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SERVING GREATER MILWAUKEE

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Platt puts hard work to work for construction firm, city

Minority-owned construction firm making a name for itself in Milwaukee construction industry

By Terry Higgins

Richard Platt is no stranger to hard work.

His first "paycheck" in the construction industry came from some hard labor when he was 8 years old. Nowadays, he's president of Platt Construction Inc., Franklin, one of the largest minority-owned construction firms in the Milwaukee area.

Platt's father had a job pouring concrete at a house and brought his son to help.

"My job was to cart the concrete in a wheelbarrow from the front of the house to the back of the house," he said. "When we were finished, we sat down and my dad pulled out his wallet and paid me five dollars.

"Back then that was a lot of money, but it was more than that. I was proud of having earned it working with my dad, and he was proud of me for my contribution to the job."

Unfortunately, Platt is no stranger to adversity, either.

He lost his father two years later in an auto accident, and had a chance at a professional football career with the San Diego Chargers cut short by knee injury.

By his own account he's endured a couple of periods in his life when work was scarce and he had to rely on family members to get by.

Through it all he's maintained his determination to never let a setback turn into a roadblock.

"Sure, I was scared of failure," he said. "But I was also determined to succeed. I've been working since I was 11, and while there were times when I was uneasy, I knew I had to set goals and work hard at achieving them."

It was that determination that led Platt to start his construction company in 1972, with his last paycheck from a previous position.

He had done various construction jobs for a number of years, and felt he knew what it took to make a company a success.

His first few years in the business were tough. His first project was the building of a street and sidewalk in Kenosha.

"The business lived and died with my word," he said. "If I created a bill, I knew it had to be paid on time."

EARLY LESSONS

He originally began the business with a partner until he found out after a few jobs that the partner wasn't as interested in honest work as he was in making a quick buck.

"I thought I knew him and we could build something together, but at least I discovered the truth early on before it made things any harder for the company," he said.

Platt said the experience taught him the value of choosing the right people to work with.

"You have to work as a team," he said. "You surround yourself with people who are willing to work hard at a job that allows them to support their families. Once you've surrounded yourself with those people, you work together to prove that your faith in the future is well founded."

When Platt says "work together," he means it.

He worked side by side with his employees until 1978, when administrative duties came to consume much of his time.

"I know what it's like to swing the sledgehammer that breaks up the concrete," he said. "We have a number of long-term employees with us today who I worked with in the field. It gives the job a nice family feel."

A major turning point for the firm came in 1977, when Platt entered the U.S. Small Business Administration's education program. The goal of the program was to educate minority business owners on the process of winning government contracts.

Platt, an American Indian, did so well in the program he was named both state and national graduate of the year in 1992.

He was granted the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C., where he was personally feted by President George Bush in the White House Rose Garden.

"In some ways I still find it hard to believe that happened," he said. "Sometimes it seems like something I dreamed."

GETTING A PIECE OF THE PUBLIC PIE

There's nothing imaginary, however, about public projects his firm has been able to win thanks to this education and his effort.

It's currently a member of the team working on the renovation of the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts in downtown Milwaukee and is also expected to bid for work on the expansion of the Wisconsin Center, which recently began.

Platt employees are also helping upgrade water filters at the city of Milwaukee's Linwood Purification Plant, and have had a hand in shaping the new IMAX domed theater that will be the showpiece of the Milwaukee Public Mu-

Richard Platt

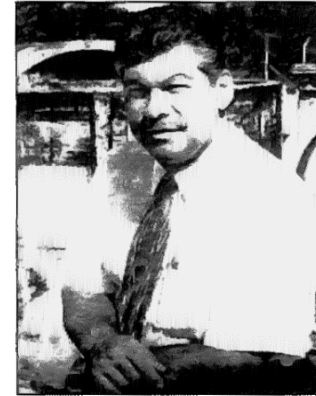
Position: President, Platt Construction Inc., Franklin

Age: 44

Family: Wife, Tina; children, Nicole, 18 and Tony, 15

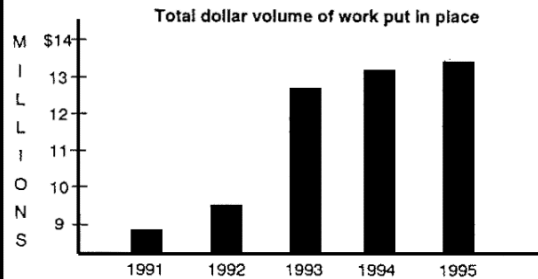
Hobby: "I guess you'd say I'm a workaholic, but I will always love sports and outdoor activities. I'm an avid golfer, I like hunting and fishing. Being outdoors gives me the chance to have a little private time."

The building he'd most like to build: "I'd love to work on a well-designed high-rise building that would always be a part of the (Milwaukee) skyline. I'd like the challenge of making something like that look beautiful to everybody who sees it."



A GROWING COMPANY

Platt Construction Inc., a fast growing minority construction firm, has seen its revenue jump 61 percent in the last five years.



Source: The Business Journal's Top 25 lists and Platt Construction Inc.

seum/Discovery World partnership.

In the firm's 1995 fiscal year, the dollar volume of work it put in place was about \$13.66 million, according to information the firm supplied to The Business Journal for an April 1996 list of the Milwaukee-area's largest contractors.

Dan Johnson, vice president of the Milwau-

keo office of M. A. Mortenson Co., Minneapolis, said such a demonstrated record of experi-

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— Richard Platt, Platt Construction Inc.

day," said Johnson, whose construction firm is working with Platt on the Marcus Center renovation.

"That he's been able to build it to that level in such a short period of time is a testament to Dick's skills. He understands not only the industry, but the way to work as part of a large project team."

WORKING HARD

Rich Tennesen, vice president of Hunzinger Construction Co., Brookfield, which is one of the leaders of the construction team working on the Wisconsin Center project, said Platt has been able to put together a quality firm.

"He's grown a lot in recent years and has been very aggressive in competing for work in the marketplace," he said. "His company is one of the quality minority construction firms in town."

As proud as he is of his contributions to civic revitalization, Platt said he's even more pleased with the opportunity to provide family-supporting jobs to workers in the city of Milwaukee.

"My greatest satisfaction comes in meeting a young person who comes into my office and tells me he wants to work for the firm," said Platt. "I tell him he's going to have to work hard, but he's also going to have a job that will enable him to take care of his family."

Platt said he has even tried to hire people he has seen working hard at Milwaukee-area gas stations.

"I give them my card and ask them to come in for an interview," he said. "I tell them that they seem like hard workers and that I'd like to offer them the chance to work hard for construction wages rather than gas station wages."