

The Hoosier Minority Chamber of Commerce was in a groove. We defeated the discriminatory game played by United Air Lines and the State of Indiana. Our relations with Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith were great. Contracting for Black owned businesses in the city was growing immensely. I had to think hard as to what might be the next opportunity. Then we got the news Dr. Shirl Gilbert was going to become Superintendent for Indianapolis Public Schools District. He would be the first Black school superintendent in the city.

We met with Dr. Gilbert and got the strong feeling that he was ready to make big changes. That gave us the confidence to move forward. The IPS Board was comprised of four Blacks and three whites. As we went on it was determined that since we were developing our construction contractors and recruiting major Black firms to put offices in Indianapolis, construction should be the starting point.

We met with the IPS Business Manager, Rodney Black. As we sat down, I said to Mr. Black "It is time for IPS to hire a Construction Management firm". He replied, "There are no Black Construction Management firms!" OK, it appears that we are going to have to play hardball. I suggested a follow up with me and two bona fide and qualified Black construction firms. Two weeks later we met again.

I brought in Powers & Sons Construction based in Gary, Indiana. They were represented by their CEO Mamon Powers Jr. The other firm was Batteast Construction based in South Bend, Indiana and Robert Batteast Jr. represented them. These multi-generational firms were high quality but they had been blocked from doing business in Indianapolis until we started our advocacy.

Mr. Black was reticent as they made their presentations. As they closed I "dropped" this on the guy: "Mr. Black you have been exclusively hiring a firm that is smaller than both of these firms and less qualified. Plus that IPS is being charged 5% of cost which is far greater than the market rate of 3%. The Board is not going to like that." He looked enraged as I continued, "Listen here! Dr. Shirl Gilbert becomes Superintendent on February 14, 1992 and you will have given the next Construction Management contract to a Black firm. I don't care which one but they must be Black and I have just put two Black firms right before your eyes. If you don't hire a firm by that time, I will seek your firing. That's right your job depends on this."

On the morning of February 14, I got a call from Mamon Powers. He happily said, "Your style worked! Rodney Black just called me and said be at his office by 2:00PM to sign the next Construction Management contract". Dr. Gilbert was being sworn in at 5:00PM

and Mr. Black was no fool after all. We broke the "ice" and now was the time to seize the procurement giant known as Indianapolis Public Schools District.

Dr. Gilbert came in with a roar. The District just budgeted fourteen schools for major renovation and he proposed a brilliant idea. The architectural and construction management contracts for these fourteen schools would be delivered through one massive competition. The top two firms in each category would get seven schools each and all firms were invited to participate in the competition. There were 32 construction companies in the competition and half as many architectural firms. The selection committee was predominantly Black. They should be as the school district was about 75% Black – it's only fair.

We were all excited about the possibility. Powers had a pretty good advantage as he was now doing such work for IPS. The times were very tense until the winners were announced. For Construction Management: #1 was SR Smoot Construction, a Black owned firm out of Columbus, Ohio and #2 was Powers & Sons and For Architecture: #1 was Blackburn Architects, a Black owned firm locally based and #2 was Woods Architects, another local Black owned firm. We slam dunked them!

The White establishment, especially the White contractors, were livid. They tried to influence the School Board which had to approve the selections. Their vote went down along racial lines 4 – 3 our favor. The school headquarters was standing room only when the final vote made by Superintendent Gilbert was to be announced. Dr. Gilbert looked at everyone in the room and finally spoke, "This school system has been conducting business for over 80 years and has never had a construction management firm or architectural firm manage a complete project. I stand here today to say that this practice has come to an end. I approve the recommended choices." Victory was ours! We now had a Black school district acting responsibly.

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