



Resource Guide

Minority Business Enterprise Program

More Business for Everyone in Maryland



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MINORITY AFFAIRS

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The secrets of their success

Leading MBE executives say it takes more than hard work to win contracts

By ALAN DESOFF
Special to The Daily Record

Minority Business Enterprises (MBEs) in Maryland are gaining government contracts in a wide range of industries, and their leading executives say that while the MBE designation helps, it takes more than that to win the contracts in the first place and fulfill them successfully.

They say it takes demonstrated excellence in the types of work they do. Moreover, they hire subcontractors themselves, for candidates who possess the specialized skills and other qualifications the jobs require in addition to being minorities.

"Being an MBE is an advantage, no doubt about that, and I'm not going to make light of it. But I don't want an agency to hire us because we are an MBE. I want them to hire us because of what we provide," said Venkat Subramanian, founder, president and CEO of Angarai International in Greenbelt. "The MBE part is more than just checking a box on a form. We truly want to make a difference."

Angarai's stated vision is to be widely recognized as "the premier provider of reliable, high-quality, value-based technology solu-



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

Juan Navarro, head of Colossal Contractors Inc. in Burtonsville, says good work means good references down the road: 'Our best reference is the last job we did.'

tions, business advisory and management services to our customers worldwide."

"Just being an MBE doesn't mean you're automatically going to get a job," concurs Juan Navarro, head of Colossal Contractors, Inc. in Burtonsville. "You have to do good work and have good references. Our biggest

thing is to please the customer. Our best reference is the last job we did. If that customer is happy, we get a great reference for the next job."

Colossal Contractors provides maintenance services largely to state and local government agencies but also some commercial customers, Navarro said.

For Randall & Sonnier, a Baltimore law firm led by partners Kendra Randall Jolivet and Yolanda F. Sonnier, obtaining a multi-million dollar Maryland state contract to represent children in need of assistance "was based on our experience representing children who had been abused and neglected," Jolivet said. "I don't know that being an MBE was any consideration in getting the contract."

"Being an MBE didn't help us when we started because we didn't have it when we started, but now it helps us a lot," said Monica Pokrywka, vice president and second-generation owner of Allegany Door & Hardware in Hagerstown, founded in 1986. "Still, customer service is number one for us. We really emphasize that."



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

Venkat Subramanian, founder, president and CEO of Angarai International in Greenbelt, reminds others that achieving MBE designation doesn't mean automatic job opportunities.

See success page 14

Martin O'Malley, Governor
Anthony G. Brown, Lt. Governor

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Gain greater access to contracting opportunities with **Minority Business Enterprise (MBE)** and/or **Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE)** certification. A free application assistance workshop is offered the first Tuesday of every month. Visit the Minority/Disadvantaged Business Enterprise tab at www.mdot.maryland.gov to learn more.



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SUCCESS continued from page 12

"The governor's office does a great job in making sure there is minority business inclusion," said Casey Broughton Stringer, managing member of Broughton Construction Company LLC. "It helps us a great deal when we are procuring projects. But as a general contractor, we really have to know the business of the projects we engage in." With offices in Baltimore and the District of Columbia, Broughton Construction does all of its business with state and local governments, specializing in construction of new school buildings and renovation of existing facilities.

The company does "quite a bit of business" with Coppin State University, Stringer said, and recently finished a major campus renovation project there. Other current or recent projects have included structural repairs in Baltimore City schools, a new school addition and some science classroom renovations in Anne Arundel County, a window and door replacement project for the Cecil County Public Schools, and "we just got a major project at Frederick Community College," Stringer said.

While Angarai serves clients globally, Subramanian said its current, active contracts include assignments for the Maryland Department of Human Resources, Office of Technology for Human Services; the Mary-

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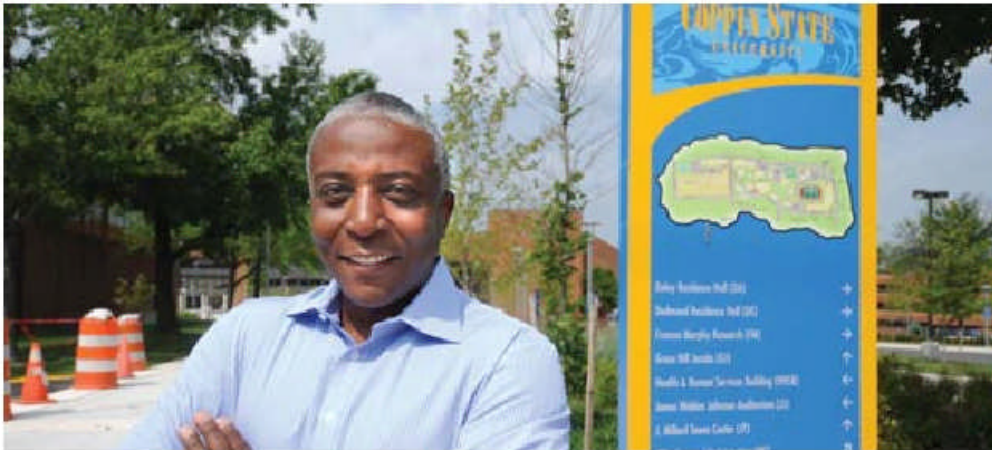
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Law partners **Kendra Randall Jolivet** and **Yolanda F. Sonnier** obtained a multi-million dollar state contract to represent children in need.



MAXIMILIAN FRANZ

Casey Broughton Stringer, managing member of Broughton Construction LLC, says the administration's emphasis on minority inclusion helps her company to procure projects.

land Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Administration; and the New York State Office of Children and Family Services.

He compared the approach agencies take to awarding a contract to an MBE to how a consumer selects a restaurant to visit for a meal.

"You don't go to the restaurant just because they accept Visa and you don't win a contract just because you're an MBE. You go to a restaurant because you like the food or the ambiance and the experience." Similarly, he said, "the value propositions that we provide should be attractive" to agencies awarding contracts. "An MBE certification definitely is valuable, but I would not start an engagement approach with that at the beginning of the conversation."

As a supplier of doors, Allegany has become a leader in a specialized market. "A lot of people are amazed. You walk through doors every day and don't realize how much goes into making sure a door fits into its opening, and that the hardware functions the way it needs to. If you go into a restroom, for example, and you don't have a way to lock that door from the inside, you have a big problem. Architects design an entire building but when they get down to the nitty-gritty of how a door needs to function, we're responsible for making sure all of that works," Pokrywka said.

The company serves mostly government customers, from several local school boards to top-secret government installations — "some jobs I can't talk about," Pokrywka said. Allegany also supplies door products to private-sector customers, including doctors' offices. "We even did a Hair Cuttery," Pokrywka said.

Many MBEs reach out to include minorities when they are considering subcontractors

or to provide other support. Randall & Sonnier, for instance, includes minority students among high school and college interns it hires, Jolivet said. "We had three young people in our office over the summer and tried to teach them about what we do to help them decide if they want to work in the legal field. We do things like that on a regular basis," she said, adding that the firm sometimes hires local law school students as well.

Stringer said Broughton maintains a database of more than 700 other businesses, many of them women- and minority-owned. "We call them into our offices and do extensive outreach on their capabilities and their willingness to participate with us on specific projects. We learn what they can do and where they are comfortable, and we try to fit them in that way," he said.

Angarai holds a monthly open house with potential MBE subcontractors, Subramanian said. "We look at what's coming in the pipeline, who has what capabilities, how we can partner." The company provides well

over 40 percent of its subcontracts to fellow MBEs, he said. "I can relate to the challenges other MBEs face because I am one, too."

"When we get a request for proposals and decide to go after it, I get my MBE partners to work with us, to be part of the solution. We help them and mentor them and coach them on looking at an RFP; for example, how to come up with an executive summary. We want them to grow and flourish as much as we did, or even better," Subramanian said.

Colossal Contractors also hires MBEs as subcontractors if they have the skills a particular job needs, Navarro said.

"That's most important. After all, it's my name on the contract," he said.

Because it buys the products it supplies directly from manufacturers, Allegany uses no subcontractors, but Pokrywka offered advice for other MBEs nonetheless: "Make sure you have a strong business, with excellent customer relations, and can provide a good product and good service. From that, the MBE program will help you grow."

"Network not only among your peers but also others, because you never know who might need your services. Find a mentor in the area you are in, and be open to different opportunities," Sonnier said.

"Always do the paperwork right. There's a lot of it with government agencies and that causes a lot of problems for some small businesses. It really helps you to do it right," Navarro advised.

"The reality is that you are not going to win everything you go after. You have to build relationships. People like to work with people they know. You cannot be short-sighted about your relationship with an agency. You can build it by demonstrating that you are a reliable and trusted partner," Subramanian said.



JOSH COOPER

Monica Pokrywka, vice president and second-generation owner of Allegany Door & Hardware in Hagerstown, says customer service is her top priority.