

SPRING 2016



Chicago
Minority Supplier
Development Council

**21st CENTURY
EXPO GROUP**
DIVERSIFYING CHICAGO'S
LANDSCAPE

PLUS:

ChicagoMSDC's
SUPPLIER DIVERSITY
ENRICHMENT
SERIES UNVEILED

CROWDFUNDING:
BRINGING
WALL STREET TO
MAIN STREET



21st CENTURY EXPO GROUP

BRINGING YOUR VISION TO LIFE

BY MEGAN NAKANO

LESLIE McFARLAND, PRESIDENT, IMAN McFARLAND, COO, AND RAY McFARLAND, FOUNDER & CEO AT 21st CENTURY EXPO GROUP HEADQUARTERS IN NATIONAL HARBOR, MARYLAND.

Ray McFarland's success story begins like that of many entrepreneurs: he started off working for someone else, figured out how to do things bigger and better and branched off on his own. In 1983, a young Ray was approached by a family friend who asked him if he'd like an opportunity to travel, stay in fancy hotels and meet nice people. Within days, Ray was working for his event management firm as an assistant event manager and within five years he had ascended to President and co-owner of the company. During Ray's tenure, the company became 8(a) certified and picked up a number of clients concerned with supplier diversity including the National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC).

While the business was successful, Ray wanted to take it to the next level. When he and his partner began to disagree on the future direction of the company, Ray was summarily dismissed. With a three-year-old daughter to support, Ray's wife Leslie quit her job as the assistant executive director of a non-profit organization to help him start 21st Century Expo Group, Inc. on an initial investment of \$5,000 borrowed from his sister. Today, their daughter Iman is twenty-nine years old and helping them continue to grow their multi-million dollar organization. "Yes, I was fired," says Ray, "and it was the best thing that could have ever happened to me in order to fulfill my

dreams and support a growing family."

As a general service contractor, the 21st Century Expo team can handle all aspects of event planning including market research and analysis, budgeting, database management, floorplan design, pipe & drape, custom furniture rental, graphic design, and exhibitor services. Their motto is to excite, entertain and educate! As the only African American woman owned and operated general service contractor in the nation, 21st Century Expo is able to offer clients uniquely culturally sensitive, community based production services with thoughtful branding and design at an affordable price point.

Producing over 120 events annually, 21st Century Expo is the general service contractor and event manager for major corporations such as Google, Intel, McDonald's, Major League Baseball, and Time Warner. They also work with organizations such as the Howard University, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and NMSDC (a contract which he won back in 2000 after having maintained contact since his time with his previous company). 21st Century Expo has been the secret behind the success of our own Chicago Business Opportunity Fair (CBOF) for the past five years and while the change in venue precludes ChicagoMSDC from using an outside contractor for this year's event, they are generously providing their staff to serve as a liaison



GRAND OPENING OF THE MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL DIVERSITY BUSINESS SUMMIT AT THE GEORGE R. BROWN CONVENTION CENTER IN HOUSTON, TEXAS FOR WHICH 21ST CENTURY EXPO GROUP SERVED AS GENERAL SERVICE CONTRACTOR.



21ST CENTURY EXPO GROUP, INC.'S PRESIDENT, LESLIE McFARLAND AND FOUNDER & CEO, RAY McFARLAND WITH JOSET WRIGHT-LACY, PRESIDENT NATIONAL MINORITY SUPPLIER DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL (NMSDC) AFTER RECEIVING NMSDC'S 2013 NATIONAL SUPPLIER OF THE YEAR (CLASS II) AWARD AT THE NMSDC CONVENTION IN SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS.

between us and the hotel's contractor. Cynthia Jordan, ChicagoMSDC Director of Events beams, "21st Century Expo goes above and beyond to offer innovative, accommodating, top quality service within our budget." According to Jordan, Ray's familiarity with the venues, local unions and vendors, and his long-standing relationships with the exhibitors preempt potential problems before they have a chance to arise and spoil the day.

Event planning is all about coordination so being a family business no doubt gives the McFarlands a competitive advantage. Ray, Founder and CEO, has almost 35 years industry experience. Leslie, President, brings extensive operations and management experience and is in charge of the company's finances. As Ray puts it, "she handles the purse strings so trust is crucial. Plus, in this business, you're always traveling and meeting folks so it's good that she's understanding of that...and knows where I am at all times."

Iman is Chief Operating Officer and completing her MBA from Howard University, her parents' alma mater. Iman has been critical to streamlining operations and increasing efficiency through the use of technology. She designed a proprietary on-line portal that can be accessed at all times by clients and staff allowing them to process orders in record time and reduce administrative expenses. Growing up in the industry, Iman did not envision herself

taking over the family business. Rather, she saw summers as an opportunity to travel with her parents and "get tons of swag from the exhibitors." It was not until she took an immersive business course for non-business majors at the UNC-Kenan Flager School of Business that her "entrepreneurial spirit was awakened. I realized that I wanted to be a part of 21st Century Expo Group, Inc. and continue to build the legacy that my parents had started."

"MY AREA OF EXPERTISE INVOLVES CREATING ENVIRONMENTS THAT LEND THEMSELVES TO SUPPORT OUR CLIENT'S TRADE SHOW OR SPECIAL EVENT VISION AND BUDGET. AT THE HEART OF WHAT WE DO, THROUGH A DISPLAY OR EVENT'S DESIGN, CAN BE SUMMED UP IN THREE WORDS: EXCITE, ENTERTAIN, AND EDUCATE!"

- RAY McFARLAND
FOUNDER & CEO
21ST CENTURY EXPO GROUP, INC

According to Leslie, there were very few women at executive management levels in the exposition industry when they started the business in 1991. Twenty five years later, she knows several second and third generation contractors that have female presidents, CEOs and other senior managers. Yet 21st Century Expo still



21st CENTURY GROUP STAFF AT THE 2014 NMSDC CONFERENCE IN ORLANDO, FLORIDA. BACK ROW: SETH WHITAKER, IMAN McFARLAND, RAY McFARLAND, FRED McRAE, LESLIE McFARLAND, AND ANTWON HALL. FRONT ROW: DAWN PERMINTER, ANNIE LAWRENCE, MICHELLE HUNT, SYBIL MYERS, LEE CAROTHERS-CLOUD AND KIMBERLY MARSHALL.

stands out as the only MBE and women-owned exposition company in the country. "My daughter has an excellent opportunity...women are much more accepted within the industry and the potential for company growth is phenomenal," Leslie asserts. "In addition, statistics show that women are very supportive of doing business with women therefore providing additional potential for growth."

And the McFarlands' tutelage reaches beyond the family. 21st Century Expo Group has ten employees, all of whom are minorities. The company is avid supporters of "Reach One, Teach One," a non-profit organization specializing in exposing urban youth to diverse environments to open their minds to new ways of thinking and living. Through their "Project Expo Initiative," the McFarlands provide opportunities for personal growth and employment to young African American men from the underserved communities in Washington DC and Maryland. Two mentees, Antwon and Seth, were hired and trained three years ago and are now full-time event technicians.

Ray is a firm believer in the power of supplier diversity to help level the playing field and create opportunities for

MBEs and the communities they serve. After the tragedy of 9/11, 21st Century Expo was dramatically impacted by the subsequent economic downturn. They turned to the Capital Region Minority Supplier Development Council (CRMSDC) for guidance on how to generate new business and create a model for sustainability. Working with the Minority Supplier Development Council network has opened doors for the company and led to contracts and valuable new relationships. In 2012, 21st Century was named the CRMSDC's Supplier of the Year (Class II). The following year they won the National Supplier of the Year Award (Class III). In Ray's words, "For 21st Century, none of this would've been possible without the existence, support and continued efforts of the MSDC network, corporations, and minority businesses working together collectively to achieve the American Dream."



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