

Exclusive Interview with Carolyn Ellison, Turner Construction Company



1. How did you prepare and find your way into Community and Citizenship line of work?

The path to a career in community and citizenship for me has been a lifelong journey – one that blends the personal values emphasized by my family and the professional lessons learned in the offices of corporate America and halls of academia.

An appreciation for the values of Community and Citizenship work and seeds of consideration as a career choice were planted by my parents who owned and operated Adult Foster Care Homes in the inner city of Detroit. The start of each day at our family breakfast table always revolved around the mantra “am I my brother’s keeper” and conversation focused on ensuring that we were seeing and serving the needs of others 24 hours a day in the lives of the clients who provided our economic sustenance. The commitment of our family was always to be fully involved and considerate of both our residents and neighbors in a conscientious way and recognizing that caring for others is not a 9 to 5 job.

Prior to joining Turner, much of my business training, work and achievement has been as a sales person and brand-marketing leader across a range of propositions from steak sauce to trading cards to cognac to mentor programs. Additionally, I have also worked for the past ten years as an adjunct professor at a number of academic institutions. In all of these roles, the critical success factor for me, driven by my upbringing, has been to see and serve the customers you are serving and have a product you can be proud to represent to them in a compelling way. For me, that has happened on each professional stop – equally on the grocery store shelf and in the university classrooms.

My specific journey to a Community and Citizenship role with Turner Construction Company was nurtured by a relationship with a 50 year company employee who supported not only the mentor program I ran for the National Urban League but also a commitment to help me be a better professional product. His commitment and those of the fellow employees he brought to the program to mentor others truly inspired me, including my General Manger Darien Grant who spearheaded our work to build the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial in Washington, DC.

The accomplishments of my Community and Citizenship work with Turner is dependent on an ability to really see and understand the distinctive needs of every project, subcontractor and neighborhood to ensure a great build. So, at the end of day, I am not certain whether I found Community and Citizenship work or it found me – but I am glad and proud that the connection was made and I am a part of a team that supports minorities.

2. Research tells us that Turner Construction Company was perhaps the first major construction firm in the US to embrace minority business inclusion with the introduction of your Contractors College. What caused that decision back then and why is it still important today?

Turner Construction Company was at the forefront of providing equal employment opportunity in the construction industry and was the first major construction company to establish a formal minority business inclusion program. Much of the civil rights activity and legislation of the 1960s regulated the inclusion of

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minority businesses in large, urban projects in underrepresented communities. For Turner, it was about doing what was right to serve local community needs, creating jobs and businesses, while also building craft skills for the local workforce. In 1969, in an effort to improve the economic viability of minority firms, Turner established the Turner School of Construction Management. This program has helped build networks, establish joint venture partnerships, and form long-term business relationships.

Beginning in the mid-1970's, Turner established internal goals, tracking and reporting surrounding our minority utilization efforts. Turner was also the first construction firm to award over \$1B in contract volume to minority and women business enterprises.

As the needs of our communities grew, Turner realized the importance of having full-time dedicated Community & Citizenship professionals in the majority of the areas where we build. An integral part of their role is building relationships with our minority business partners, through regular meet and greet sessions, mentor/protégé relationships, and just-in-time topical workshops like lean practices, safety and estimating.

In 1989, understanding that we needed to grow the next generation of construction professionals, Turner started our YouthForce program, which expanded our outreach to include mentoring, exploration and career training within our school systems and in partnership with organizations that support youth.

Our commitment to the economic viability of our minority trade partners and the communities in which we live and build remains as important to us today as it was in the 1960's.

3. How is Turner addressing COVID-19 worldwide pandemic across your vast US territory of projects?

While COVID-19 has certainly presented challenges, Turner is being proactive to ensure the safety and health of everyone involved in our operations. The safety of the people on site and in our community remains our top priority. We have in place robust measures to keep all workers safe on our site. We have implemented social distancing, enhanced hygiene, and have in place robust cleaning and disinfecting protocols.

Daily meetings are held with project teams to provide ongoing updates. Weekly calls are held locally and company-wide to provide transparent updates to employees and encourage the sharing of best practices.

4. Being a builder of both public/government and non-public/private projects in America, how does Turner address non-government/private projects that may not have minority or disadvantage goals attached to them?

The requirement of minority utilization and tracking on projects is a company-wide directive. While utilization mandates are often a reality in contracts, utilization goals are ALWAYS an obligation for Turner. We track on every project, regardless of customer requirements and provide updates to headquarters several times a year.

In a competitive industry, like construction, partnerships with minority interests are imperative to ensure that we achieve the goals we set for ourselves. Our partnerships include joint

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ventures, alliances, associations, matchmaking and mentor/protégé relationships to ensure we have a deep bench for today and tomorrow.

5. Does Turner have programs in place to assist minority trades with surety bonding? How about early payment of invoices in some cases?

We certainly recognize that bonding and financial stability are critical concerns of our subcontractor partners, especially new, emerging and small businesses. As part of our Turner School of Construction Management, we bring in bonding agents/companies to provide education, council and support to sub interests. Some local interests we work with include the Surety and Fidelity Association and a host of small businesses including Construction Bonds, Centennial Surety and JSSB Consulting. In addition to supporting those who assist subcontracting interests in building their bonding capacity, Turner provides subguard to most owner interests which in fact alleviates the need for smaller interests to provide bonds, whilst they build their credentials.

As further support of the financial concerns of our subcontractors we offer a number of supports:

- The Turner Accelerated Payment program – allows for payment by a third party, within five days (or less) for owner-approved applications,
- Turner Logistics – offers the flexibility of purchase of materials directly for clients. This often assists small business interests who are able to secure contracts to provide installation without precluding them for consideration because they are challenged to fund large cash outlays for equipment

6. What makes your job so satisfying?

The number one thing that makes my job satisfying is that I know that my parents would be proud. Every time when a minority interest secures a contract I have a sense of satisfaction that they are able to support a high school student to go to college, get an internship or job or just help someone. I know when this happens, I am indeed living my family mantra that I am my brother's keeper. I also am mother to a 15 year old mini who is watching, participating beside me and appreciating the importance of being "my brothers keeper."

In addition to the personal satisfaction of my jog, I have been really, really blessed to have a tremendous network and supportive cast – we really look out for each other. It's a big deal to be able to say I work for the man – Darien Grant – who spearheaded the building of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. And he is just one of the many on our team who take care of each other.

7. How do you enjoy your downtime?

Downtime?!?!? When it happens, I especially enjoy spending time with my `15 year old mini me – we like to cook, watch Improv and work at local soup kitchen. I am a part of Leadership Greater Washington and participate in a Race and Politics discussion group – lots of serious discussion with a lot of love and laughs to get us thru challenging times. I also especially enjoy travel and listening to live music.

8. What's the first thing you plan to do once the economy opens for good?

I wish I could say that I wasn't spending during the pandemic, but...I have certainly been doing my part to keep the economy moving...on line. What I miss more than anything is the hugs and in person

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fellowship with my like family, personal and professional contacts, including a lot of subcontractors and industry interests who don't mind hugging. Yep, hugging, that's the first thing I plan to do when the economy opens for good, preferably in front of some live music.

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