contractor on a St. Louis area VA Medical Center, and that's when PMSG hit its stride. Today Ward shares his experience by mentoring other black entrepreneurs. "When I began to receive awards and recognition, I started getting calls from other African-American business owners asking me on how I did what I did," he says. "I would say, 'Why don't you come to my office and we can talk?' I am spiritual, so I think blessings are to be shared, not coveted. Otherwise they will stop coming." ■

Kim Davidson ET Superior Services

On Aug. 1, 2000, Kim Davidson received a call from her father, Earl Thomas, about an opportunity to clean an office building. Although Davidson was working for Blue Cross Blue Shield as a customer service manager and her father was retired, cleaning was her father's passion. "When I got off the phone with my dad, I prayed and said: 'We don't have a company. I don't know how to run a business. My dad has a bucket and a mop. Help us to do this,'" she says.

Davidson, her father and her sister, Kelly Fields, earned the cleaning contract, which happened to be with World Wide Technology. As World Wide grew, Davidson's company, ET Superior Services, did as well. The company continued to clean World Wide's more than 1 million square feet of office space while earning outside contracts.

But as unexpectedly as Davidson's family business started, so did the challenges. "In 2004 my sister became ill," says Davidson. "We took care of her for 18 months, but she passed away from AIDS in 2005. In 2007 my dad passed away suddenly from a heart attack the day before Thanksgiving."

Losing both of her business partners

"I had even more drive to make sure we were a success."

- Kim Davidson

didn't stop Davidson though. "I had even more drive to make sure we were a success," she says.

Today Davidson is partnered with her husband, Dominic Davidson. ET Superior has become a nationwide company, and the Davidsons have even started a nonprofit. "If a parent loses his or her job and cannot pay the tuition, we will assume the janitorial contract for the school," she says. "We train and hire the parents, and the child's tuition is paid through our work. Some of the parents even take cash home for working extra hours. We've done this with King of Glory Lutheran on Chippewa on the south side and are hoping to expand next year." ■

Marvin Woods | Project Controls Group

In 2003, when Marvin Woods' employer went out of business, he didn't fret about losing his job. He instead saw it as the perfect time to start his own business. With over 20 years of experience in engineering management and expertise in project controls, Woods started Project Controls Group with business partner Viola Pancratz.

As PCG fell smoothly into place, Woods' feeling that the time was right was proved correct. "I had a friend, Morris Hervey, who had just consolidated his business, Tsi Engineering," says Woods. "Because of the consolidation, he and his wife, Denise, had extra office space and



Marvin Woods

offered it to me for free. The only catch Morris said was that I could look for opportunities for his business while I marketed mine."

While Woods was marketing his busi-

ness, timing again was in his favor when he won his first bid with St. Louis Community College. "In July 2003, I called the St. Louis Community College and was told that they had a proposal request out for a project that fit exactly with what we were doing," he says. "We responded with an RFP (request for proposal). Viola and I figured it would be good practice for the future. Twenty-eight firms submitted proposals, and to our surprise we were one of three to win. This gave us confidence and other firms the confidence to work with us."

Woods quickly learned, though, that it is hard to be the new kid on the block,

especially when chasing work with majority firms. In his experience, if majority firms don't have a diversity requirement, they are unlikely to partner with minority firms.

Woods has not let the environment discourage him though. "Recently we won a \$12 million contract from the U.S. Corps of Engineers Huntsville Center," he says.

Today Woods stays inspired by keeping relationships with entrepreneurs and friends such as Harvey. "Morris has owned a small business for over 20 years," he says. "Seeing others with a similar background succeed always inspires me." ■