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With 70% of Arrowhead due to be completed by the first pre-season game of the year, and completion of Kauffman, after the Hall of Fame opens in July, MBE/WBE newsletter that has been generated by the Jackson County Sports Authority on a monthly basis, will now be published quarterly. The newsletter will continue to highlight those MBE/WBE firms that have played a part in the stadiums renovations. Each has a unique story to tell.

Custom Engineering

For 35 years, Custom Engineering has performed mechanical and electrical engineering work around the country and reviewed a countless number of electrical, plumbing, HVAC, lighting and signage plans for major construction projects. The Independence-based firm also has gained a reputation for mentoring scores of young minority engineers.

Clarence Mabin, who founded the company in 1974, was the first African-American to earn a civil engineering degree from the University of Missouri. As an established business owner, he helped pay the college tuition of minority students pursuing an engineering degree.

"When Mr. Mabin purchased the company, his goal was to help spur more minority interest in engineering," said Joseph Davis who later bought the company and is now its chief executive officer. "As a result, he has given a number of minorities the opportunity to come work here, pursue an engineering degree and learn more about the business." Davis joined Custom Engineering in 1999 as Mabin was looking to retire and sell the company to another minority. "I am here because of Mr. Mabin's goal and dream to have more minorities own businesses," Davis said.

At Arrowhead and Kauffman stadiums, Custom Engineering has served as the JCSCA's consultant on the mechanical and electrical engineering work being performed on the renovations. "We are serving as the team owners' eyes and ears," Davis said. "We reviewed the construction documents as the design team produced them and make periodic site visits during construction."

The expansion of restrooms, larger concession and restaurant space, and wider concourses required more plumbing, electrical power and HVAC capacity inside the renovated stadiums. Thus, the renovation project has kept Custom Engineering busy.

Davis said MBE/WBE programs, like the one for the stadium renovations, have allowed minority firms to get past historic social barriers and gain more jobs and contacts in the community. And they have bolstered the company's ability to hire the best available employees and pursue bigger and better projects. "It's still a much needed program and we continue to support its use," he said.

Davis's advice to minorities who want to become engineers or entrepreneurs is to identify your needs, go out and meet as many people as you can and not be afraid to take risks. "Think big," he said, "and don't let money be an obstacle."

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Virgie Dillard will never have an Office Max Perks Card on her keychain. She could be desperate to find an ink cartridge for her printer and would still drive past the Office Depot. And don't even get her started on Staples entering the Kansas City market.

Dillard likes it when people bypass those big-box retailers in favor of her office equipment shop in Grandview - Missouri Office Systems & Supplies Inc. The business, which she has owned since 1993, employs seven people and prides itself on its personalized service.

"Several of my clients have found that I am small but mighty," Dillard said. "I can offer you the same thing a super store can offer you and in some cases my prices might be cheaper because I don't have the same overhead."

Dillard said her business sells office and IT equipment, such as computers, printers, fax machines and copiers. It also sells supplies for that equipment, as well as office furniture.

Dillard said she works closely with several independent contractors and other partners. They specialize in various facets, such as furniture, equipment installation and IT systems. "They help me in offering clients a complete package," she said.

As a certified MBE and WBE, Dillard landed a small contract with the Truman Sports Complex renovation project, selling several thousand dollars worth of equipment to Hunt Walton, the construction manager for the recently completed Kauffman Stadium renovations.

Dillard started Missouri Office Systems & Supplies after working 10 years at Missouri Typewriter, an office store on 63rd Street near Troost Avenue. That store's owner, she said, encouraged her to start her own business and take advantage of the MBE and WBE programs that were being offered by various governments and school districts.

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"The MBE/WBE programs enable business owners like me to get in the door," Dillard said. "That is all that we are asking for. We want the chance to prove our wares so that we can grow and become prime contractors ourselves."

Dillard said maintaining a successful business requires one to surround themselves with knowledgeable people, especially for financial matters.

"You need to close your books every month so that you know how much money you have," she said. "Learn how your credit card works. If the fee costs you 2.5 percent then take that off your sale. Pay your taxes and stay on top of your liabilities because stuff like that can come back to bite you."

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