

Diversity-Building is Key to Negotiator's Success

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Katrina Keyes never dreamed she'd be wearing a hard hat or work boots for a living, much less that she would garner a reputation as a leader and negotiator of minority- and women-owned business enterprises.

In fact, the 38-year-old Milwaukee native didn't know what path to pursue after high school graduation so she delayed going to college and enlisted in the Army.

Keyes, whose father and uncle were career military men, not only grew accustomed to wearing heavy boots while learning how to communicate in a male-dominated environment, but she also realized the importance and necessity of diversity development and inclusion within the work place.

The Army also taught her good time-management and how to be better disciplined, she adds.

"And I learned I'm not scared to get dirty or to work outside. But the main thing

I learned was that there was a need for more women and minorities in business, even in the Army. That's when I knew I wanted to help begin filling that gap."

Finding a niche

After Keyes was discharged in 1991, she moved to the Metroplex. While pursuing a bachelor of business administration degree in management and marketing at the University of Texas at Arlington – she also holds a master's in higher education from Dallas Baptist University and is currently completing a Ph.D. in public affairs at the University of Dallas – Keyes held a full-time position with Tarrant County College as a continuing education and financial aid administrator.

She then found her niche while serving as manager of UTA's Historically Underutilized Businesses program, an enterprise that helps secure opportunities for minorities to provide materials, supplies, equipment and services for the university.

Working at the physical plant was rewarding and educational, according to Keyes.

“I liked helping the engineers, contractors and suppliers bid on construction jobs. I found I just like construction,” she laughs. “There weren’t a lot of people specializing in diversity and inclusion for the construction industry, especially women. So there was a need and I knew I could fill it.”

Keyes got more experience assisting minority- and women-owned companies as a liaison for the Small and Emerging Business Department at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport. After saving enough capital for a start-up with the help of her engineer husband, Bill Keyes, she launched her own business, K Strategies Group LLC, in 2002.

With offices in Arlington, Dallas and now Fort Worth, K Strategies specializes in increasing the participation of minority- and women-owned businesses in the construction and transportation industries.

“My passion to strengthen minority businesses comes from a belief that entrepreneurship is one of the best tools to grow wealth and opportunities in the minority community,” she says.

Her passion and expertise have landed her high-profile contracts, including the new Dallas Cowboys stadium and the \$600 million Glorypark mixed-use retail venture that will be built adjacent to the Cowboys complex in Arlington.

Despite some early hurdles, Keyes has taken her success in stride.

“When I walk in the room, my youthful appearance takes people back. That, and being a woman and a minority. No one believes that I could have 15 years experience in construction,” she says.

Keyes reports the Cowboys project is on target. To date, the 57 minority- and women-owned companies awarded contracts to work on the stadium have received 24 percent of the \$121.3 million spent, or almost \$29 million. That figure doesn’t count \$80 million that the city of Arlington spent on acquiring land.

Zeb Strong, director of student affairs at TCC’s south campus and one of Keyes’ mentors, said he’s pleased to watch his former student blossom in her career.

“She’s a true presence in the construction industry, helping raise awareness for women and minorities,” Strong said. “She’s a quintessential lady who knows her craft. I always tease her and tell her she’s going places. She’s a real star.”

She also serves on the boards of the Black Contractors Association, the Minority Business Enterprise Institute for Public Policy and the Fort Worth Women’s Business Center. She’s an active member and leader for a dozen area chambers of commerce as well.

“She’s a jewel,” said Marvin Gooch, chairman of the board for the Black Contractors Association. “I call her Wonder Woman. She helps position people for success and is a success herself. I’ve seen her go out and market her own firm and win multimillion-dollar contracts such as the Cowboys stadium. In doing so, she’s inspires other women-owned and minority-owned businesses to work harder for participation. There’s no better role model.”