



Mary Carter, Deputy Director, City of Jackson; Kishia Powell, P.E., Director of Public Works, City of Jackson; Mayor Tony T. Yarber, City of Jackson; Councilman De'Keither Stamps, City of Jackson, Ward #4; Willie A. O'Neal, Jr., SOL; Derek T. Starling, Sr., SOL; and representatives from United Waters.

SOL: Engineering innovators

By Meredith C. McGee
Jackson Advocate Contributing Writer

SOL Engineering Services, LLC (SOL), a regional engineering and technical services consulting firm, is on the move like radio personality Tom Joyner.

Mississippi natives Willie A. O'Neal, Jr., and Derek Starling, Sr., P.E., who have been in business 13 years, are moving into new markets and expanding.

O'Neal is a native of Crawford, and Starling grew up in Canton. They met in college while pursuing engineering degrees at Mississippi State University. O'Neal operated several business entities previously, and Starling worked in corporate America.

They began operations with a three-person team. Today, the company employs 120 individuals. They are headquartered in Jackson at 106 S. President St. on the 3rd and 4th floors in the heart of downtown off Capitol St., which recently opened the street to two-way traffic.

The firm has three Engineering, Technical Support, and Emergency Management Services divisions which support government, commercial and industrial clients. "We have operations in Fort Polk, LA, Fort Leonard Wood, MO; Gulfport, MS; New Orleans, LA; Sheppard AFB, TX; Boston, MA; and South Shore, KY," O'Neal stated.

"I have to recognize my faith and belief in God as my foundation first," shared O'Neal. His home church is Oakland M.B. Church, and he is a current member of Abundant Life Christian Church. "We started

with a solid business plan; we work hard to screen and hire quality employees, establish sound policies and procedures, and emphasize the consistent delivery of meaningful quality services and solutions for all of our customers," he said.

O'Neal and Starling were named the SBA 2015 Mississippi Small Business Persons of the Year by the Mississippi District Office of the U.S. Small Business Administration. The national winner will be recognized as the 2015 National Small Business Person of the Year during the SBA's celebration on May 8th in Washington, D.C. SOL has great support for receiving the national honor.

BUSINESS INFLUENCERS

"My parents Willie and Helen O'Neal, who owned a small business, planted the seeds early in our lives for me and my sisters that business ownership is very important," O'Neal said. His parents repeatedly said, "Own your own business and create your own destiny." So, after 11 years of business experience, "I led the charge to establish SOL as a local firm with the goal of reaching regional and ultimately multi-national status to significantly improve the lives of others and leave a heritage for my family."

"My grandfather, J.B. O'Neal, a small farmer, had a great impact on my work ethics," Willie O'Neal, Jr., recalls. When he was a boy, Willie faithfully rose at 4 a.m. to travel with his grandfather to sell watermelons and produce to a small customer base in the county. He remembered, "My grandfather offered his produce at a fair price, and treated everyone with

respect." Helen O'Neal is a financial services consultant in Columbus today.

Starling's mother, Mrs. Alma Starling, and his uncles owned an automobile tire and detail business when he was growing up. His grandparents, Ruth and Willie Sanders, Sr., were small farmers in rural Madison County. When he was in junior high and high school, he ran errands, worked on the farm, washed

Starling founded the Jackson State University Chapter of the Society of American Military Engineers in 2010, and is a past mentor.

COMPANY GROWTH

Starling determined the firm's lack of capital was problematic early on. However, business owners were able to tap into the emergency management market in 2005 after Hurricane Katrina.

"We were operating a five-person

SOL tradition of excellence," said O'Neal. "We respect each client and we work hard to protect the environment."

WHAT'S NEXT?

"We will continue to evolve in our industry," Starling stated. He believes it is vitally important to measure how well customers are pleased to continue to grow.

"We have our sites on locations on the West Coast. We are looking to expand in Chicago, on the East Coast, and on Florida's coastal region, too. We will try to get into as many markets as we feel we can be competitive in," Starling said. "We are passionate about what we do to shape and improve communities and with focus, energy, drive and paying attention to details, the sky is definitely the limit," O'Neal added.

O'Neal credits the healthy, positive relationship their firm enjoys with SBA, its customers, bankers, partners, team members and other critical stakeholders as being very critical to their success, and looks forward to nurturing those relationships as they seek to reach higher heights.

SOL is on the move cautiously planning roll outs, dotting all the I-s, crossing all the T-s, and seeking to hire smart employees.

By the way, the corporate office is looking for an accountant.

For more information about this engineering firm please contact them.

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cars, and supported the family businesses in any way he could.

Even though he worked consistently during high school, he managed to be valedictorian of his high school class in Canton. Starling credits his high school basketball coach Dellie Robinson and Edward Blackman Jr., a Canton-based lawyer, who was elected to the Mississippi Legislature in 1979, as his most important influencers during his teen years.

"I worked in corporate America for 17 years," Starling said. Starling was a corporate director of Quality and Enterprise Resource Planning for a firm headquartered in New Haven, CT. He provided oversight for Enterprise Resource Planning and Quality Management's 55 locations in the U.S., Mexico, and China. "I had all of that responsibility for a publicly traded company, so with the inspiration from prayer and my wife, I was led to start a company that would be a blessing for my community and my family."

GIVING BACK

"We support our community and are humbled to be in a position to give back," O'Neal acknowledged.

The firm sponsors an ongoing scholarship fund for students in good standing who have participated in the Louis Stokes Mississippi Alliance for Minority Participation or the Summer Bridges Program. Recipients must be from Lowndes County, preferably graduates of West Lowndes High School, or the Canton Public School District in Madison County.

Last year, their staff delivered presentations at the Jackson Aviation Career Education Academy at Hinds Community College in Raymond.

As African American engineers, O'Neal and Starling are interested in encouraging minority students to pursue their chosen field of discipline.

O'Neal currently serves on the Boys and Girls Club of Central Mississippi's board as an expression of his commitment to the community, and making a positive difference where he lives and work.



Willie O'Neal, Jr.



Derek Starling, Sr.