

## FIRESIDE CHAT WITH CHERYL MCKISSACK DANIEL

# "REFLECTIONS OF HER SUCCESS"



CHERYL MCKISSACK DANIEL  
PRESIDENT AND CEO

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*"We grow on levels and we get to each level by stages."*

In honor of Black History Month, WTS-GNY had a fireside chat with President and CEO of McKissack & McKissack, Cheryl McKissack Daniel. McKissack provides construction management, program management and consulting services for various project types throughout the United States. Born in Nashville, Tennessee, Cheryl comes from a long lineage of architects and builders that began with an enslaved Ashanti ancestor in 1790. Her family's long celebrated history and commitment to continue the legacy as her story is inspiration for all. In this chat she reflects on her journey and what she has learned along the way.

### WHICH LEADERSHIP SKILLS WERE THE MOST DIFFICULT TO DEVELOP?

Confidence, sense of knowing my purpose and the management of people. I would put those three at the top. Confidence is something that comes with maturity and it intertwines with knowing your purpose. I can't tell you exactly when this happened, but I would say within the last decade is when I began to really understand my purpose in life and how that attached to the McKissack legacy. Learning to be just who I am, improving on that as opposed to trying to be something that I am not. With that comes confidence and then from there managing people becomes easier because you are coming from a place where you know who you are. These things come with maturity. I remember when I would run up to people and say "my name is Cheryl McKissack and my company is...." It was rushed, it was nervousness and a host of things that I am not anymore. Now, I flow with whatever the timing is, wherever I am, I get in the flow of the energy around me. I come from a place of strength and confidence and a sense of purpose.

Cheryl's grandfather, Moses McKissack, founded the family business in 1905. Her father, William DeBerry McKissack, took over in 1968, and her mother, Leatrice Buchanan McKissack grew the business after her husband died. Today, Cheryl represents the

fifth generation of the McKissack family's century-old business, McKissack & McKissack, the oldest minority and woman-owned design and construction firm in the nation.

### WITH SUCH A DIVERSE PORTFOLIO HOW DID YOU LEARN TO EMBRACE RISK-TAKING?

Risk taking, I like risk, as long as I understand the risk and mitigated the risk to a point that I am at peace, then I am fine with taking the risk. That also comes with maturity and experience, especially in construction, entrepreneurship and investing in other companies. I always use peace as my umpire, so if we are submitting a number, it has been vetted with all the leaders in my company. When we are all comfortable, and all at peace with the numbers that we are submitting then we take the risk. That is our guide. If one person says I am not comfortable about this, then we won't do it. If it's not in my lane I won't do it.

McKissack is involved with some of New York's largest projects including: JFK Terminal One, LGA Central Terminal Building Redevelopment, Coney Island Hospital Redevelopment, Harlem Hospital Center Modernization, the NYC Economic Development Corporation Hunts Point Cooperative Market and Fulton Fish Market, MART125 Cultural Center Harlem, Pacific Park/ Atlantic Yards Barclays Center; The Women's Building, Pier 42 Redevelopment, and The Studio Museum in Harlem. McKissack also serves as the MTA Independent Engineer, overseeing the Capital Construction Program of the nation's largest transportation system. Her company currently employs over 150 employees and has contracted more than \$50 billion dollars in construction over the past decade.

### LEADING IS IN YOUR BLOODLINE, BUT WAS THERE EVER A TIME WHEN YOU FELT VULNERABLE OR POWERLESS? HOW DID YOU OVERCOME IT?

I have a very strong faith in God. Feeling powerless is actually powerful because that is when He takes over. That is when you really have to rely on the fact that whatever is good for you is going to come about, and no one or anything can change that. When I am in uncertain spaces and I don't understand why it looks so bad, why things are not in my favor, I just shut down and I give it to God, and I move on to something else. Most of the time it turns around and sometimes it is not even the reality of the situation.

Cheryl serves on numerous, corporate, charitable and community boards. Her success stems from her unique ability to listen, ask the right questions, lead through expertise, and to always be prepared.

**WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR THOSE WHO ARE AMBITIOUS AND MOTIVATED? HOW CAN WE AVOID MISTAKES WHEN WE WANT IT (SUCCESS) SO BAD?**

Patience. You can have passion and perseverance, but you still need patience. Wealth grows over a period of time. We grow on levels and we get to each level by stages. There is a maturity process in business that we all have to matriculate through. You will have the good and the bad, the challenging and the success; all of that is part of the equation. The bottom line is that if you are moving forward, even if you move two steps backwards and then three steps forward, you are moving. As long as you move forward, you are going to reach the dreams you have for your business.

McKissack earned both a bachelor and master's degree in civil engineering from Howard University and graduate course work at Columbia University in civil engineering. With more than 25 years of experience in all phases of the design and the construction industry

including major project work in the commercial, healthcare, education and transportation sectors, she continues to be an inspiration in her community.

**WHAT BOOKS HAVE YOU READ THAT YOU THINK OUR MEMBERS WOULD BENEFIT FROM READING?**

*Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* by Daniel Goleman

*The ONE Thing* by Gary Keller

The "One Thing" book discusses how to identify the one thing, that I have to do,



*"As long as you move forward you are going to reach the dreams you have."*

that is going to have the highest impact on advancing my overall agenda. This book forces you to think about those one or two things. When you have only one or two things at the center of your being and the center of your thoughts, you have literally identified the priorities that you work on. It makes your life easier because you are focused on the highest impact activity right now.



**WHAT ARE COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES?**

What I find interesting is that as women, we are already powerful. Yet for some reason, our counterparts don't even realize it until they are forced to. That's comical to me. They know we have the power in our personal lives, and they know we have the power in our business lives, but they are so conditioned to not having strong women in leadership, positions, it's totally forgotten. So, it's good to see that paradigm changing and hopefully it will ultimately become a norm. I don't think it is a norm now but it's our time.

**HOW CAN WE COMBAT THESE MISCONCEPTIONS AND COMMUNICATE MORE EFFECTIVELY?**

We have to get women on corporate boards, we are still behind on that. We did great in the 90's and early 2000's, but it has begun to dwindle again. So, we need women leadership at Fortune 500 companies, we need more female politicians. It would be great to have a female president. These things are happening. Hopefully there will be real change.

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**General Information**

WTS-Greater New York Chapter  
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Advancing Women in Transportation  
Greater New York Chapter  
40 Years



WTS attracts, sustains, connects and advances women's careers to strengthen the transportation industry. To fulfill this mission, WTS operates under a specific vision with core values, goals, and guiding principles behind all of its activities and programs.