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## Construction Firm Tearing Down Buildings But Building Up Lives, The Community

BY CHRISTOPHER WEEMS

\*Tearing down. Building up. It has been a continuous cycle in Atlanta over recent years. Buildings are being torn down in order to build up new buildings. Construction companies are doing a lot of work.

One construction firm is tearing down a lot of buildings. But it is unique in that it is building a lot as well. However, Fleetwood Dunston Enterprises Inc. (Dunco) builds up people.

The rapport that the executives of Dunco have with the laborers who do the tearing down for the 17-year-old demolition company is a very unique feature, but it is just part of the Dunco story.

Fleetwood Dunston Jr., a life-long entrepreneur, has built a thriving business in a niche that very few African Americans, including those with large construction ventures, have entered—baseline construction/demolition.

Baseline construction, including demolition, site cleanup, etc., according to Dunston, is the most lucrative part of the construction business. He says that the components of baseline construction account for as much as 90 percent of the value of construction contracts.

The reason, says Dunston, that more minority firms are not involved in baseline construction is the prohibitive cost of the equipment, such as earth-moving machinery, needed for demolition.

But, more important than machinery to any business, is people. Cora "Cocoa" Johnson, Dunco's project director, is a person vital to the company's operations.

Indeed, the fact that she is an African-American female working as an executive in a successful construction company is unique, but that is only one point.

Ms. Johnson, not only makes some of the management decisions, she also is the hands-on person who implements the business actions that Dunston develops.

"I do next to zero manpower and field operations," admitted Dunston, who spends long hours generating new business and handling management problems.

And problems are not unfamiliar to this business. In the hectic period of pre-Olympic construction over the past few years, Dunco has experienced good and bad.

It was Dunco which cleared the way for the new Morris Brown College Stadium. That project was indicative of the trials that often accompany baseline construction activities.

Dunco had to use heavy earth-moving equipment to clear away the remnants of the old Herndon Stadium but the task had to be done during record summer rains a few years ago. Soft ground and heavy machinery never mix, but under Herndon is a tunnel for the MARTA westbound train line. In order to do work, Dunco workers had to rope off a firm strip of land sturdy enough to support them.

The most difficult working situation, however, says Dunston and Johnson, was the demolition of a building at 1-23 Peachtree Street a few years ago.

"I experienced every emotion, good and bad" during work at that site, says Johnson. Dunston cringes while reminiscing about that job.

Dunston says that the City and the State involved the Dunco work crew in a tug-of-war over whether or not the sidewalk involved could or should be blocked off for pedestrian passage during the construction.

The company endured costly delays and eventually had to build a pedestrian bridge to the Underground Atlanta parking deck, at a cost of over \$20,000. The bridge was promptly torn down as unnecessary by the State.

But what especially disturbs Johnson and Dunston was the treatment of their construction crew. They say that their crew members were continually harassed and occasionally detained by police who took the workers, who had to gather at the work site during odd hours for the work done overnight, for vagrants.

The principals of Dunco hold fair hiring and treating fairly all people as one of their principles. To that end, Dunco makes a point of using their business to provide employment opportunities to many persons generally considered hiring risks.

Johnson, a former probation officer, has used her experience and contacts to develop a partnership whereby persons leaving the criminal justice system can get a chance at gainful employment.

Dunco also makes special efforts to hire African-American workers.

Johnson says that in the history

of the company, there have been "no overt incidents" of negative behavior involving any Dunco worker.

Dunco has gone above and beyond the normal employer-employee relationship to help their workers. Johnson has often, to the dismay of Dunston, picked up workers without transportation at night from potentially dangerous areas such as Capitol Homes. She has also had to give physical descriptions of workers without identification over the phone to banks so that checks could be cashed.

The checks are also fair. Though he could get away with less, Dunston insists on paying all his employees according to set union scales.

The end result is that Dunco has developed an admirable record of employee loyalty ("They see us as bringing economic development to their community by employing their husbands, fathers, mothers, sisters and sons," says Johnson) and a string of successful construction jobs.

Included among the projects done by Dunco are jobs at the Polo Shop and General Nutrition Center at Lenox Square, Motorola in Gwinnett, Airport concourse E, Ft. Gillem, Ft. MacPherson Piedmont Hospital, Ga. Baptist Hospital, the Kellogg's Plant, the Georgia Dome and the new Fulton Superior Court.

Says Dunston, "We have done a lot of things very successfully and involved a lot of minorities."

A lot of Dunco's success has been due to the fact that it has largely been in control of its own destiny. Dunston is in a rare position among minority entrepreneurs in construction. He is typically a general contractor rather than a subcontractor.

"We haven't had hyphenated work," he says, alluding to the common practice of minority-owned firms being brought in merely to lend their name to another contractor merely to meet minority participation mandates.

The "minority" tag is not one that Dunston flaunts.

"My appetite isn't quenched by being a 'first' or an 'only,'" he says.

"I want to go down as a real industrialist," he says, "one who created a mass of employment opportunities."

### Toyota And UNCF Reward Nine Atlanta Students For High Academic Achievement Local Students Are Earning College Degrees With The Toyota/UNCF Scholarship Program

The College Fund/UNCF and Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc. recently honored four Morehouse College students and five Spelman College students who are recipients of 1995-1996 Toyota/UNCF Scholarships. These students are among nineteen 1995-1996 Toyota scholars, all of whom were honored at a formal dinner, held in New Orleans.

The Morehouse students are: John Vance, a senior from Decatur, GA, Biology major; Brian Franklin, a junior from Brooklyn, NY, English major; Sebastian Jackson, a sophomore from Houston, TX, Business major; and Ronald Frazier, a freshman from Charlotte, NC, Business major.

The Spelman students are: Rachele Kirby, a fifth year senior from Dayton, OH, Physics/Engineering major; Nekia Staley, a senior from Suitland, MD, Biology major; LaRaye Brown, a junior from East Orange, NJ, Math/Engineering major; Nakia Clements, a sophomore from Roxbury, MA, Biology major; and Alexandria Johnson, a freshman from Brentwood, NY, Computer Science major.

To date, 26 students have graduated from UNCF colleges through the Toyota/UNCF Scholarship Program. The Toyota scholars join the program as a

freshman, and receive financial support for each year of their college education. In addition, the students participate in a summer internship program at Toyota's headquarters in Torrance, California following their junior year. During the internships, each student is assigned a Toyota mentor and given a specific project to be completed during the summer.

UNCF scholarships are one element of Toyota's national education program "Highway to Learning", which includes kindergarten through 12th grade education, higher education, family literacy, and technical training. In 1995, Toyota contributed more than \$12 million to U.S. charities, with nearly 70 percent funding education program.

The College Fund/UNCF is a consortium of 41 private, historically black colleges and universities. It is the oldest and most successful minority higher education assistance organization in the country. The College Fund currently administers more than 350 educational programs that give students access to higher education and career opportunity, and strengthens its member colleges. To date, nearly 300,000 men and women have graduated from UNCF colleges and universities.

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