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Local Business

IN YOUR BUSINESS: Michael Ward makes opportunities for veterans and their businesses

By Chris King of The St. Louis American
Wednesday, September 8, 2010 11:43 PM CDT

Like Uncle Sam, Michael Ward is looking for a few good men and women and the companies they own.

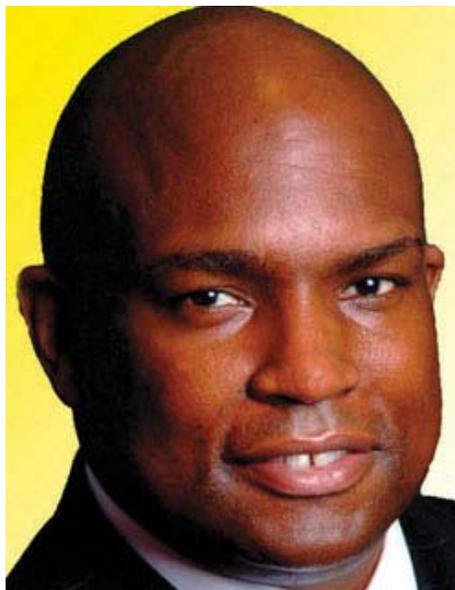
"We hire veterans," Ward said. Then he repeated, for emphasis: "We hire veterans. Veterans only. There are a lot of opportunities out there."

Ward is president and CEO of Project Management Solutions Group, based in St. Louis and the Metro East. He started the firm in June 2005 after a 22-year career in the Coast Guard; he said the firm will do \$6.8 million in business this year.

Project Management Solutions Group is an enterprise project management firm that handles IT, telecommunications, business operations, supply-chain logistics, real estate and construction – then puts people and smaller businesses to work.

Ward said, "We get the opportunity, then hire nothing but veterans – veterans know how to get jobs done. We do discovery, figure out what is going on, what it will take to get the objectives accomplished, then we hire a team around the project."

Ward has made effective use of opportunities for his own firm as a veteran-owned minority business enterprise. In the past two years it has received a four-year subcontract from the U.S. Army Human Resources Command for \$480,000 per year, and a \$5.7 million prime contract from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for construction services at the Veteran's Administration Medical Center at Marion, Illinois.



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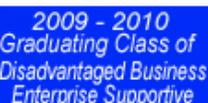
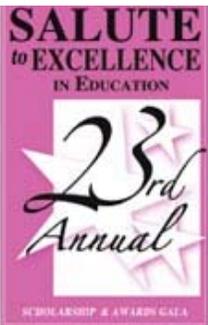
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"Real opportunity came about from the Marion project," Ward said. He wrote the proposal with Bruce Holland of Holland Construction. He said they capitalized on a set-aside for a small, service-disabled business.

"We were blessed with the contract," Ward said, then added with a laugh: "That's when everyone in St. Louis became my new best friends. But I don't make new best friends like that."

Ward qualifies as service-disabled from being shot in the leg in October 1983 while on active duty with the U.S. Coast Guard. He was deployed in Grenada during the U.S. invasion when this country was fighting shadows of the Cold War in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Ward was looking over communications at the command center in the theater of operations for Urgent Fury, as the invasion was named. "We had problems with snipers," Ward said dryly. "So rather than shoot some guy with bars on his collar, they shot a guy in a blue bus driver uniform." That was Ward.

"It was an in-and-out bullet," Ward said. "It broke my leg."

He was on the bus – the USS Eisenhower – with U.S. Marines. "You know Marines," Ward said: "first in, last out." He recovered painfully in the dispensary until the ship finally returned to Fort Lauderdale.

After his leg healed, he put in another 17 years with the Coast Guard, retiring in 2002 with the credentials – which would later become valuable – of being injured on active duty: service-disabled. In a way, that was a \$5.7 million bullet that broke his leg.

The Coast Guard prepared him to run his current business in other crucial ways as well, since it paid for him to attend New York University to study electrical engineering. He looked into military service after graduating from Sumner High School in 1978 as an undefeated swimmer who was told there was no such thing as a professional swimmer.

Dejected about the commercial uselessness of his swimming skills, he spoke to several military recruiters. The Coast Guard representative asked, "Would you rather take someone's life or save it?"

"That took me right there," Ward said.

On the other end of his Coast Guard year, as a service-disabled, 22-year veteran, Ward continued to benefit from military support services. He developed his company with the assistance of the Veterans Business Resource Center in St. Louis.

"I'd go see Darcella weekly," Ward said of Darcella Craven, then a staffer of the center and now its executive director.

"She would beat me up, then I would come back the next week, then the next week, until I got the business up and running. They played a major role in my success. I can't thank Darcella and Pat Healy [founding executive director, now retired] enough."

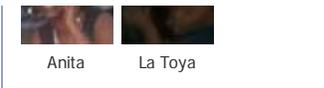
Ward also cited the Missouri Procurement Technical Assistance Center as being "instrumental" in launching and supporting Project Management Solutions Group. His association with the Southern Illinois Leadership Roundtable also has been beneficial.

Success for Ward and his business was anything but instant. "We tried to figure out our market niche. We tried to hit corporate, State. We failed miserably."

Ward was steered toward federal contracting opportunities by Eddie Davis, director of the Center for the Acceleration of African-American Business in St. Louis. "Now we concentrate solely on federal work," Ward said. And when they find it, they try to share it with similar businesses.

"In St. Louis, the way the diversity thing usually works is: I get a project you're qualified to do, then I mess it up and call somebody like you to fix it for me," Ward said.

"My philosophy is: why not call you first? Then we will all make out well, and the customer will get a professional project done."



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