

Building Values for Client and Tribe Turtle Associates

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Owned by the Nanticoke Leni-Lenape Tribal Nation of American Indians, relatively young Turtle Associates is expanding on the East Coast. While some tortoises might say slow and steady wins the race, Turtle Associates has blossomed into a multimillion dollar company in just four short years, expanding economic horizons for the Nanticoke Leni-Lenape people and positively impacting southern New Jersey.

John Norwood, a tribal council member, is the firm's CEO and works mainly with Turtle's marketing division. He is joined by Mark Gould, the principal tribal chief and deputy



chief executive officer for the company. The two are aided by Thomas DePhillipo, part owner and business operations manager of the firm, and Sharon Walters also part owner, who acts as Turtle's chief financial officer. Originally, Walters and her husband owned a successful development company that managed construction of one of the largest industrial park complexes on the East Coast. After these projects were complete, DePhillipo says Walters was looking to "sunset" his company, but decided to use its resources and help the community.

"The Walters were looking to give back to the community, so I recommended that we put something together that would

take the capability and infrastructure of the company and put it into the tribe," he explains. The tribe consists of 12,000 people and is located in southern New Jersey, with business offices in Bridgeton, Cherry Hill, and Ewing. When Turtle was incorporated in 2005, it was the first Native American tribally owned 8(a) company in New Jersey.

As a Native American Indian-owned company, Turtle is a member of the Small Business Administration's 8(a) Business Development Program, a government program that helps small "disadvantaged" business firms compete in America's economy through increased business development opportunities. For the Native Americans who own 51 percent of the firm, Turtle has been a huge success. As stated on the company's Web site, Turtle's mission is "to increase the financial resources of the Nanticoke Leni-Lenape Tribe and provide job training and career opportunities for the Nanticoke Leni-Lenape people through socially responsible, environmentally friendly construction enterprises, which are consistent with tribal cultural values."

The 8(a) classification allows Turtle to pursue sole-source contracts and grants the firm the ability to bid for exclusive federal contracts specifically designed for 8(a) firms. To become an 8(a) contractor, Turtle and its leaders went through an extensive background investigation and application process. To remain in the program, Turtle is subject to ongoing federal monitoring to ensure that the company is stable, capable of handling large, difficult workloads, and minority-owned.

Healthy and Wealthy and Wise

According to DePhillipo, Turtle is very healthy, thriving despite the recent economic downturn. "Our growth rate is becoming phenomenal," DePhillipo excitedly reports. "We've doubled our volume every year and we're still doing that in this economy."

At any time the firm of 25 construction personnel can have as many as eight to 10 projects underway, scattered throughout Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and New York. The company's range extends far beyond

general contracting and includes facilities management, environmental services, alternative energy and design for unmanned area vehicles, the latest technology in America's military field.

Primarily, however, Turtle performs construction management and engineering services for the greater New Jersey area, fulfilling contracts for federal and state government agencies and the military. For example, Turtle recently completed a 40,000 square foot barracks at Fort Dix in New Jersey. Also, in early 2009, Turtle completed repairs to a Federal Court House on Long Island, N.Y., a prestigious \$500 million facility with an exterior granite facade. The project, under the direction of the General Services Administration, commissioned Turtle to replace granite panels and perform leak repairs. During this project, Turtle had to modify plans quickly and efficiently, and used its in-house expertise to complete the project in just over a year.

One of DePhillipo's favorite projects was building a sophisticated firing range for a military base. "As opposed to what you might have seen in the old time movies, everything is [high-tech]," he explains excitedly, adding that the firm got to put a lot of its technical expertise to work during the project.

Besides working as a construction manager and general contractor, Turtle is becoming very well-known for its exploratory work in environmental services and solar energy. For many years, Turtle employees have been involved with environmental issues such as site evaluations, wetland determinations, reuse studies and real property decontamination. Recently, Turtle developed an environmental management capability, designed to provide critical project assessments and remediation planning. Thus, Turtle has the capability to decontaminate compromised soil, air and water, as well as expertise in disposal mechanics plus surface and sub-surface detection and analysis.

In addition to providing these services, each of Turtle's construction management employees are currently or will soon be LEED Accredited Professionals, and the company is "green building-oriented," says DePhillipo. He adds that the American Indian culture is inherently cognizant of the environment and the company plans to expand its environmentally friendly practices.

A Chance Where There Was None

Building a stronger American Indian culture, while still respecting tradition, is important for Turtle. Over half of Turtle's employees are American Indians, many of whom, according to DePhillipo, grew up disadvantaged.

"We bring in people who may not have the expertise or training, but we give them that. We give them a leg up," DePhillipo explains. "We created an apprenticeship program in the roofing business for younger Indians who want to work, but don't have the requisite skills."

In addition to providing jobs for tribal members, 51 percent of the company's profits are targeted for tribal initiatives. Tribal initiatives include: meals for the elderly; youth programming; an outreach program for the tribe's disadvantaged members; and a health and wellness program. "They're very spiritual people," explains DePhillipo on the tribe's desire to help its people. "They really make every effort to take care of their people."

DePhillipo predicts that Turtle will continue to grow, expanding its influence to the entire continental United States. And as the company thrives, the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation will also flourish and prosper. Thusly, Turtle Associates is building not only inspiring structures, but also a system of renewable hope. ■



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