

Minority CPA firm has major success

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Milligan and Company, LLC is one of the largest minority-owned certified public accounting firms in the U.S. The firm is celebrating its 25th anniversary in business. John Milligan, left, is managing principal; M. Denise Bailey and Jovan Goldstein are principals.

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This month marks a significant milestone for Milligan and Company, LLC.

The firm, one of the largest minority-owned certified public accounting firms in the U.S., is celebrating its 25th anniversary in business.

Led by Managing Principal John Milligan, the full-service consulting and CPA firm focuses on tackling complex financial accounting, operational and managerial challenges for large corporations, nonprofit organizations and government agencies.

"I've been around to see so many businesses come and go to understand that 25 years in business is really significant, especially here in Philadelphia," Milligan said.

Fresh out of college, Milligan began his accounting career in 1975 at Coopers and Lybrand in Philadelphia, which was known as one of the nation's "Big 8" firms. He can easily recount his experience as one of the firm's two African-American managers.

"I just had a number of experiences where I was introduced to clients who said they didn't want an African American on their accounts," Milligan said. "There were partners in the firm who did not want African Americans or women on their accounts."

After spending nine years at Coopers and Lybrand, Milligan reached the point in his career where the next stage was to become partner. At the time, no African American had ever made partner in the firm's history.

"I had a candid conversation with my mentor, who told me that the only chance I had to make partner there was to bring in enough business to make it worth their while," he said. "There was just no way that I had those connections. I made a decision to leave Coopers and Lybrand and either work with a minority firm or start a firm where diversity was something that was accepted."

In 1984, Milligan left and moved on to the city's largest minority-owned accounting agency at the time. One year later, he entered the entrepreneurship arena and set out to build a firm committed to excellence.

Armed with a dot matrix printer and a computer, Milligan set up shop in his basement. He consulted with some of the city's prominent business people who were interested supporting a quality African American-owned CPA firm. The African American Museum of Philadelphia became one of his first clients.

"The first couple of years were interesting and challenging," said Milligan, who spent those first few years as the company's sole worker.

He set about meeting his first goal of quickly growing the firm to the point where he could become a director. The company would eventually move from his basement to a small office at 105 N. Eighth St. From there, Milligan and Co. relocated to its current headquarters at 105 N. 22nd St.

In 1987, the company won a contract from the U.S. Department of Commerce to manage the Minority Business Development Center. The firm began working with disadvantaged businesses and providing support and technical assistance to firms that sought to enhance their diversity programs. Milligan managed the center for 18 years.

Like many firms, Milligan's faced the challenge of obtaining capital during the early years. During the early '90s, a lucrative business deal with a chemical company allowed Milligan and Co. to obtain the funding to move forward with its plans for growth.

Over the years, the firm would grow from a small entity to one of the largest minority-owned CPA firms in the U.S. The firm, which employs about 50 individuals, is led by Milligan and two other principals, M. Denise Bailey and Jovan Goldstein.

Bailey joined Milligan in 1992 to manage a PennDOT (Pennsylvania Department of Transportation) contract to help the agency develop a diversity program in compliance with federal regulations for disadvantaged businesses. Under the contract, the firm provided technical assistance to minority- and women-owned businesses seeking to do business with PennDOT.

"At that time highway design and construction was not the picture of upward mobility for women and minorities," said Bailey, who previously worked with an engineering firm on highway construction before joining Milligan.

Bailey took the PennDOT contract and grew it into a full line of business enabling the company to form a long-standing relationship with the U.S. Department of Transportation.

"It was an interesting time, because we were growing but I think we both had high expectations where we knew we could take the blend of talents, but we wanted to be sure that we did it in a way that we didn't grow too far, too fast and get too far ahead of ourselves, because we were still a minority firm and there are the benefits and the challenges that come with that," she said.

Bailey is certified to teach agencies throughout the country rules and regulations for how to certify minority-owned businesses under the U.S. Department of Transportation's program.

Milligan and Co. has also conducted compliance oversight on multi-billion dollar projects for the federal government. One of the firm's most significant accomplishments was providing financial oversight of \$6 billion in federal funding for the World Trade Centers Transit Rebuilding Effort after 9/11.

"For us that was another vote of confidence in our firm," Milligan said. "Those are the things that we really take pride in, the fact that our clients come to us when they have challenging situations."

While Bailey focuses on government consulting, Goldstein heads up the audit department. On the audit side, the firm serves major clients such as Food Lion, PNC Bank, Johns Hopkins, the United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania and The Philadelphia Orchestra.

"I think the fact that we were able to obtain and retain those kinds of clients was a reflection of our commitment to doing quality work," said Milligan. "We've actually taken the firm from just being local to having a national presence, which is key."

As he reflected on the aspects that have kept Milligan and Co. thriving throughout the years, Milligan noted that a lot of businesses have experienced growth spurts due to political relationships.

"We've done our growth pretty much through business relationships, where people have relied on us because they thought we could deliver," he said.

While a lot of companies have had to change to achieve success, Goldstein said Milligan and Co. has stuck to its core values.

"If you look at the history of this company, you'll see that 25 years later this company is still true to its roots," he said. "If you look at the leadership, on the premise on which it was started, it hasn't shifted."

Headquartered in Philadelphia, the firm has offices in Delaware, New Jersey, Maryland and Washington D.C.