

A FIRE IN THE BELLY

By: Gary Keffer—bizlife Magazine

Robert Brown is a successful businessman, civil servant and philanthropist. He's also the great-grandson of a slave, advised a U.S. President and befriended the most famous civil rights activist of the 20th Century. In most circles, that qualifies Bob Brown as a fairly unique individual.

But that barely scratches the surface.

Pictures on the walls of Brown's High Point office document a life of great achievement. In one, Brown is seen with a young Martin Luther King, Jr., in another, he's seen tuxedo clad with Sammy Davis, Jr. Elsewhere in the office are images of Brown talking with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney.

"I just never imagined," Brown says of his life experiences. "My life has been more than I ever expected."

A native of High Point, Brown is Founder, Chairman and CEO of B & C Associates, Inc., a management consulting, market research and public relations firm specializing in reputation management and image enhancement. The firm was co-founded in 1960 with Albert Campbell, now a High Point city councilman, who left the firm shortly after it was formed to pursue another interest. The firm continues to flourish even in the face of a tough economy.

Facing tough times isn't unfamiliar soil for Brown. He claims that the struggles have been instrumental in placing him amongst the most influential leaders of the past five decades.

Among those struggles was having to leave college and return home to assist his ailing grandparents, which is how he ended up starting his career in law enforcement. It was 1956, and after a stellar score on the Civil Service exam, a door opened for a position with the High Point Police Department. Two years later, he accepted a position in New York with the U.S. Treasury's Federal Bureau of Narcotics.

It was during this time that he first met Martin Luther King, Jr., a charismatic man who made quite an impression on the young Brown.

"I was struck by his humility; just a really humble man," Brown says. "I had no idea that I'd ever be close to him or travel with him, which proves you never know what God has in store for you."

The confluence of divine intervention, circumstance and preparedness is an apt explanation for Brown's success in the face of unimaginable challenge.

"My grandmother used to say that if you have enough faith, enough courage, are willing to sacrifice and work hard enough, there's absolutely nothing you can't achieve," Brown says. "I believed her. She used to tell me that often, when I was a little kid. So I grew up with that in me."

Brown grew up in a time too many have forgotten—a time before desegregation and equal opportunity. He was raised by his grandmother, Nellie Marshall Brown, who worked as a maid at the High Point train station and his grandfather, Marcus, who worked at a local furniture factory to provide for their family. In practicing what she preached, Brown's grandmother set an example that sparked his ambition and shaped his life.

"I always had the fire," says Brown. "Without it, you achieve nothing." He explains: "Everyone will have roadblocks in this life. Obstacles will be thrown at you every step of the way. But to succeed, you've got to have that fire in your belly, that fire that says you've got to work 25 hours a day, that you've got to go on even when you don't feel like it. You've got to keep pushing."

Brown's track record proves that he takes his own advice.

Despite a promising career in law enforcement, Brown felt there was something else in his future. He soon resigned his U.S. Treasury position in New York, returned home to North Carolina and launched B & C Associates, Inc.

And the move wasn't an easy one. While he logged thousands of miles on his 1960 Rambler, driving up and down the East Coast to meet with executives and build his business, Brown slept in its back seat.

"I had enough money for either a hotel room or gas—but not both," Brown says with a laugh. "Early in the morning, I'd go to the Y or some place like that. I'd have a shower and a shave and put on my suit, my nice shirt, nice tie and have my shoes shining like glass. I'd walk in to a meeting and they could have thought I'd been staying at the Waldorf-Astoria."

But Brown doesn't take full credit for his success. He credits his wife, Sallie, as a pillar of strength in his life and his career. The couple has been married for 46 years.

"She kept giving me encouragement," Brown says of his wife. "I didn't have money for a secretary or bookkeeper or anything else. She was everything. Without her, I couldn't have made it." And made it he has.

With a client roster full of Fortune 500 companies, the raw determination and tireless effort

Brown poured into his company built a solid business that has grown for more than 42 years. The company now employs more than a dozen people spread across two continents. President and chief operating officer Frankie T. Jones, Sr. oversees day-to-day operations.

A White House Appointment

While Brown is very much involved in his company, there have been times when his attention was needed elsewhere, such as 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

From 1968 to 1973, Brown served as a special White House assistant in the Nixon administration, where he worked on issues involving community relations, civil rights, emergency preparedness and daycare issues. One of Brown's proudest achievements during that time was the establishment of the Minority Business Development Initiative, which helps minority and women business owners establish and build their businesses.

The history Brown recants of the 37th President of the United States highlights several achievements that would spur even a History Channel buff to check his encyclopedia.

Nixon's achievements in equal opportunity, equal rights protection, the enhancement and funding of black colleges and promotion of black generals and admirals in the military, Brown says, were overshadowed by the media's portrayal of the Watergate scandal.

"I think we ought to report it the way it is, put it out there, let the people see the facts for themselves and form their own opinions," he says.

Another opinion that Brown supports is the notion that a select few highly visible people influence the perspectives and history of the masses. This is something that doesn't sit well with Brown, particularly as it applies to African-American issues.

"I think now we have too many leaders who think more partisan than they ought to be thinking," Brown says, taking time to build his explanation.

"We can't have people putting themselves up as non-partisan and then advocate a purely partisan approach," he says, waving his hand in dismissal, "telling people to vote a straight party line. I think they're misrepresenting black people, and I think that's wrong...and it's not smart."

As a black man, Brown is something of a rarity in the Republican Party. With the majority of African-American voters registered Democrats, entire election cycles can be determined by their support. Brown sees this as a major roadblock in the black community.

"Blacks have to be wherever the action is," he says, tapping his finger on the desk to punctuate his point. "And if you're not, you're making a terrible mistake. That's what I think. Everybody is trying to be where the action is. Black people have to be there, too—whether it's with major companies, within the government, whatever."

Brown is no stranger to corporate America. He has served for many years on the boards of Wachovia Corporation, Duke Energy Corporation, Sonoco Products Company and AutoNation, Inc.

Bob Brown spent many years at the epicenter of major action in this nation's history. Today, he sees the need for action in local communities and around the world.

"We've got to reach out and do more for the struggling. We have to redouble our efforts, those of us who have some resources—and all of us have resources, because even as poor as I grew up, my grandmother would share anything we had," Brown says. "We have to get back to that fundamental spirit that brought us to where we are today; we have to share with each other, with our fellow man, and not only here in America, but elsewhere."

Making A Global Difference

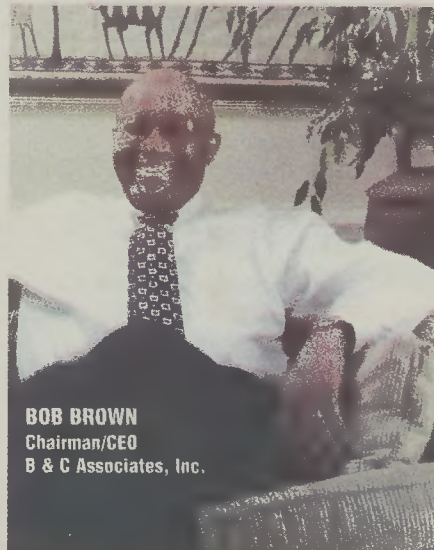
Brown has found a way to share with the world in a way that's simple yet unique, and in doing so, is helping millions.

After learning from a friend that thousands of surplus textbooks from the Guilford County school system were being replaced each year, Brown devised a plan to save the old reading materials and put them to use in other places. In 1993, he created the South Africa BookSmart Project to provide books and other resource materials to South African school libraries, academic enrichment programs and educational and community centers. Most of the children in South Africa today have no paper, pencils or books in their schools.

Since then, more than 3 million books have been delivered to more than 140 libraries, schools, universities and resource centers in South Africa. In 1998, the program partnered with the British city of Leeds, and an additional 200,000 books were donated. The following year, the South Africa BookSmart Foundation was established. Corporate sponsors included Sara Lee Corporation, BP South Africa, First Union Corporation, IGA and Johnson Controls, among others, who distributed more than 3 million additional books and kept the project moving forward.

And so, too, is Brown.

"A lot of people get success mixed up. Success requires a lot of hard work—hard, grinding work. That's why you've got to have that fire in your belly," he says. "We've got to keep our spirits high and we've got to have that fire burning in us—not only for ourselves, but for our children, our communities, our states and our nation."



BOB BROWN
Chairman/CEO
B & C Associates, Inc.