

Separate but Together: Twin Sisters Break Ground in Construction Industry

By Samar Khoury

Construction is largely known as a male-dominated industry, but that has never stopped Cheryl McKissack Daniel and Deryl McKissack. In fact, these twins are equally acclaimed with years of history and expertise in the worlds of construction and architecture.

Representing a legacy that spans five generations, Cheryl serves as president and CEO of New York-based McKissack & McKissack, the oldest black-owned and female-run construction company in the country. She brings more than two decades of experience in the construction industry to her role as principal-in-charge and project executive. She is charged with several high-profile projects in the commercial, healthcare, education and transportation sectors, while ensuring that diversity is implemented during each phase of a project or program.

Cheryl's firm is renowned for several marquis projects, including the revamping of Long Island's Railroad Hub, which runs underneath the Brooklyn Nets' home. McKissack & McKissack has also been hired to build new terminals at JFK and LaGuardia airports. Long-term projects include managing the Manhattan Transportation Authority capital program, as well as all the design and construction initiatives for the School District



Cheryl McKissack Daniel and Deryl McKissack speak onstage during the National CARES Mentoring Movement 4th Annual for The Love Of Our Children Gala at The Ziegfeld Ballroom on February 11, 2019 in New York City.

PHOTO BY BENNETT RAGLING/GETTY IMAGES FOR GALA FOR NATIONAL CARES MENTORING MOVEMENT

of Philadelphia. Cheryl's company, which has more than \$500 million worth of projects for the next few years, currently employs more than 150 employees and has contracted more than \$50 billion in construction over the past decade.

As chairwoman and CEO of McKissack & McKissack in Washington, D.C., Deryl is esteemed credentials that are just as impressive. She landed her first major contract in 1996 in Washington, D.C., where she renovated the Treasury building after a fire. Deryl's firm was also the lead architect on the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in D.C., and she managed the design and construction of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture.

With 27 years in the construction business, Deryl is credited with managing more than \$15 billion in projects nationwide. Her firm has offices in several cities, including Detroit, Miami, and Los Angeles, and has been chosen to be featured in *Architect Magazine's* three-part series on increasing diversity in architecture.

And yet, that's barely scratching the surface of all this sterling pair have accomplished.

The History of McKissack & McKissack

The story behind McKissack & McKissack began in 1790 with the sisters' great-great-



MCKISSACK MCKISSACK

Deryl McKissack



REGINA FLEMING PHOTOGRAPHY

Cheryl McKissack Daniel

grandfather, Moses I, a former slave. Moses took on his slave owner's last name, McKissack, who taught Moses how to make bricks. After being granted his freedom, Moses sold his bricks, and his son, Moses II, took his father's trade further by becoming a master carpenter. Moses III and his brother Calvin McKissack then formalized McKissack & McKissack as a construction firm in 1905.

In 1968, Cheryl and Deryl's father, William DeBerry McKissack, took over the business, exposing the girls to the field at a young age. "We would go to work with him every Saturday starting at ten years old, walking construction sites, tracing documents, you know, learning about building systems early in life. It was all ingrained in us," Cheryl told *CBS News*.

After William suffered from a stroke in 1982, their mother, Leatrice B. McKissack, took over the business. She has major projects under her belt, such as the \$50 million complex at Howard University and a building at the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis.

Keeping the Family Together

Cheryl and Deryl supported their mother as she grew McKissack & McKissack. Cheryl

graduated with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering, later graduated with her master's, and Deryl earned a bachelor's in structural engineering.

In 1990, Deryl opened McKissack & McKissack of Washington, and in 1991, Cheryl opened the New York business, buying the original McKissack & McKissack in 2000. Although the sisters went their separate ways, they are carrying on the family name.

"I used the family name for my business because the name was known for architecture throughout the country," Deryl said to *Family Business Magazine*. "My business was started out of my own internal passion to build a business on my own."

Breaking Ground

Staying true to their innovative spirits, Cheryl and Deryl continue to raise the bar in the construction and architecture industry.

As an active member of Women in Transportation (WIT), Cheryl serves on various boards, including the New York Building Congress, New York Women's Forum, Greater New York ACE Mentor Program, and Women's Builders Council. Under the leadership of Mayor Bill de'Blasio, she takes part in the

OneNYC Advisory Board, Jobs for New Yorkers Task Force, and the MWBE Advisory Council. Previous boards include the National Women's History Museum, Fisk University, and the National Liberty Museum Board, where she was honored as a "Hero of Liberty" for her support of humanitarian initiatives and for promoting the responsibilities of a free and diverse America.

Her advice? "You need to define yourself," Cheryl said to *Essence* magazine. "Don't let other people define you. If we had let them do that, we would not be where we are today."

Deryl offers her own words of wisdom for those wishing to follow in both her and her sister's footsteps.

"Don't be afraid of math, science, and technology," she said to *The Glu*. "These disciplines can be very challenging, but they are also enjoyable and fascinating because our society is dependent on the knowledge and discovery that is created through these courses of study. Also — have a plan."

Cheryl and Deryl strive to remain at the cutting edge of architecture and construction while remaining true to themselves and the legacy that McKissack & McKissack is—now and in the future.

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