



In an industry with few black- or female-run companies, MCO Construction is a stand-out example of possibilities.

SELF SUFFICIENCY

For Ann McNeill, entrepreneurship isn't about the relentless pursuit of profits and growth. Rather, running a business lets her provide economic opportunity for other blacks.

McNeill points to her construction firm's \$1.7 million dry-wall subcontract at American Airlines Arena. Of the more than 100 workers MCO Construction hired for the project, about 80 percent were black.

For McNeill, it's a matter of economic self-sufficiency. White-owned contractors tend to hire white workers, she says, while Hispanic companies hire Hispanic workers. "There is a relationship between the number of African-American workers and the number of African-American contractors," McNeill says. "People hire their own. It's that simple."

McNeill, 45, runs MCO Construction and a consulting company from two small office suites at the Business Assistance Center in Liberty City. She started the firm in the early '80s, after working for aerospace firm Pratt & Whitney in Palm Beach County. Her boss at the firm practiced what McNeill calls "discrimination at its highest," convinced that neither blacks nor women had a place in business. McNeill decided to prove him wrong.

Racism isn't an abstract concept to McNeill. A West Palm Beach native, she cleaned homes on Palm Beach as a teenager. Like other blacks, McNeill was forced to carry a yellow card to prove her right to visit the island.

Fortunately, McNeill says she hasn't found it as hard to deal with sexism. "Being a woman - I look at that as an advantage," McNeill says. "A lot of the guys underestimate me."

Willard Fair, president and CEO of the Urban League of Greater Miami, says it would be a mistake to underestimate McNeill - given her willingness to do business in an industry with few African-American or female entrepreneurs. "That's bold if you're black," says Fair. "It's bold times two if you're black and a woman, espe-

Building Equity: Ann McNeill's firm offers fair wages for black workers.

cially in the field she is in."

An accountant by training, McNeill had no qualms about using her minority status to advance her business. The company's biggest project came in the early '90s, when MCO formed a joint venture with another contractor to win the \$20 million bid to build a police station in West Palm Beach. McNeill landed the contract in spite of being the sixth-lowest bidder - her status as a minority contractor making the difference. Before the police station, a black firm had never won a substantial public contract from the city.

City officials later criticized the project for delays and work that was not up to code. McNeill blamed shortages of materials and workers resulting from Hurricane Andrew. Regardless, she says, "It was a win for the community."

Since then, McNeill has downsized. MCO Construction now does "under \$2 million" in annual revenue. She calls it a matter of choice. "Bigger isn't always better," McNeill says. "I used to have a payroll of over \$100,000 a week. I couldn't sleep. I have to have a balanced life, and I cannot have a balanced life wondering how I'm going to make payroll."

McNeill's idea of a balanced life includes serving as a trustee for the 10,000-member New Birth Baptist Church, staying active in the alumni association of Florida Memorial College, and traveling. She also runs a

self-help group she calls Mastermind Women.

While McNeill has downsized MCO Construction and sold another firm, MCO Environmental, she expects growth from a new firm, MCO Consulting. It helps private-sector companies navigate the public sector's minority-contracting requirements.

McNeill wouldn't reveal the consulting firm's revenue, but says that projects have included Royal Caribbean's new passenger terminal at the Port of Miami and United Airlines' cargo facility at Miami International Airport. To make the United Airlines project accessible to black firms, she advised the company to split the \$30 million contract into smaller pieces. Many black-owned companies don't have the bonding or financing capacity to handle such a big project.

McNeill's tenacity has had its rewards, not the least of which is the power that MCO has given her to pay good money to her workers. The American Airlines Arena project paid prevailing wage, which translated to \$10.54 an hour for unskilled laborers. For former welfare recipients, that's a lot, McNeill says: "You're talking about people seeing the kind of money they've never seen." - Jeff Ostrowski

For MCO's \$1.7 million American Airlines Arena dry-wall contract, McNeill was able to pay unskilled black workers a wage of \$10.54 per hour.