

CELEBRATING BLACK ENTREPRENEURS

This is the third week in the **San Diego Business Journal**’s continuing celebration of Black History Month by featuring stories on local Black entrepreneurs.

Black-owned businesses have a proud tradition in San Diego and we are expanding our coverage to bring increasing awareness of how integral Black-owned businesses are to our region.

Engagement is what the Community of Business is all about and we are committed to showcasing the ways Black businesses have enriched our city. Black business leaders have achieved much in their professional lives and contributed significantly to San Diego.

We believe each of these stories gives a small glimpse of not only accomplishment, but hope. The stories are illuminating and we hope they will inspire and motivate all of us to support these Black-owned businesses.

If you are a Black business owner or have a Black business story, please send information to us at businessnews@sdbj.com. We want to hear from you. Throughout 2021, the San Diego Business Journal is committed to continuing to showcase minority-owned businesses.



Barb Chodos
President and Publisher



Jay Harn
Editor-in-Chief

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PRESENTED BY



Winery Has Rich History

BEVERAGES: Altipiano Vineyard and Winery Only Black Female-Owned Winery in SoCal

■ By MARIEL CONCEPCION

To visit **Altipiano Vineyard and Winery**, headquartered in Escondido, is to experience a piece of San Diego's rich African American history.

Founded in 2008 and at 500-acres in size, Altipiano is the only Black female-owned winery in Southern California, as well as minority owned and veteran owned.

These aren't recognitions that co-owner and wine maker **Denise Clarke** takes for granted.

"The thing is, I know what it means to be in the corporate world," said Clarke, who will turn 65 years old next month. "I was in human resources and I saw it all. I know what it is like to be in a male dominant environment. I know what it feels like to have to be three



Denise Clarke
Co-Owner/Wine Maker
Altipiano Vineyard
and Winery

times as good to get ahead. And I know what it feels like to get into a business that you aren't trying to be in but then you have to make it work because failure is not an option. I know what those fears feel like, those challenges, the weight of it all. If you don't have a good network of people that come from different disciplines that you can use as a soundboard and get that advice, then, it's pretty tough. So, if I can share my story, especially with a person of color, and inspire them along their journey, then I've done my job."

Safe, Relaxed and Encouraged

This is part of the reason Clarke, along with her husband and business partner **Peter Clarke** and her daughter, have kept Altipiano open as long as legally possible during COVID-19, she said: to offer an environment where patrons of all races can come and feel safe, relaxed and encouraged even if just for a few hours amid the pandemic.

With COVID the numerous state-mandated openings and closings since last March, it hasn't been easy to continue to run the family business, said Clarke. Add to the crisis, political distress and race riots and last year was a tough year for everyone, she said.

Still, she is motivated when she hears people laugh while visiting Altipiano. That, she said, brings a sense of hope not just to her customers, but to Clarke and her family, who live on the winery, as well.

As a result, during lockdown, Clarke focused heavily on creating a safe environment for her and her guests to experience upon reopening.



The Altipiano Vineyard.

“

"The thing is, I know what it means to be in the corporate world. I was in human resources and I saw it all. I know what it is like to be in a male dominant environment. I know what it feels like to have to be three times as good to get ahead. And I know what it feels like to get into a business that you aren't trying to be in but then you have to make it work because failure is not an option. I know what those fears feel like, those challenges, the weight of it all. If you don't have a good network of people that come from different disciplines that you can use as a soundboard and get that advice, then, it's pretty tough. So, if I can share my story, especially with a person of color, and inspire them along their journey, then I've done my job."

DENISE CLARKE



Photo Courtesy of Altipiano Vineyard and Winery
Denise Clarke, (left) and husband Peter Clarke (middle), founded Altipiano Vineyard and Winery in 2008. At right is daughter Tonisha Del La Cruz.

"My daughter and my four grandchildren live here, too, and so it was always in my mind: how do we keep everyone safe?" she said, adding that the staff now wears gloves, disinfects seating stations between groups, switched to bottle service only instead of individual tastings, and gifts each visitor with an Altipiano stemless glass, courtesy of the winery, so to avoid reusing glassware between customers.

After a new wave of closing, Altipiano reopened again earlier this month. Its opening weekend was completely sold out, said Clarke, hosting over 100 guests. All of the tastings are outside, she said, adding that the winery has over 4,000 grapevines and grows a number of varietals, including petite Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon. The winery also recently switched to 21 and over, said Clarke, as an added safety precaution.

The Backstory

Named after the Italian word meaning "plateau", Altipiano was an avocado farm that perished in the Witch Creek Fire of 2007, said Clarke. In 2008, and inspired by a trip to Italy, it was reimagined as a vineyard and winery with Clarke as its master wine maker.

Since then, Clarke has inspired an entire generation of others.

Cassandra Schaege said moved forward with the opening of her business, **SIP Wine & Beer LLC**, after learning of Clarke and her contributions to the beverage industry as an African American woman. Founded in 2015, SIP is the only wine bar in the city of Escondido today.

"Denise has been a mentor who gave me the courage to create space to pursue my passion," she said. "The wine space requires grit, tenacity and the ability to sideline naysayers. Denise cultivated a wine haven (in) Altipiano that shaped the San Diego wine culture and encourages women and people of color to engage and explore wine." ■

Altipiano Vineyard and Winery

FOUNDED: 2008

CO-FOUNDER: Denise Clarke

HEADQUARTERS: Escondido

BUSINESS: Vineyard and winery

EMPLOYEES: Three

WEBSITE: www.altipianovineyard.com

NOTABLE: Only Black female owned winery in Southern California.

CONTACT: 760-839-7999

Helping Those Who May Be Overlooked

EDUCATION: Reality Changers Supports First-Generation College Students' Goals for Higher Education



In 2020, Reality Changers sent 281 students to two-year or four-year colleges through its program that supports first-generation college students.

■ By NATALLIE ROCHA

Tamara Craver leads Reality Changers, a nonprofit organization that is at the intersection of education and opportunity for students who might get overlooked in school. By surrounding students with positive role models and support, this local nonprofit helps young people succeed in college and beyond.

Reality Changers is a local, nonprofit that prepares youth to become first-generation college graduates and agents of change in their communities. In 2020, the program sent 281 students to two-year or four-year colleges and saw 140 program alumni earn post-secondary credentials.

"When we recruit them we're looking for students who have that 2.0 or below GPA, which are students who don't typically get a lot of attention from other programs," Craver said. "And so we're saying here's an opportunity for you to change your narrative, to fix your grades, and we'll support you through the process."

Since the organization's founding in 2001, Reality Changers youth participants have come from 13 middle schools and 44 high schools throughout San Diego.

"When Chris Yanov started the organization his belief, which we strongly still believe, is that if we catch them in the eighth grade, we can change their trajectory by the time they hit high school," Craver said.

Craver brought more than 20 years of experience in nonprofit fundraising and executive leadership when she took the lead as president and CEO of the organization in August 2019.

Prior to Reality Changers, she served as director of The Posse Foundation, Los Angeles, a nonprofit that provides scholarships and prepares diverse groups of leaders who transform communities. Under her leadership, she successfully increased the program's number of students mentored for college and more than quadrupled the foundation's annual revenue.

"I think that that's one of the things I was most proud of in these past few months, is that the community relationships that we've built, we were able to connect students to additional resources that are outside the realm of what you know we do in terms of 'college changes everything'. But we also understand that if the kid is hungry and or homeless — that is an obstacle and barrier for them to do well academically."

TAMARA CRAVER

As the head of Reality Changers, she's built upon the organization's partnerships with local groups that offer students support and professional opportunities. The nonprofit's relationship with partners like Centro Fox, The San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce, San Diego Unified School District, SeaWorld, and The YMCA of San Diego County provide resources to meet students' needs now and in the future.

Overcoming Challenges

While there have always been challenges that Reality Changers has helped students overcome, Craver understands how the pandemic has raised other hurdles beyond academics. With the pandemic shifting the program online in 24 hours, Craver said suddenly having a quiet place to study at a Starbucks coffee shop or at the library is gone for many students.



Tamara Craver
President & CEO
Reality Changers

"As you can imagine it's been very challenging because those interpersonal relationships, is what really supports these students to kind of get over those obstacles that they may face academically and sometimes even at home," Craver said.

Even with the sudden shift to online programming, Craver said her team was able to account for all of the students who they knew immediately faced either housing insecurity issues or didn't have access to cell phones, and they worked to connect them to community partners who could help.

"I think that that's one of the things I was most proud of in these past few months, is that the community relationships that we've built, we were able to connect students to additional resources that are outside the realm of what you know

we do in terms of 'college changes everything'," Craver said. "But we also understand that if the kid is hungry and or homeless — that is an obstacle and barrier for them to do well academically."

Sometimes there are multiple generations living at home and these students are having to split their time with on-line school and additional jobs to support their family, Craver said, so she is also trying to provide a place of rest for the students.

"So we've tried to remain a consistent positive force in their lives and understanding that this is a new era for them being on zoom all day long, and zoom fatigue is real, that we've had to be very creative," Craver said.

While Craver said she is not sure what exactly the ripple effect of the pandemic will be on the higher education system, she sees glimmers of hope for how their digital infrastructure can provide more students access to educational programs like Reality Changers in the future.

"Being an optimist, I think one of the things that has really come out of this for us as an organization is that we're no longer restricted to brick and mortar," Craver said. "And so thinking about how we expand our services to be able to serve more students across the San Diego County is something that we are working on." ■

Reality Changers



FOUNDED: 2001

CEO: Tamara Craver

HEADQUARTERS: City Heights

BUSINESS DESCRIPTION: Reality Changers prepares youth to become first-generation college graduates and agents of change in their communities.

NOTABLE: Provided 10,770 hours of college readiness instruction to 12th graders.

IMPACT: Served 549 8th - 12th graders in 2020

CONTACT: info@realitychangers.org, 619-516-2222, Facebook, LinkedIn, & Twitter @RealityChangers | Instagram & YouTube @RealityChangersOrg

Write Juice Food Truck Offers Healthy Options

FOOD: Founder Wants to Bring Health Back Into the Community

■ By RAY HUARD

Joshlyn Turner started her food truck business – **The Write Juice** – in 2009 with a goal of giving people in her part of San Diego healthy alternatives to the liquor stores and tobacco stores she saw all around her.

“I really do want to bring health back into the community,” said Turner, who grew up in Southeast San Diego.

“My parents were very big on fruits and vegetables,” Turner said. “What I noticed was as food trucks became a trend, we did not have a specialty truck like what I had in mind.”

The name of her business is a play on Turner’s avocation as a writer.

“Writing was a hobby for me, something I’ve been able to do since I was younger and I always enjoyed,” she said.

Turner said she was a theater production major at Hampton University in Virginia, where she earned a degree in liberal arts with an emphasis on theater production.

After college, she moved to Atlanta where she did some writing for a theater production company.

Branching Out

Besides the food truck, Turner also has the **Write Fit**, an online clothing company, and recently started The Write Expressions, a greeting card business.

The Write Juice Truck	
	
YEAR FOUNDED: 2019	
FOUNDER AND CEO: Joshlyn Turner	
HEADQUARTERS: San Diego, CA	
EMPLOYEES: 1	
WEBSITE: https://www.thewritejuicetruck.com/	
NOTABLE: First owned and operated Black woman owned smoothie truck.	
CONTACT: info@thejuicetruck.com	



Photo courtesy of Joshlyn Turner

Joshlyn Turner designed her own food truck from a converted delivery van.

“I just kept the umbrella of the Write brand,” Turner said. “The vibrant colors of the truck, the name, the branding – all of them play a part in the Write energy.”

In 2020, Turner again turned to her avocation, producing **Black Girls Got The Juice** coloring book.

As far as she knows, Turner has created a special niche for food trucks.

“There’s nothing like it, at least at this side of the country,” Turner said.

Turner started out making smoothies at home and visiting smoothie restaurants to see what they offered.

“I kind of took that and decided I could make it a healthier option,” Turner said. “I had a few friends who were in the food industry. I talked to them about it. I did a taste test,” Turner said adding that “It was about two or three years before I

even opened the truck.”

“I met multiple companies. I bought books about food trucks,” Turner said. “It took a while to play around with.”

Turner said her secret is to keep it simple.

“I get some customers who come to the truck, who know what they want. Then I have a lot of customers who come to the truck and all they know is they want something good,” Turner said. “Once you tell them what’s in it, they’re ‘Oh, this is healthy? That’s good.’”

A favorite among her customers is a blue smoothie that gets its color from acai berries.

“People say ‘I want the blue,’” Turner said. “Mostly, they’re drawn to the color.”

Community Helped

The COVID-19 pandemic has hurt. “With food trucks, a lot of our revenue

comes from large events,” Turners said. “Our catering gigs aren’t like they used to be but we are open to still do that.”

She said she’s managed to pull through with support from the community and by forming partnerships with Black-owned restaurants.

“I’m thankful about having a truck. The great thing about having a truck is I can pick up and go where I want verses a brick and mortar,” Turner said.

Although she owns and runs The Write Juice herself, Turner said her family often helps.

Over time, Turner said the pandemic may indirectly help her business as people become more interested in health.

“People are paying more attention to their immune system,” Turner said. “This has also given people an opportunity to try our drinks.”

In addition to running her own businesses, Turner is a mentor and serves on the board of **DETOUR**, a nonprofit organization that works with young girls.

As a Black woman, Turner said she’s a bit of a rarity in San Diego County’s food truck scene.

“When you think in terms of just like access and having someone to talk to, there wasn’t anybody I could turn to, like a Black-owned food truck,” Turner said. “I do think people are surprised when they find out who owns the truck. I wish there were more Black-owned food trucks, especially in San Diego because it’s so prevalent in other cities where the population of minorities is high. I think San Diego is a little bit behind on that.” ■



Joshlyn Turner
Founder and CEO
The Write Juice Truck

Ensuset Technology Group Remains on Top

FINANCE: Firm Has Supported \$11.6 Billion in M&A Deals

■ By FRED GRIER

Ensuset Technology Group, founder and CEO **Paul Robinson** drive for entrepreneurship was instilled early on.

His great-grandfather was the pastor at one of the first African American churches in San Diego. His grandmother, born in 1916, was a self-taught real estate investor. His mother holds a doctorate and his father was a U.S. Olympic champion.

Following the footsteps of his accomplished family, Robinson carries a philosophy that he learned from his Olympian

father, which was to surround himself with world-class competitors.

“My job is to build the ‘stadium,’ and fill it with the best players in the game,” said Robinson.

Launched in 2008

Robinson, a self-taught IT professional, got his first start in mergers and acquisitions, when the company he worked for merged with another in 2007.

The following year, he launched Ensuset Technology Group, a firm that focuses on enterprise IT architecture and post-merger IT integration. Founded in 2008, Ensuset Technology Group’s line of business includes a range of IT management services and consulting.

In less than five years, Paul took his one-person, high end I.T. consulting company to sales of over \$1 million per year, while increasing owner independence by 400 percent.

Today, the San Diego-based company serves global Fortune 1000 enterprises,

as well as clients in the public, government, and defense sectors. A global firm, Ensuset services clients across the United States, Central America, and the Asia-Pacific region.

Supporting \$11.6B M&A Activity

Ensuset has been involved in planning, organizing, and availing the necessary resources to facilitate successful

acquisitions, from million- to billion-dollar mergers.

Its offerings include IT consulting, cloud and infrastructure services, cybersecurity, enterprise operations, business process optimization, merger and acquisition, and IT life-cycle planning, among other services.

To date, the firm has supported mergers and acquisition deals that total \$11.6 billion. More recently, Ensuset Technology Group was involved in a global M&A engagement valued at over \$7.6 billion in October last year.



Paul Robinson
Founder and CEO
Ensuset Technology Group

Ensuset Technology Group	
	
FOUNDED: 2008	
CEO: Paul Robinson	
HEADQUARTERS: Scripps Ranch	
BUSINESS: Provides merger and acquisition services	
EMPLOYEES: 22	
WEBSITE: www.ensuset.com	
NOTABLE: Co. was recently involved in a global M&A engagement valued at over \$7.6 billion	
CONTACT: probinson@ensuset.com	

“This was an important achievement for Ensuset Technology Group and the involved parties in this M&A engagement. It served as an important milestone in our company’s evolving history,” said Robinson. “The credit goes to the hard work of our team and their commitment to designing and implementing approaches that benefit our clients.”

Since inception, the company has been awarded numerous accolades including being named Small Business of the Year by the **Central San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce** and ranked Number 335 on **Inc. Magazine’s** 5,000 fastest-growing private companies in America in 2018. It is also among the top ten for IT management companies and the sixth-fastest-growing company in the San Diego metro area in 2019.

Building in San Diego

Headquartered in Scripps Ranch, it employs 22 local staffers. A minority-owned business, the team brings over 30 years of public and private sector experience. Robinson said he plans to continue growing and building its team in San Diego. ■

Young Black & N' Business Aids Black Entrepreneurs

SERVICE: Group Aims to Help Businesses Increase Profits, Find Community

■ By FRED GRIER

Over the last five years, **Young Black and 'N Business** has been helping entrepreneurs build their professional network, meet new customers, and leverage the power of marketing.

The business organization provides instruction and inspiration to business people through the organization's events, programs and digital magazine. It also works with the **NAACP San Diego** and the **Urban League of San Diego County** to spread the word about its offerings.

Founded by **Roosevelt Williams**, a San Diego native and Black entrepreneur, said he spun up the business organization after wanting to pass on knowledge that he learned through his experiences to the next-generation of entrepreneurs.

Bring Together Minority Entrepreneurs

"Young Black and 'N Business is devoted to serving and motivating the overlooked and underserved majority, working together as one to be healthy, happy and successful," said Williams, president and CEO of Young Black and 'N Business.



Roosevelt Williams
President and CEO
Young Black and 'N
Business

"Young, is a state of mind. The color Black encompasses and includes all of the colors in the spectrum. The definition of business is to provide a solution for a problem that equates into profit," he added.

Since inception, the San Diego-based organization has hosted quarterly networking mixers, business clinics, and courses on public speaking, consulting and event planning, as well as two festivals, including "A Soulful Christmas," where more 2,000 toys were given away last year.



Brittany Miller
Chief Marketing
Officer
Young Black & N'
Business

In addition, it has also held several philanthropic events, such as turkey drives and forming partnerships with local nonprofits for free food distributions.

In response to the pandemic, the organization quickly pivoted to hosting virtual trainings through **Zoom**, focused on helping Black-owned businesses shift to e-commerce.



Photo courtesy of Young Black and 'N Business

Young Black & N' Business is a black-owned organization that aids entrepreneurs in expanding their professional network, creating high value exposure, and supplying entrepreneurial content from real entrepreneurs. In November, the organization launch its Young Black Entrepreneur Magazine.

"We teach them to go from brick and mortar to click and order," said Williams.

Celebrating Black History

One of the organization's top projects is a poster that highlights 100 community Black industry leaders in San Diego County. The latest edition of the 24-by 36-inch poster, called "Black Faces in High Places," which releases at the beginning of February each year.

In conjunction with Black History Month, the organization also awards one local leader making an impact in the San Diego community and beyond. Last year, it awarded former Assemblywoman Dr. **Shirley Weber**, the first African American to hold the position of Secretary of State in California's history.

"Dr. Shirley Weber is a living example

of legacy building, with her daughter now running to fill her mother's seat in the 79th Assembly District," said **Brittany Miller**, chief marketing officer at Young Black & N' Business.

Creating Financial Impact

Through Young Black and 'N Business, the goal is to eventually acquire an executive commercial complex and establish a community block of Black-owned businesses, said Williams.

It aims to provide an all-inclusive space, bringing together a variety of minority entrepreneurs within industries including health and beauty, travel and hospitality, insurance, among other verticals.

"Our mission is bring their

entrepreneurs from darkness into the light," said Williams. "In the next five to ten years, we will focus on vertical integration and group economics," said Williams. Our goal is to create more than 100 millionaires here in San Diego and have a real financial impact on the economy."

Williams formerly owned and operated a Sole Cobbler repair shop, before shifting to Young Black and 'N Business full-time in 2016. Involved in the local community, he has served as president at the Urban League's 21st Century Youth Leadership Team, College Career Club, and San Diego Youth Commission. Williams lives in Rancho San Diego with his wife and has two children. ■

Young Black and 'N Business

FOUNDED: 2016

CEO: Roosevelt Williams

HEADQUARTERS: Chula Vista

BUSINESS: Promotes Black-owned products, programs and services.

EMPLOYEES: 5

WEBSITE: www.ybandnb.com

NOTABLE: Org. has partnership with NAACP San Diego and Urban League of San Diego.

CONTACT: roosevelt_william@yahoo.com

Fighting for Racial Equity and Diversity

NONPROFIT: Organization Builds Relationships, Hosts Events and Offers Support

■ By FRED GRIER

Sister Cities Project founder **Shawn McClondon** is pushing for diversity and racial equity, one conversation at a time. Through his newly founded nonprofit, it aims to provide a platform for Black women entrepreneurs while also helping the youth pursue their passions.

Founded in 2020, McClondon launched the nonprofit in the wake of the killing of George Floyd last year, and the demonstrations and protests against police brutality and systemic racism that followed.



Shawn McClondon
Founder
Sister Cities Project

Sister Cities Project seeks to address institutional racism with partnerships between



Photo courtesy of Sister Cities Project
Sister Cities Project, is building relationships between affluent White communities and underserved Black communities in order to encourage the sharing of support, resources and cultures.

affluent communities and more underserved communities, encouraging relationship building, in addition to resources and support for the communities in need.

"Sister Cities Project was created to form formal partnerships between underserved minority communities with affluent communities, mainly between White and Black people to build a new relationship and deepen cultural understanding between them," said McClondon.

"We believe that forming these partnerships between differing communities will be the catalyst to help end racial inequality," he added.

Focusing on Black Women

The organization creates programs and events that allow communities to collaborate and share resources, in an effort to forge relationships and provide opportunities for affluent communities to support the Black community. An all-inclusive nonprofit, the programs focuses on primarily Black women.

So far, Sister Cities Project has two prototype partnerships between Encinitas and City Heights, and Solana Beach and southeastern San Diego. In addition, it has hosted more than 10 "cultural tours," as well as a San Diego Black Women Entrepreneurs Summit.

"These tours take residents from Solana Beach and Encinitas down to southeastern San Diego and City Heights. During these tours, we sit in an area that is significant to the community, have lunch provided by a Black-owned business, and ask for donations to provide a larger tip. We then have a guided discussion on how the two communities can support one another, which includes speakers from local businesses, organizations and elected officials," said McClondon.

The summit is also a fundraiser through sponsorships to build out an ecosystem that will support the entrepreneurs in our network.

Aims to Expand Nationwide

Starting in San Diego, the goal is to expand nation-wide.

"We have to be able to listen to each other and talk to each other because it's important for us to take the next step towards social justice, equality, and ending racism," said McClondon. "I believe that forming these partnerships between differing communities will be the catalyst to help end racial inequality."

McClondon started his career in the internet industry in 1998. His first start-up, **Designing Minds**, allowed him to work with leading companies such as **Intuit**, **Coldwell Banker** and **Century 21**, among others. Today he runs **Smart Digital**, a digital marketing consulting company with clients including **WD-40 Company**, **Dexcom** and **Bumble Bee Tuna**. McClondon, 45, lives in Solana Beach and has two children, Damion and Quentin. ■

Sister Cities Project

FOUNDED: 2020

CEO: Shawn McClondon

HEADQUARTERS: Solana Beach

BUSINESS: Nonprofit pushing for diversity and racial equity

EMPLOYEES: 6

WEBSITE: www.sistercitiesproject.org

NOTABLE: McClondon has founded multiple companies and nonprofits.

CONTACT: shawn@sistercitiesproject.org

15 Rules to Live By

DEFENSE: Allen Maxwell Uses His Analytical Side to Identify, Work Within a System

■ BY BRAD GRAVES

Allen F. Maxwell recalls telling the people around him in rural Georgia that he was going to be a businessman someday.

It was the 1970s. He had already spent the first 11 years of his life in a part of Philadelphia known as the Badlands. Then came his first case of culture shock. He moved with his family from the city to a small town in the South, where he found himself working in fields full of peas, beans, cucumbers, watermelons and tobacco.

Were those field workers able to see 50 years into the future, they would have seen Maxwell getting out of a sleek Italian sedan at a glass building at the east end of Mission Valley. True to his word, Maxwell is a businessman, running his own company.

A San Diego Story

The years between then and now turned out to be a San Diego story. Maxwell joined the **U.S. Navy** to get away from the Georgia farms. That introduced him to the military, and more importantly to one of his first mentors. It also introduced him to his first duty station on the destroyer tender USS Dixie at the naval base on 32nd Street.

Twenty-two years later, Maxwell retired as a Chief Warrant Officer 3. He went to work as a civilian in government procurement offices, including SPAWAR — the information technology command now known as NAVWAR. He also started dabbling in business, running a mailbox store franchise in La Jolla.

There came a point when Maxwell realized he could be a defense contractor himself: "As a GS-15 [government employee], I was watching people get these million dollar checks," he said.

He founded his defense contracting company, **Omni2Max Inc.**, in 2009. It specializes in cybersecurity, engineering, information technology, logistics, program management and system engineering.

\$8M in Revenue

The most recent year has been particularly good. Sales grew from \$5.5 million in 2019 to \$8 million in 2020. Maxwell attributes that growth, in part, to bringing in new ideas, strategies and people — including a strong business development executive — and having a stellar track record with government clients.

Omni2Max has about 100 employees around the country, in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Texas and Nevada, in addition to California.

The business was also selected by the **World Trade Center San Diego** for the Met-roConnect program, which introduces participants to international markets. Omni2Max has been in talks to do business in the Philippines, India and Mexico, Maxwell said.

Like many of his peers, Maxwell has been able to gain certifications for his company that give it a preference in obtaining



Allen F. Maxwell
CEO
Omni2Max Inc.

contracts. Among other things, Omni2Max is a minority owned business and a service-disabled veteran owned business.

It takes part in the **U.S. Small Business Administration's** 8(a) program, which offers companies sole-source contracts up to \$4 million without competition. It's nice, but it's no free ride, Maxwell said. "It's a good club in your bag, but you have to work it." One has to market hard, he said, and pay attention to quality of service.

Recognizing the System

Maxwell recently wrote a book about his life called "The System Is Unforgiving: Play by the Rules and Win." In it, he lays out 15 rules for dealing with life.

For example, Rule of the System No. 4 is "Never become pompous or arrogant. Adversity is not the enemy; stay humble."

While the book is a memoir, it is also a study in sociology and anthropology. Maxwell said he has always had an analytical mind. As he recounts his life, he discusses the systems that certain communities and cultures develop, the benefits of working within a system, and the penalties of going against it.

"There's a system in everything we do," he said. A person has to understand it and work with it.

The farms in Georgia had an ingenious way of paying farm hands a small wage, then taking most of the wage back by charging for

meals and snacks. Maxwell kept his wages by bringing his own food and snacks, saying he was keeping to a special diet, and not giving the impression that he was too good to comply. "I used the system against itself in a nonthreatening way," he wrote.

The Importance of Mentorship

There was also a tale of an early mentor from his first ship in San Diego, a senior enlisted sailor named **Albert McCoy**, who clued him in on how to negotiate life in the Navy, and life in general. Maxwell wrote that he hated McCoy at first, and then came to realize him as an angel.

Surprisingly, there is one thing the system is not: The system isn't personal.

"Nothing's personal in life," Maxwell said. "If you make things personal, I think you've gone down the wrong path." ■

Omni2Max Inc.

FOUNDED: 2009

CEO: Allen F. Maxwell

HEADQUARTERS: La Mesa

BUSINESS: Professional technical service firm, serving the defense industry

REVENUE: \$8 million in 2020; \$5.5 million in 2019

EMPLOYEES: 30 in San Diego; 100 companywide

WEBSITE: www.omni2max.com

NOTABLE: One of Maxwell's daughters followed in her father's footsteps. She joined the Navy as a Construction Battalions builder, otherwise known as a SEABEE.

CONTACT: info@omni2max.com

A Legacy of Service

NONPROFIT: Neighborhood House Association Delivers Services to San Diegans for More Than 100 years

■ By NATALLIE ROCHA

As a kid, **Rudolph A. Johnson, III** never imagined being the President and CEO of the **Neighborhood House Association (NHA)**, but looking back on his career path to where he is today, he said it all makes sense.

As a child, he participated in the Neighborhood House Association's Head Start Program that supports early childhood education. Now, he leads the nonprofit with a dedication to giving back to his community.

"I came through this Head Start program in 1968, that I'm now President and CEO of so it's very personal to come full circle and service the community that helped raise me," Johnson said.

On top of that, Johnson shared that he is the fourth generation in his family to work at Neighborhood House Association, starting with his great-grandmother.

The Neighborhood House Association is one of the largest nonprofit social service agencies in San Diego County with 125 locations in the region. It was founded in 1914 as a settlement house that helped immigrants transition into the San Diego community. According to the NHA website, more than 3.5 million individuals have been impacted by its services in just the last 50 years.

Now in his 15th year leading the organization, Johnson said his work is not only personal, but a matter of upholding the legacy of service NHA provides to the community.

"I take that very seriously; I don't take it for granted and I'm very laser focused as I go about our work," Johnson said.

Legacy of Service

The San Diego-native has found ways to put his own stamp on this more than 100-year-old organization. Under his leadership, NHA developed the Continuum of Care Model which ties together its 25 plus programs with a simple goal.

The nonprofit has a "vision that begins at the prenatal stages of life and continues all the way to senior care and adult day health care." The Continuum of Care Model is rooted in its Nutrition Services program and Balanced Living Initiative which provides San Diegans the wellness tools to thrive at every stage of life.

"But here's the simplicity — babies that we're serving in our Black Infant Health Program and Early Head Start, we want to hire them in our corporation 20 years from now," Johnson said. "So essentially, we're developing our own workforce 20 years out. And that's how I look at it."

According to the NHA website, the organization "is investing approximately \$75,000 in each child today, with the goal that they will return to the next step in the model, Workforce Placement at NHA." Johnson shared that the NHA touches more than 20,000 individuals per year through its programs and wrap-around services from food distribution, education, healthcare, employment



Rudolph A. Johnson, III
President & CEO
Neighborhood House Association



Neighborhood House Association works with local organizations and corporate partners to provide social services to the community.



"I've always been excited about our work because I know, the type of families and individuals and neighborhoods that we serve, we help and it's not hard to understand that because, you know, that was me. I was that little young guy running around in those neighborhoods — so it is not hard to get geared up."

RUDOLPH A. JOHNSON

services, youth programs and senior services.

"I would say, not only are we very unique, we're that polka dotted unicorn in San Diego," Johnson said. "I just don't think you're 'gonna find one like us."

While the pandemic has shone a light on the essential role of these kinds of services, Johnson explained that they have always been there doing the necessary work. While the organization has adapted services such as mental health support to offer thousands of telehealth visits as well as services in the field, Johnson proudly said they "have not missed a beat" since March 13, 2020.

Social Service Heart, Business Mind

Prior to leading NHA, Johnson served as the general manager of the **San Diego Convention Center**. He explained that when he joined Neighborhood House in 2006, he brought his business experience and strategy of managing the Convention Center to the human-services agency.

"I developed this concept, you know, a social service heart with a business mind," Johnson said.

One example of this transformational strategy was when he introduced the concept of a virtual gala for NHA's annual fundraiser — an event they have

been doing for the past 14 years.

As an executive leading during the pandemic, he said "the number one thing you can do is be as good employer — you can protect jobs." In addition to the families NHA provides services to, Johnson said he is mindful not to overlook the 801 employees and their families that he is responsible for as the organization's leader.

What keeps him inspired in his work during tough times and beyond, is his understanding of how families, like his growing up, are impacted by NHA's work.

"I've always been excited about our work because I know, the type of families and individuals and neighborhoods that we serve, we help and it's not hard to understand that because, you know, that was me," Johnson said. "I was that little young guy running around in those neighborhoods — so it is not hard to get geared up." ■

Neighborhood House Association



FOUNDED: 1914

CEO: Rudolph A. Johnson, III

HEADQUARTERS: Kearny Mesa

BUSINESS DESCRIPTION: The Neighborhood House Association is one of the largest nonprofit social service agencies in San Diego County with wrap around services for families.

NOTABLE: Johnson started in the Head Start program as a child, and now leads NHA's program as President and CEO.

EMPLOYEES: 801

CONTACT: communityaffairs@neighborhoodhouse.org, (858) 715-2642, Twitter and Instagram: @nha_sd Facebook: Neighborhood House Association San Diego

Improving Lives with Innovation

HEALTH: NewGait Founder Hopes to Change Lives and Improve Mobility with Rehab Device

■ By NATALLIE ROCHA

What started as a training device to help athletes run faster, transformed into a mission to promote recovery, increase mobility and improve the quality of life for people with movement limitations.

Founder and CEO, **Benga Adeeko** parlayed his passion for track and field into his company **NewGait** that creates a physical therapy and rehab device for people who have difficulty walking.

Originally from San Antonio, Texas Adeeko graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering and ran Division 1 track and field. He came to San Diego to work for **UTC Aerospace Systems** in Chula Vista, but he wasn't finding as much fulfillment from his job as he had hoped.

"So I really then thought back to my passions in life," Adeeko said. "What do I love to do? And engineering was one of them, but track and field was another."



Benga Adeeko
CEO & Co-Founder
NewGait



NewGait is a rehabilitation device used by physical therapists to help patients who have difficulties walking.

He said he ran track and field almost his entire life, so to get back to it he started coaching a youth track club in Carmel Valley.

It was while he was coaching track and field athletes that Adeeko started asking himself another question — how can I help my runners improve their stride and run faster? This curiosity led him to conceptualize the **SpeedMaker**, a wearable resistance band device, now called the **NewGait**, in 2014.

The original **SpeedMaker** device was developed as a series of elastic bands around the waist and thighs that focused on muscle groups such as the hamstrings and glutes to power a runner's extensions, Adeeko explained. The current **NewGait** device works similarly as a series of straps along the hips, shoulders, legs and elastic bands that provide resistance on patient's muscle groups as they walk.

Adeeko said he thought back to when he was his strongest as a runner and what

muscles needed to be strengthened. Engineering the prototypes then just became a series of asking a small question and solving that problem, Adeeko said.

In the early stages of the device, Adeeko connected with **NewGait** co-founder, **Jordan Strofaci** who contributed his experience in biomechanics and exercise physiology to developing the product.

The turning point for **NewGait** was in 2016 when a physical therapist in Michigan named **Kim Spranger** used the device to rehabilitate her patient, **Emily Devooght**, who had a devastating spinal cord injury. Doctors told Devooght that she would never run again, but after working with Spranger and **NewGait's** device, Adeeko said not only did she recover, she ended up running a 5k race.

From there, Adeeko and Strofaci officially started the company in 2016 with a focus on the therapeutic and rehabilitation potential of the **NewGait** device.

"We said, let's put the **SpeakMaker** on the side for right now. And let's really focus in on this device because it's truly impacting people's lives," Adeeko said.

Next Step

Back in December, **NewGait** won first place in a seed-pitch competition that was sponsored by the **Central San Diego Black Chamber of Commerce**. The local chapter of the **National Society of Black Engineers** hosted the event in an effort to foster more equity and inclusion for Black professionals and entrepreneurs in the life science industry.

Not only did **NewGait** win a \$2,000 cash prize, Adeeko said the competition provided him valuable connections to industry leaders who judged the pitches and it encouraged him to get involved in groups such as the **National Society of Black Engineers**.

"[The judges] gave us advice on, you know, how could I have made my pitch better? What did you like about it? What did you not? Because even though I did win, I understand that we can always be better. We are always working to refine it and make it better," Adeeko said.

Building off of this experience, the next step for **NewGait** is growing its footprint in the local community.

"Well, one of the big things that we're really looking for are partnerships, and physical therapists within the local community," Adeeko said. "We have a smaller footprint here in San Diego than we do in Michigan, where my clinical team is located. Just by nature, we've been able to grow quicker there."

Adeeko said moving forward **NewGait** is actively seeking out health care professionals, rehab specialists and physical therapists in San Diego who "want to make an impact and a change on their clients lives" through their product. ■

NewGait

FOUNDED: 2016

CEO: Benga Adeeko

HEADQUARTERS: San Diego

BUSINESS DESCRIPTION: NewGait is a company that produces an innovative physical therapy and rehab device for people with difficulty walking.

NOTABLE: Adeeko is a former Division 1 college sprinter, USA Track & Field Level 1 certified coach and a Youth Track & Field coach.

LOCAL EMPLOYEES: 2

CONTACT: Benga@thenewgait.com, Facebook: @TheNewGait, Instagram: @the_newgait

From Simple Meals to Closing Deals

CONSULTING: Meri Birhane Helps Sellers Improve Their Social Media Game

■ BY BRAD GRAVES

One of **Meri Birhane's** earliest memories is that of her family trying to sell its jewelry at a U.S. airport.

"We didn't have anything when we landed," she said.

Birhane's family emigrated from East Africa to the United States when she was 4 years old. They had been living in Eritrea. The country had been at war with Ethiopia. Birhane's family got a chance to come to the United States, and they decided to make a new life in San Diego.

Thirty years later, with the help of **San Diego State University's** M.B.A. program, Birhane is deeply entrenched in San Diego's tech and business cultures, at the intersection of sales and technology.

"I love sales," she said, particularly the parts involving building relationships and helping people. She said she was able to close \$3 million worth of sales using LinkedIn leads while working for corporate clients. But entrepreneurship was calling.

Out on Her Own

By March 2020, Birhane decided it was time to turn a part-time sales consulting business, founded in 2017, into a full-time pursuit. Since then she has generated \$30,000 in revenue. "I just closed three clients this month," she said, adding that she is projecting \$100,000 in revenue during 2021.



Meri Birhane
Founder and
President
Meri Consulting
Services

Meri Consulting Services helps sales professionals better use online tools such as LinkedIn. Especially during COVID, "your digital presence is huge," she said. Salespeople can't attend conferences or trade shows.

Meri Consulting also holds monthly networking events for minority business owners, on the third Wednesday of every month.

Rising to the Top

The thing that took Birhane from that day at the airport to the world of corporate sales was education.

"We were definitely on public housing assistance," Birhane said of her family's arrival in 1990, adding she is grateful for the resources the government provided. The family settled in North Park "before North Park was cool," Birhane said.

"My parents pushed me to get an education. ... I took school very seriously." She volunteered, played volleyball at **San Diego High School** and was president of the **Black Student Union**. She had one of the best grade point averages at the school.

Birhane was able to win a scholarship under the **Gates Millennium Scholar** program. That took her to **UCLA** for both undergraduate and graduate studies. She

received a master's degree in public health.

During her time in Los Angeles, she started the first Eritrean-Ethiopian student group. "It was controversial at the time" but it was ultimately successful with 200 members, she said.

A New Approach to Grad School

Following that, Birhane decided to get her M.B.A., opting to study at San Diego State. She decided to approach her second master's degree differently by networking all she could. She attended every speaking engagement available. Her mentors steered her toward sales.

"In my first sales job I was terrible," she said. Then she got the hang of it. Pretty soon her supervisors were noticing she was getting the most meetings, and wanted to know her secrets. It was LinkedIn and messaging, she said.

Birhane also discovered there is money to be made in sales training, as companies want to reduce the amount of "churn and burn" among their sales forces.

Birhane's San Diego experience may have begun in public housing, but it recently came with a small victory.

In an example of the American dream, Birhane and her sisters bought their mother a house in a San Diego suburb in 2018. ■

Meri Consulting Services

FOUNDED: 2017

CEO: Meri Birhane

HEADQUARTERS: Allied Gardens

BUSINESS: Sales consulting, including the use of social media

EMPLOYEES: One

WEBSITE: www.MeriConsultingServices.com

NOTABLE: Clients have included Miles McPherson, pastor of the Rock Church

CONTACT: meri@mericonsultingservices.com, (619) 709-9404

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Lifetime Achievement Honorees Floyd & Sandra Robinson

Floyd and Sandra Robinson have always worked to make San Diego a better place. The two are both life and business partners, well-known for developing Golden Age Garden. This 76-unit apartment complex provides low-income housing for senior community members helping to create a more affordable and inclusive environment. The couple has been married for 44 years.

In 2007, they established the nonprofit Floyd Robinson Foundation and in 2009, Floyd Robinson was inducted by the San Diego Hall of Champions into the Breitbard Hall of Fame honoring San Diego's finest athletes both on and off the field.

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Virtual Event

Awards Ceremony and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Panel Discussion

February 25, 2021 | 2 pm - 3:30 pm

Preview Publication: February 22, 2021 Event Recap: March 8, 2021

MODERATOR



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Vice President - State Government Affairs And External Affairs

San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) and Southern California Gas Co. (SoCalGas), Sempra Energy Utilities

Eugene "Mitch" Mitchell is vice president of legislative and external affairs for San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) and Southern California Gas Co. (SoCalGas), Sempra Energy's California regulated utilities. Mitchell is responsible for state governmental affairs for both California utilities and oversees external affairs activities for SDG&E. Mitchell will be adding a new focus on DE&I to his duties later this year.

PANELISTS



MIKE FASULO

President and COO

Sony Electronics

As President and COO, Mike oversees Sony Electronics' multi-billion dollar business in the U.S. and Canada. With 37 years at the company and a track record of performing under pressure, Mike has a passion for delivering positive financial results. Mike believes in building and supporting a diverse work environment where employees' unique differences are recognized and celebrated. His management team actively seeks individuals from a variety of generations, socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, and sexual orientations. While planning his retirement from Sony Electronics beginning April 1, 2021, Mike will continue supporting diversity and inclusion efforts in the San Diego community.



MARK STUART, CFRE

President And Chief Executive Officer

The San Diego Foundation

Mark Stuart is a fundraising and community building professional with nearly 30 years of experience in all aspects of operations and leadership. As President and CEO of The San Diego Foundation, he reports to and collaborates with the Board of Governors and is responsible for developing and managing relationships with a wide range of stakeholders as well as for the operating health of The Foundation.

In the last few months, under Mark's leadership, The San Diego Foundation was selected as a Community Hero by the Union-Tribune, named a Best Place to Work in San Diego, received the Best of the South Bay Award from the South County Economic Development Council.



CAROLINE WINN

Chief Executive Officer

San Diego Gas & Electric

Caroline Winn is chief executive officer for San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E), one of Sempra Energy's regulated California utilities. Sempra Energy is a San Diego-based energy services holding company whose subsidiaries provide electricity, natural gas and value-added products and services.

SDG&E provides service to 3.6 million consumers through 1.4 million electric meters and more than 873,000 natural gas meters in San Diego and southern Orange counties. Winn became CEO of SDG&E in August 2020. Previously, she served as the chief operating officer of SDG&E, overseeing operations of the utility's gas and electric infrastructure assets, and customer services. In that role, Winn is widely recognized for SDG&E's national leadership in sustainability, technology and innovation, including the company's significant safety and wildfire mitigation efforts.

Winn also served as chief energy delivery officer, managing all energy delivery activities for SDG&E, including electric distribution operations and gas services, customer services, and external and state legislative affairs.



DOUG WINTER

CEO & Co- Founder

Seismic

Doug Winter is the chief executive officer and co-founder of Seismic, the industry-leading sales enablement and marketing orchestration platform provider. A veteran entrepreneur, Winter was also a co-founder of Objectiva Software Solutions. He served as COO and general manager at EMC Document Sciences until founding Seismic in 2010. In collaboration with his co-founders, Winter has grown Seismic from a small startup to an international organization with "unicorn" status and is the undisputed category leader in sales enablement. Seismic has been named to the Forbes Cloud 100, which recognizes the top cloud companies in the world, as well as the Deloitte Technology Fast 500, a list of the fastest growing tech companies. At the helm of Seismic, Winter has been recognized as a top CEO by several media groups and industry associations, including the San Diego Union-Tribune, San Diego Business Journal, Comparably and more. He has a 100% approval rating on Glassdoor, and under his leadership, Seismic is well-known for its exceptional workplace culture with awards from Forbes, Inc., Entrepreneur, and the Boston Business Journal, to name a few. Winter holds a MSEE and an MBA from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and a BSEE from Virginia Tech. He resides in the greater San Diego area with his wife.

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