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# Controlling his own destiny

Philadelphia Business Journal - May 31, 2002 by [Adam Stone](#) Special To The Business Journal

CHESTER -- Ten years ago, Michael L. Parker knew he just had to make the big leap.

Having grown from being a journeyman carpenter to working as a superintendent and foreman, he was still just contract labor, with his income subject to the whims of the economy and others' management decisions. Something had to change.

"I wanted to control my own destiny. I had gotten married in 1987, and by 1992 I wanted to provide work for myself on a more continuous basis, which is sometimes difficult in construction," he said. "Once the building is built, you are done, unless the contractor has something else for you. I wanted to have more or less steady employment."

In between jobs, Parker had already been picking up the odd project: Hanging a door or finishing a basement. His success in those jobs helped to convince him that he could go it alone.

He was right. Over the past decade he's grown his Delaware County-based M.L. Parker Construction steadily, and in recent years the firm's pace of business has revved up hard and fast. The company grossed some \$2.3 million last year, up from \$560,000 in revenues in 1999.

"He's a very direct person, assertive without being aggressive," Cheryl Watson, deputy for small business at the Army Corps of Engineers in Philadelphia. Parker has done several projects for her over the past couple of years, winning bids as an 8A contractor -- that is, a minority-owned business as certified by the federal government.

While minority-firm status has helped Parker to grow his business, Watson said 8a alone is not enough to ensure success. "You have to be able to market yourself, you have to show me that you are capable of doing the work that we need done, otherwise you are wasting my time and yours, and you are setting yourself up for failure," she said.

Parker's firm has been 8a certified since 1994, and Parker has worked hard to take best advantage of that status.

"I had to first make myself a financially fit company," he said. "I had to learn to watch the numbers: The balance sheet, the profit sheet. I went to a lot of seminars to understand all of that. It was not tough, but it was something I had to learn. There are certain things you have to do to make your company profitable, so that when the banks come to look at your numbers all the ratios are where they are supposed to be.

"Then I had to get my marketing up to speed," he continued. That meant compiling lists of every likely government client, meeting with the relevant contracting agents, distributing glossy brochures and making extensive follow-up calls.

But the proof is in the pudding, as they say, and things did not really take off until Parker had compiled a pretty substantial list of successful projects.

"If they are even going to consider you for something, they want to know what you have done lately. That is key for them," he said.

What has he done lately? Quite a lot, in fact.

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Parker's firm worked on the Army Corps of Engineers' Chester Levee repair project, the Westinghouse steam plant in Chester, and United Parcel Service's Tincum industrial complex. At present the firm is helping construct a rifle range for the Delaware National Guard and on the renovation of an entire city block in Wilmington in conjunction with development firm Streuver Bros.

Perhaps Parker's most daring strategies have come in the realm of growth management. As business took off he brought on more help, eventually reaching a high water mark of 20 employees. But then he backed off. Revenue growth continued, but headcount declined. The firm now employs 12 full-timers and does out much of its work to a field of subcontractors.

"It is tough to stay competitive" with a bulky payroll, Parker said. "We found that it was more effective to try and keep our overhead down as much as possible. So now I have carpenters in-house, but they are what I call all-around carpenters. Then if I need a specialist, like an acoustic-ceiling person, I bring in a firm that does nothing but acoustic ceilings."

Parker has been personally responsible for landing much of the firm's work over the years. In a market dominated by larger players, his personal touch has won allies for his firm among some government contracting professionals.

"He does the marketing himself, which to me is a plus," said Linda Maiden, contract specialist with the National Park Service in Philadelphia. "As the president of the company he gets out there, he knows what is available, and he brings it directly to the agencies. He has the first-hand knowledge and he does not leave it to someone else to present that knowledge to us."

Ten years into the work of being his own boss, Parker says entrepreneurship is everything he'd hoped it would be.

"I like working with people. I like to be able to provide an income for my employees," he said. "And I get real satisfaction in seeing a project grow from the architect's plans to a complete building, with brick and mortar and a roof. When I drive by and say, 'I had a lot to do with that building' -- well, that is a really good feeling."

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