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2010 Minority Champion “Walks the Walk”

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — As a small business owner since 2001, Diane Lewis measures success in various ways. The president of Action Facilities Management, a site support company based in Morgantown, has grown her business from a two person operation to its current level of 170 full- and part-time employees in just nine years. But it’s the advice and support she provides to other entrepreneurs that really makes her feel successful.

This is what has made Lewis the U.S. Small Business Administration’s 2010 Minority Small Business Champion for West Virginia.

“Being named West Virginia’s 2010 Minority Small Business Champion is awesome, but it’s also a very humbling award,” Lewis said. “The real reward is watching other minority-owned companies develop and become successful. I love sharing my business experience and growing pains to make things easier for them.”

Lewis’ nearly 10-year career as an entrepreneur started when she was a contract administrator for a small business. She was encouraged to delve into entrepreneurship when the owner became ill and considered closing the business. With her knowledge of government contracting, and support of husband, Ken Jackson, Action Facilities Management was created.

“Working in a small business support role, I never dreamed I would someday become an entrepreneur,” she said. “I was fortunate to have a good mentor in Ken and just followed his example.”

Even with all the encouragement in the world, becoming a successful small business owner doesn’t happen overnight.

“I was really nervous at first,” Lewis said. “I knew I had a good product and service to offer, but wasn’t sure I could sell it. Also, being a minority female in a male dominated field didn’t ease the anxiety,” she said.

But sell it she did. With prior experience in contract administration, Lewis knew the federal government sector was a good place to look for opportunities. She began focusing her marketing efforts on federal agencies in West Virginia and surrounding states eventually landing her first contract with the Center for Disease Control.

That contact led to more contracts and the opportunity to not only focus on work in West Virginia, but branch out to Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington D.C., and Colorado.

“As a site support company, our main focus is on security services, but we also offer support administrative services, janitorial and building maintenance services, which includes grounds,” Lewis said. “We recently branched into warehousing and will be looking into opportunities to expand into program management.”

Action Facilities Management (AFM) is also a participant in the U.S. Small Business Administration's 8(a) business development program — an essential instrument for helping socially and economically disadvantaged entrepreneurs gain a foothold in government contracting. The program helps firms build competitive and institutional know-how through sole-source government contracts as well as encouraging participation in competitive and commercial contracts.

“AFM wouldn't be at the level they are today without the SBA's 8(a) program,” Lewis said. “The staff at the West Virginia District works hard to make sure small businesses get their fair share of federal contracting opportunities. I use their expertise on a regular basis.”

She stressed the importance of providing assistance to other minority-owned companies on business related issues.

“I do it all the time,” Lewis said. “It is a way to help others avoid the pitfalls and problems I went through over the past 10 years as an entrepreneur. I really enjoy helping others succeed and making a difference in someone else's life. It makes me feel like a proud parent. I am blessed to have a staff that does their jobs to the degree which allows me to help other companies. I know the company won't suffer due to their expertise and support.”

She is also proud of that her children are both involved in the business and learning the ropes as well. Her son, Donald Hill is running the Washington D.C. office and has been able to secure two federal contracts. Daughter Stephanie works at the corporate office and is putting her recently attained college degree to work to ensure all potential candidates are able to meet our requirements.

Another project near and dear to her heart is her participation in the Members of Diversity group in the Morgantown area. As the group's vice president, Lewis works with high school youth in grades 11 and 12 to provide “life skills.”

“About a year or so ago, Ken and I noticed a lot of local minority youth were getting in trouble,” Lewis said. “We teamed with the local Board of Education and went into the local high schools to provide 11th and 12th graders with such skills as going through an interview process, how to prepare a resume, how to fill out a job application, how to dress for an interview, and stressed how important it was to not have something in your background that might affect their future. It's a way to demonstrate to them that someone cares and is paying attention to them.”

As far as advice for minorities and others considering venturing into the world of entrepreneurship, Lewis stresses to not only know your product, but know the paperwork that goes with it. Do your homework, learn about business planning, attend business related classes offered by the SBA and the Small Business Development Center, and know what you are getting into before taking that first step, she said.

Once you do become a small business owner, remember the other 125,000 West Virginia small businesses and support them by using their products or services in your business. “Don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk,” Lewis said.

Diane Lewis was nominated by Otis Cox, director of operations at Action Facilities Management.

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