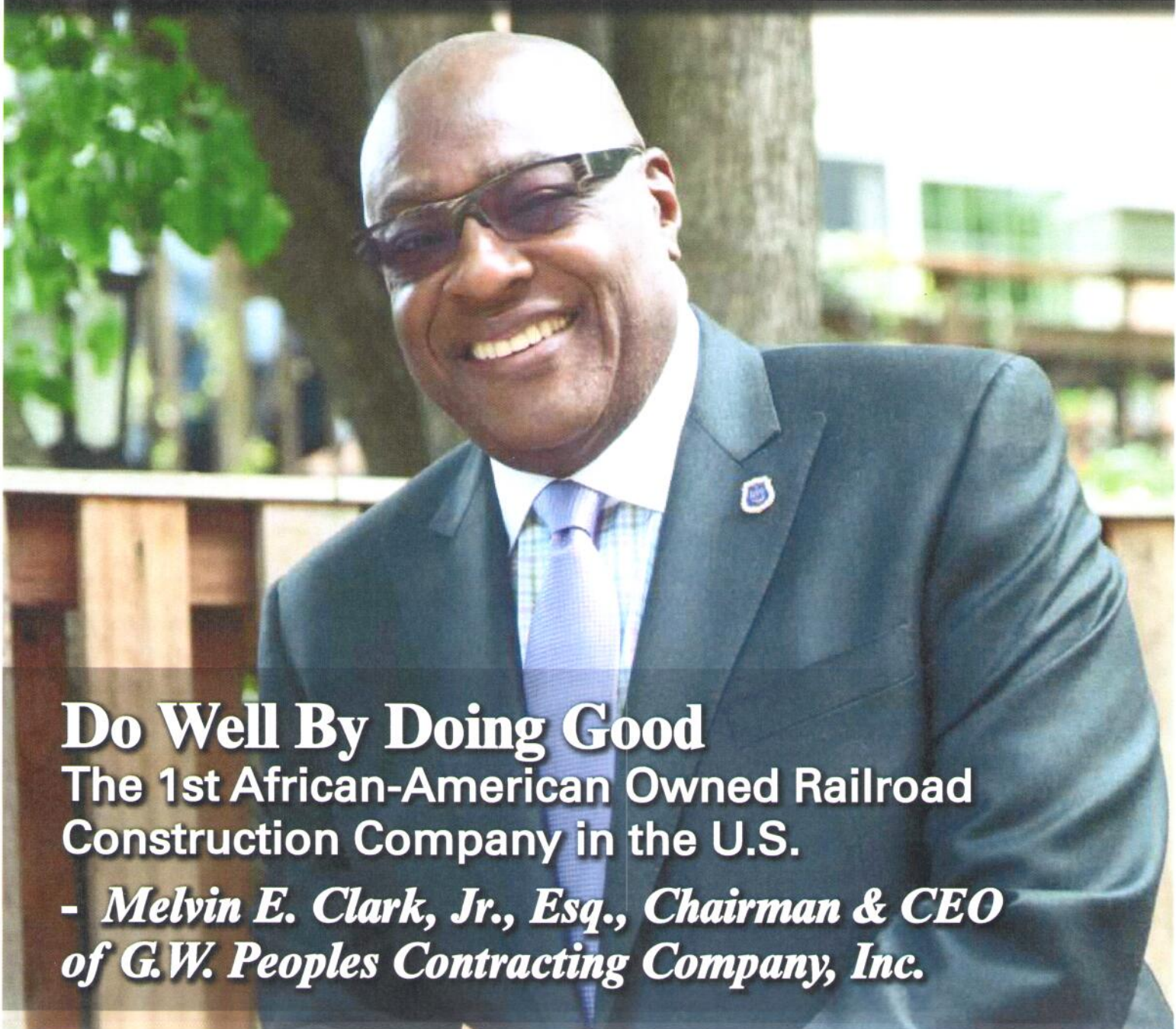


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Minority Enterprise Advocate



Do Well By Doing Good

**The 1st African-American Owned Railroad
Construction Company in the U.S.**

**- *Melvin E. Clark, Jr., Esq., Chairman & CEO
of G.W. Peoples Contracting Company, Inc.***

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Do Well by Doing Good . . .

The 1st African-American Owned Railroad Construction Company in the U.S.

by Phyllis Cunningham

Valor and integrity are words that come to mind when you meet Melvin E. Clark, Jr., Esq., founding owner of the Metroplex Corporation. A gifted leader, Mr. Clark is currently the Chairman, Chief Executive Officer, and owner of G.W. Peoples Contracting Company, Inc., a DBE/MBE/SBE certified contractor specializing in top quality construction, repair and maintenance of railroad tracks and related facilities, as well as construction and maintenance of railroad right-of-way and rail transit infrastructure. (www.gwpeoples.com)

Amidst a career spanning over three decades, Clark has earned a reputation as an unflinching trailblazer and a staunch advocate for minority and disadvantaged businesses. He holds an undergraduate degree in accounting from Penn State University, a Juris Doctorate from Northwestern University School of Law, and a Masters in Management from Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management.

"If you're going to be successful in minority business, you have to get involved in the political system."

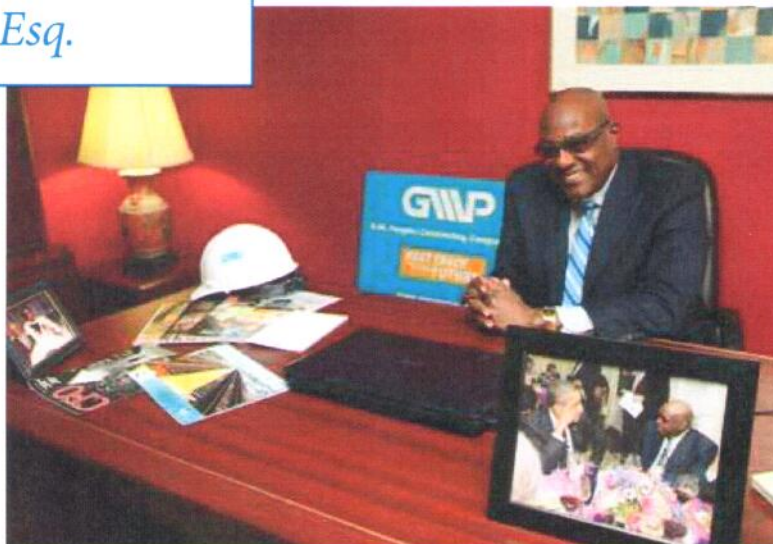
- Melvin E. Clark, Jr., Esq.

American member of the staff at Ernst & Young, a multi-national professional services firm, before working as an associate with the law firm of Klett, Rooney, Lieber & Schorling. At that firm, Clark gained invaluable experience in corporate planning for construction companies, and in construction litigation and labor law. Clark then fulfilled a four year commitment as an attorney with the tax division of the United States Department of Justice. Clark credits his parents with helping to mold him into the successful businessman he is today. "The way I was raised has a lot to do with my work ethic. My Father and Grandfather taught me the tenacity and courage to make a positive difference in this world," says Clark. "I realize what a tremendous impact these two men—in fact, my entire family—had on my life." His father, Bishop Melvin E. Clark, Sr., is a nationally known Bishop in The Church of God in Christ and Pastor of the evangelical Church in the Round in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. His grandfather, Carl W. Clark, Sr., was a Pullman Porter and president of the Norfolk chapter of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP),



Mr. Melvin Clark with his crew

While attending Northwestern University, Clark was employed as a consultant to Chicago United, an organization committed to addressing the socio-economic problems of the city. There he developed a plan for increasing minority participation in the construction trades industry. He worked as the first African-



the first African-American independent labor union established to protect the rights of working-class black men and women.

Growing up in the South, Clark was always keenly aware of the civil rights movement and the injustices black people endured. "I am very proud of the fact that my grandfather, a civil rights leader in his own right, and labor advocate A. Philip Randolph, were close friends. In fact, Mr. Randolph stayed

at the home of my grandparents whenever he was in Norfolk. It was at our family dinner table that he and my grandfather worked tirelessly to organize the BSCP and formulate plans for the historic March on Washington," says Clark. It is no surprise that his grandfather's civil rights legacy ignited Clark's passion for advocacy and paved the way for a deeper understanding of the role of politics in business.

As a young man exploring his career options, Clark and his father had many heart-to-heart conversations about which path to take. Clark recalls his father saying, "Son, you're not in this world just for yourself—there's more to life than making money. What you want to do is to help somebody and make a difference in this world." These wise words serve as the guiding principle of his life and the foundation upon which Clark would later brand his company motto, "Do well by doing good."

In the late 1970's and early 1980's, the OPEC oil embargo imposed an acute strain on the U.S. economy and contributed to skyrocketing oil prices. Fuel shortages resulted in millions of cars lining up to get gas and drove the need to upgrade the nation's public transportation infrastructure. In view of this confluence of events, Clark redirected his professional career path, convinced that mass transit would be the thing of the future. The Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1982 provided for a percentage of gas tax funds to be dedicated to funding capital transit improvements. Notably, the legislation, through the urging of the Congressional Black Caucus, included guidelines that set goals for small and minority business participation.

Clark's entrepreneurial nature kicked into high gear and he pinpointed an important niche—railroad construction. "I felt I had the necessary education and business acumen to launch the company. However, I lacked the technical expertise needed to actually build a railroad," Clark confided. Consequently, he conducted extensive research on the railroad industry and careful due diligence to find the best talent in the field. In 1983, Clark, with his father's support, founded Metroplex Corporation, the nation's first minority-owned railroad construction company.

"Although my father admitted that he did not have a full understanding of what I wanted to do, he assured me that he had complete confidence in my ability to get the job done," says Clark. During those early years, Metroplex, like many minority businesses, faced severe opposition when it came to securing substantive contracts. Yet with persistence, dogged determination and political savvy, Clark successfully landed his first major military contract to rebuild the railway system at the Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. "My focus was on producing quality work rather than worrying about maximizing profits," says Clark. Under his leadership, Metroplex quickly established a national reputation of excellence and became the premier minority rail construction contractor in the United States. And, because of Clark's focus and insistence on delivering quality, the Navy began setting aside contracts for negotiation. Metroplex became a certified 8(a) company and was designated as the AAA contractor serving the Yorktown Naval Weapons Station in Virginia.

After diligently building Metroplex into a nationwide, preeminent railroad contractor, in 2000, Clark sold the company to Balfour Beatty, a U.K.-based construction/engineering firm. At the time of sale, Metroplex was actively performing on projects such as the Alameda Corridor Project in Los Angeles (\$65 Million), a Bay Area Rapid Transit Project in San Francisco (\$40 Million) and The Southern New Jersey Light Rail System in Camden, New Jersey (\$55 Million), which were, at that time, the largest transit construction projects in the country.

A quintessential businessman, Clark has a profound understanding of the intricate relationship between business and politics. During the Clinton Administration, he recommended and formulated the creation of the SBA's Mentor-Protégé Program, giving minority 8(a) companies the advantage of being mentored by larger companies in order to compete in today's marketplace. Metroplex and G.W. Peoples (GWP) signed the first Mentor-Protégé Agreement with the SBA. The SBA's Mentor-Protégé program has been replicated throughout the federal agency system. As an active volunteer and business mentor for aspiring entrepreneurs, Clark's advice to new entrepreneurs is this: "If you're going

to be successful in minority business, you have to be involved politically. As a minority business owner, you can't afford to sit idly by and let things happen to you—you have to make things happen."

In keeping with his personal mission to provide help to small Black-owned businesses, Clark became a mentor to floundering minority firm G.W. Peoples (GWP) and charged full steam ahead to stabilize the company, resurrect its reputation and secure its future viability. In 2011, Clark acquired full control of the company, and under his leadership, expertise, and vision, GWP now boasts a successful turnaround, producing more than \$20 million in annual sales and over 100 employees. G.W. Peoples is the largest African American-owned firm in the country that builds railroads. The company's technical expertise spans the entire scope of rail operations from light and heavy rail transit to commuter rail and freight haul. Between 2010 and 2012, GWP was involved in several major infrastructure projects. "In Norfolk, we completed an entire light rail system for Hampton Roads Transit. We recently completed building the downtown streetcar system in Atlanta. We also completed the construction on the Dan Ryan Red Line Renewal Project in Chicago, the Downtown Streetcar Project in Atlanta, and Phase 1 of the Washington Metro Silver Line Extension to Tyson's Corner. Importantly, we are teaming with the Clark/Kiewit Joint Venture to build Phase 2 of that project to Dulles International Airport, our largest job to date. We also are performing rail construction on a Dallas Area Rapid Transit (DART) project in Dallas, Texas. We work 24/7 with multiple crews on multiple projects at a time, and we're very proud of what we've accomplished thus far," says Clark.

At GWP, Clark oversees an experienced management team of experts and industry leaders including Renee Banks, President of GWP, and his son, Jonathan Clark, who serves as Senior Manager of Business Development. Clark has developed and retained the expertise of Ralph Golick, Senior VP & Project Manager, with over 40 years in the rail industry; Jack Smith, Estimator, with 35 years; Gary Beam, CFO, with 30 years in rail; and Mary Ridley, his Executive Assistant of 28 years, to mention only

Continued on page 17

"If you're going to make it in business, you're going to need perseverance, determination, faith and prayer."

When it comes to building effective teams, her advice to start up entrepreneurs is this: 1) Make sure to communicate clear objectives and performance expectations; 2) Create an employee handbook to guide team conduct; 3) Don't hesitate to re-assign or release an employee if you discover that he or she is not a good fit for your company; 4) Avoid micro-managing. Learn how to delegate and allow your staff to do what you've hired them to do; 5) Take caution when hiring family and friends; 6) Be discerning and know when to say no. "I learned the hard way that all opportunities are not necessarily good opportunities."

Wooldridge believes that a successful business ownership requires an understanding of processes, policies and procedures—all of the technical aspects of running a successful company. "Just because you have a skill or trade doesn't mean you'll be a good business owner." In addition, she says, "It's imperative to understand what it will cost to start and what the market will bear in your chosen industry." Wooldridge also recommends joining related trade organizations and engaging in networking opportunities

and building relationships as much as possible. This is a sure fire way to quickly grow your business.

"Most importantly, if you have a dream, follow it. If you have a skill or a passion, make it work for you," says this accomplished entrepreneur. A proven leader with extensive experience in business development, marketing, management and technical knowledge, Wooldridge's team building and strategic planning skills have catapulted her company from a micro business to a mid-size innovative industry leader. With patience, persistence and plain hard work, Wooldridge has followed her dream to create what is now one of Virginia's most successful commercial and governmental building service contractors.

Among her many accomplishments, Sharon Dabney-Wooldridge, CEO of the The Kleane Kare Team, was recently selected by Thunderbird for Good to be featured in a business training video that will be used to assist women in South America start their own businesses. Thunderbird School of Global Management launched its first women's empowerment program in 2005 to serve aspiring entrepreneurs from war-torn Afghanistan. Since then the school has provided business skills training and certification for thousands

of nontraditional students from all over the world through Thunderbird for Good, a pioneer in developing and delivering customized programs at the base of the social pyramid. This is just one example of Ms. Dabney-Wooldridge's efforts to give back not only to the community but globally.

Today, through innovation, Kleane Kare developed and offers signature services, such as the GreenKleane Program. This LEED certified process is recognized in the industry as a significant environmental sustainment commitment. Says Wooldridge, "The FlexKleane Policy is another signature service highly valued by our clients, because it empowers our team members to perform reasonable tasks outside the original scope of work. And before starting new contracts, we provide the Kleane Kare audit, which consists of a complete review of the client's facility, producing an exact requirement and recommendations of maintenance needs. Going forward, we will continue to build on our strong relationship with health care providers, expand our presence within the commercial building sector, proudly offer our services and commitment to governmental entities, and always be mindful to support our employees and cheerfully to give back to the communities in which we operate."

Continued from page 13

a few members of the team. GWP's many Job Superintendents collectively have over 300 years of rail experience. "It's vitally important to understand that in business and in life no man is an island—it's all about forging lasting relationships and surrounding yourself with people who are smarter than you," says Clark. His novel approach to hiring the best talent includes job fairs in traditional settings, as well as in neighborhood churches, VFW's and other community organizations. This serves the dual purpose of identifying prospective employees, while exposing inner-city youth and veterans to rail industry career opportunities.

Realizing the value of building strong interpersonal relationships and business networks, Clark is a member of the Washington/Baltimore Chapter of the Young Presidents' Organization, Inc. (YPO), a privately organized, nonprofit executive education organization of more than 20,000 presidents and chief executive officers worldwide. YPO is committed to the development of better presidents through education and idea exchange by providing challenging environments that promote the exchange of ideas and shared experiences. Clark is also a member of the Black Young Presidents' Organization (BYPO), a part of the YPO. BYPO was created to focus on environments and interactions unique to its Black members, as well as to have members share their

respective business and social networks, while increasing minority membership in the YPO.

Over the years, Clark has received Presidential Appointments to the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation, the Board of Governors of the United Service Organization and the Board of Directors of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation. He has also served as a private sector representative for the U.S. Department of State at the United Nations Trade and Development Conference in South Africa; a member of President Clinton's White House Mission to Africa as well as a part of TransAfrica Forum's trip to

Haiti. In 2012, Clark was nominated for the prestigious Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award, created to recognize and honor the accomplishments of the outstanding men and women who turn economies around, build high-growth companies, create jobs, build communities and, indeed, change the world.

Today, Clark remains active in the political arena, working closely with the Democratic National Committee and the Obama administration. He believes that only by leveling the playing field in the federal marketplace for a diverse group of competitors can true contributions be made to the economic revitalization of disadvantaged neighborhoods. A formidable advocate for small and disadvantaged business concerns, Clark is a former advisor to the White House Task Force on Small and Disadvantaged Businesses and serves on the Executive Committee of the Congressional Black Caucus Institute's 21st Century Council. The CBCI launched the 21st Century Council to identify issues key to ensuring a sound future for all Americans and to provide workable solutions to the White House and U.S. Congress to meet these challenges.

Mr. Clark currently serves as a Trustee of the Church in the Round in Aliquippa, PA, and supports the church and Beaver County's local Family Life Center with his time and through his generous financial contributions. Looking back over his early years as a minority business owner, Clark is certain that the overarching spiritual values and moral principles that he learned from his parents prepared him to be successful in business. "I am humbled by the selfless acts of those who have gone before me and laid the tracks to ensure my success," says Clark. "I've had many angels in my life—my relatives, close friends and professional acquaintances—people who have supported my vision and helped me to succeed along the way. Likewise, I am committed to mentoring minority businesses—helping them in every way that I can to do well by doing good."

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