

A Legacy Of Excellence

An Interview with Cheryl McKissack Daniel, President and Chief Executive Officer, McKissack & McKissack

EDITORS' NOTE Cheryl McKissack Daniel has more than 30 years of experience in all phases of the construction industry and provides executive leadership for project implementation. She serves as Principal-in-Charge and Project Executive on numerous high-profile projects, including major work in the commercial, healthcare, education, and transportation sectors and is actively involved in project oversight and management, ensuring that diversity is implemented during each phase of a project or program. She serves on numerous corporate, charitable, and community boards. She has been honored as a "Hero of Liberty" for her support of humanitarian initiatives and for promoting the responsibilities of a free and diverse America. She has also received a Legacy Award from the Women's Builders Council and has been named to City and State New York's Power 50 List. McKissack Daniel earned both a bachelor's and master's degree in civil engineering from Howard University and has completed graduate course work at Columbia University in civil engineering. Born in Nashville to builder and architect William DeBerry McKissack and teacher Leatrice Buchanan McKissack, she represents the fifth generation of the McKissack family's century-old business, McKissack & McKissack.



Cheryl McKissack Daniel

are also very collaborative with a lot of teamwork.

How critical is innovation to McKissack's business?

We are not the biggest company in the industry, so when you are competing with organizations that are much larger than you, you need to innovate to win. We are innovating in technology and we understand that construction is a big data problem, and if you can disseminate that information quickly and make decisions around it quickly, the better you will perform. Technology has been a key to McKissack's growth and strength.

What do you feel differentiates McKissack in the industry?

We are one of the largest, most successful Minority/Women-owned Business Enterprises (MWBE) in the New York construction industry. There are not many firms like us that provide the diverse services and solutions that McKissack offers. Our size is a strength even though at times it can also be a challenge. Clients come to McKissack because they know they are

getting senior leadership on their project, which is different from some of the larger companies where you may get more junior employees or trainees working on the project. At McKissack, we offer clients experienced and seasoned talent to handle their projects.

How do you focus your efforts leading McKissack?

My management style is very loose, and I expect people to be professionals. My focus is on setting the guidelines and expectations and then giving our people the space to do their jobs. One of the areas of focus for me has been succession planning – how to grow McKissack beyond me and how to build the right leaders for the future. Those leaders are internal, and we promote from within. I have been running McKissack for more than 30 years, and I believe that it is best to have more than one person running the company since the more hands on deck, the more you can cover.

Have you seen progress in the opportunities available for women to grow and lead in the construction industry?

I have seen a tremendous increase in women in the construction workforce. We are

FIRM BRIEF McKissack & McKissack (mckissack.com) is the oldest minority/women-owned professional design and construction firm in the United States. For more than 120 years, McKissack has remained a family-owned business, leading the planning, design, and construction of more than 6,000 projects while proudly upholding the standards of excellence established by its forefathers.

How do you describe McKissack's culture?

Our culture is about having people reach their maximum potential within our business. We give our people a loose framework and guidelines to work within, and then we ask them to be innovative and to make decisions. I am a big proponent of the concept that if someone makes the wrong decision, it is a great opportunity to be a learning experience. This is how we have built our business, and as a result we have had longevity with our employees. We



Coney Island Hospital

working on the new JPMorgan Chase headquarters building at 270 Park Avenue in New York City and they are all about quality, and the fact is that women are so detailed that they provide great value to the project. I see women in leadership roles across the industry, and I believe that the profession is open to women because it understands the value and quality that they bring to the business.

What do you see as McKissack's responsibility to be engaged in the communities it serves?

This has been a common thread throughout the generations at McKissack. My grandfather used to build churches at cost because he saw the church as the place where the community gathers. I think that community for us in most of the urban cities we work in, such as New York, Philadelphia, Nashville, and Orlando, is about giving opportunities for people who are having a difficult time getting those opportunities. That is the Black and Brown contractors, for example, and this is easier for McKissack since we have walked that road. We have been in the position where people assume we offer less quality services just because we are a Black-owned business, or people not wanting to come work for us because we are a Black-owned business, or people wanting to pay us less or not pay us at all because we are a Black-owned business. When we meet with contractors that look like us, we give them opportunity and respect because we have been in their shoes.

You mentioned McKissack's involvement in the new JPMorgan Chase headquarters building. What do you feel will be the impact that this building will have on New York City, and how has this project impacted McKissack?

I call it the Eighth Wonder of the World. This is to me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to work on a building that was designed to be an icon for the City of New York and to reemphasize what we represent as a city – the



Rendering of the New Terminal One at JFK International Airport

biggest, the best, the most creative, power, money, excellence – that is what this building is all about. This building will sit in the skyline of New York City and people from all over will know 270 Park Avenue.

The vision of Jamie Dimon (Chairman and CEO of JPMorgan Chase) to provide opportunities for minorities in the construction of this building has had a tremendous impact for McKissack. Prior to this opportunity, McKissack had not worked with any of the Wall Street firms, but since this amazing opportunity we have worked with several. This all opened up after Jamie Dimon took the lead in diversifying across all platforms at JPMorgan Chase which included the construction of 270 Park.

Did you always know that you were going to join McKissack and that this is where you would spend your career?

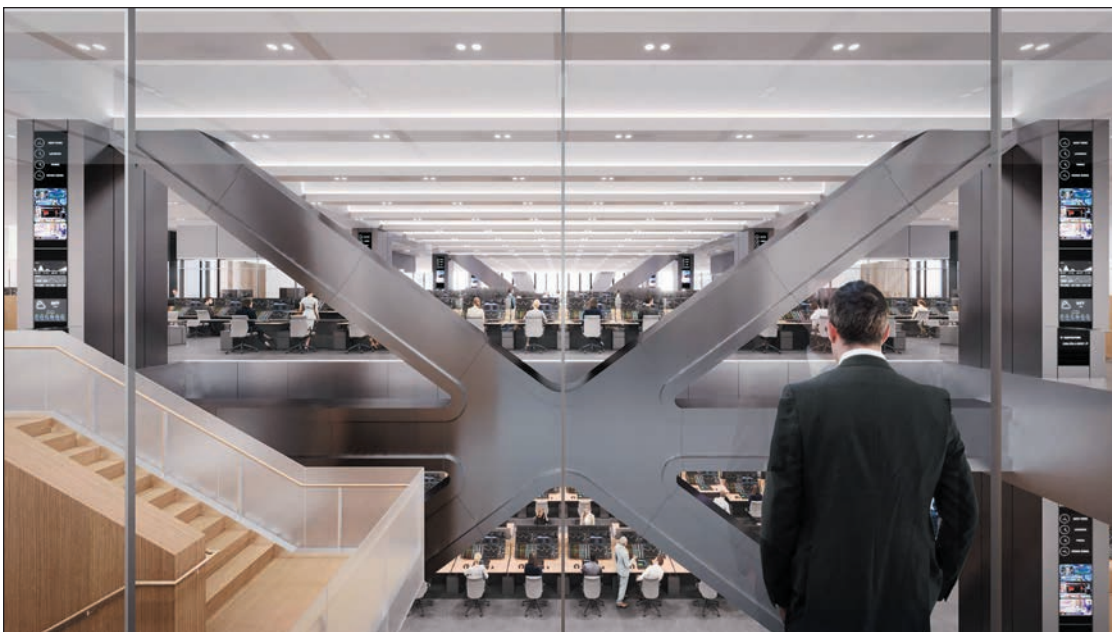
I grew up in a different era, and my parents made the choice of where I was going to college, what I was going to study, and where I was going to work. Since I was ten or so years old, I would work in my father's office on the weekends, and I have been walking job sites since I can remember. It was a totally different time than today. While I hope that my kids (Deryl and Leah Felder) will eventually decide to join McKissack and that they will see how powerful it is to carry on the legacy and to make McKissack a six generation company, this is a decision that they will make for themselves.

When you look back at the success that McKissack has experienced under your leadership, are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate the wins?

I never take my eye off of growth and the next opportunity, but anyone that knows Cheryl McKissack knows that I enjoy a good martini and a good celebration after each win. It is important to take the time with the team that makes it happen, since the team deserves the recognition.

Do you ever think about slowing down?

Absolutely. I love what I do, but I also believe in planning for the future. My goal is to step back and serve as chair of the board by 2030, which would allow for a real transition to begin in the next year or two. That would give my husband, Dr. Samuel Daniel, and me the chance to travel the world and enjoy new experiences together. McKissack & McKissack has a bright future ahead, and I'm confident in its continued success as the legacy carries on. ●



Rendering of the new JPMorgan Chase headquarters building at 270 Park Avenue – Trading Floors