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Wanda Johnson Proves Women Can Make It In Construction

ORLANDO - Wanda Johnson didn't intend to follow in her father's footsteps. Johnson's father, John McGee, has been in construction all his life. And he didn't want her to follow in his footsteps, either. In fact, when Johnson was on spring break from college and exhibited an interest in the business, he hired her as part of his crew just to prove how tough construction can be.

"We worked side-by-side on the Tropicana sports arena in St. Petersburg, and Dad would say 'See? This is hard, too hard, getting to



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JOHNSON FROM FRONT

work at sunup, not leaving until sundown, all under the blazing Florida sun. You don't want to do this for a living.'"

So much for reverse psychology. Eighteen years later, Johnson's company, TRZ Construction, was hired in October 2008 for the forming, placement and finishing of floor slabs for Orlando's Events Center, part of the \$1.1 billion City of Orlando Venues project. But it wasn't her first bid to be part of the largest building project in the City's history.

"My first bid was too high," Johnson recalls. "A competitor got it." But not just any competitor — Mims Construction — where Johnson's father John currently works. Yet lest anyone suspect tension around the family dinner table, Johnson says that her father couldn't be happier that she stuck to her guns and was successful in her second contract bid. "I tightened my budget, became more competitive, and came back. If you want something, you have to go after it. My parents taught us that."

By "us", Johnson means her nine other siblings, who all grew up in a modest West Orlando neighborhood. Johnson was an athletic kid, playing both collegiate basketball and semi-professional softball. She is determined to finally earn her degree.

While Johnson herself doesn't have a college degree, something she is determined to achieve, she makes education a top priority for her children. Her oldest daughter is in restaurant management; her son

knows at the tender age of fifteen that he wants to be an engineer; and Johnson's youngest daughter, is a determined seven-year old who "will be a success in whatever she chooses," Johnson says.

Johnson's own success in construction — from single-family houses to high-rise office buildings — has earned her a reputation for excellence and professionalism. Construction is more than her chosen profession, it's a fascination that began during that fateful spring break nearly two decades ago. "I like being there for the start of something and then watching the finishing process, to see something being built before my eyes," Johnson says.

Still, she admits, it's tougher to bid and get jobs as a "double" minority: both as a woman and an African-American. "It is harder for women in construction to be taken seriously," she says. "And I'm not just a name on paper, I'm 100 percent involved. But if you know what you're doing, if you apply yourself, you can do it."

The economic downturn has hit Orlando's construction industry hard, and TRZ Construction is no exception. Johnson had to lay-off several of her full-time employees, and expand into renovations and pool decks through an associate. She also did some preliminary work and clean-up for a well-known interior designer as a way to add to her

income.

Now, with the new Events Center contract, Johnson will need a staff of 15, that she will hire largely from the BLUEPRINT Employment Office.

She recognizes that unemployment is at an all-time high on the west side of town and job opportunities are particularly scarce in that area. "There's at least ten people waiting for me by the office door in the morning," she says. "I try to hire as many people as I can, but I have to make sure I've got qualified teams, employees who can be there for set-up and then for finishing. As one employer, I can only do so much."

Part of this process, Johnson says, is to do what she did: attend every available Venues workshop and meeting, ensure that the necessary MWBE accreditation is in order, and fill out the reams of necessary paperwork. "No one is going to just hold the door open for you, you've got to knock on that door," Johnson says. "You've got to show up, sell yourself, and then prove you've got what it takes."

TRZ is just one of the minority and women-owned businesses which are playing a significant role in the design and construction of Orlando's Community Venues project. To date more than 26 percent of the work on the Events Center has gone to minority-owned firms.