

BUSINESS — BUSINESS

Battling In The Tough Real Estate Market

Don't Be Afraid To Dream Big

By Frank H. Madison

What is success? That was the question Redditt Alexander asked recently when asked to comment on his success. He had thought about the question for a moment. "I haven't spent much time thinking about it, he said. I know I enjoy what I do, and I'm rewarded fairly well for doing it. But, I also know I can't afford to get complacent or over-confident. So, I just take it all day, one month, one year at a time."

Few, however, would argue that Alexander is not a successful man. His businesses are thriving. Alexander & Associates Realtors is widely recognized as a leader in its field, and that more than 90% of its transactions come as a direct result of referrals is proof positive of how well Alexander's clients like the way he does business.

A second enterprise in which Alexander is a partner, Metro Roof and Gutter Company, is also doing well and is rapidly developing a solid reputation for performance. And, Alexander hasn't neglected what he calls his "community obligations." These range from providing a positive male image to shelterless youths through a big brother-like program; to volunteering time, expertise and money to a variety of charities; to serving on a committee with other business and civic leaders identifying and addressing issues and concerns facing Durham's African American community.

For Alexander, there have been no short-cuts, no lucky breaks. There has only been hard work, long hours and a lot of sleepless nights. Whatever "success" he now enjoys, he earned the hard way. The "hard way," however, causes no particular anxieties. Alexander's entire life has been lived the hard way.

From some 40-odd years ago in the cotton country of Mississippi's Delta region, he began his life's journey on the very bottom rungs of the social and economic ladder. He was the third oldest of his father's seven children, of whom he was the youngest two were

legitimate. Alexander was nine years old when his mother married his stepfather, who Alexander calls a "good man."

Mother and family were sharecroppers, a condition Alexander describes succinctly. "At that time, and in that place in Mississippi, sharecropping was one step removed from slavery."

Alexander gives credit to his mother for all that he has become. "My mom was quite a woman," he recalls fondly. "Although most of us were born out of wedlock, she always pushed us to the forefront. She made us go to school, do our homework, our chores, and she made us respect each other."

"She was a very religious woman, but without being obsessed. She held very strong values, and she imparted those values to us."

Because of his mother's teachings, Alexander grew up with a well-developed work ethic; an inner mental toughness; and an almost compulsive desire for education.

He needed them. Statistics were against him. It was six times more likely that before he reached his 21st birthday, he would murder someone, be the victim of a murder, or receive a prison sentence, than finish high school.

Drugs and alcohol abuse also claimed their tolls. And, many of Alexander's peers who survived all the other dangers, simply gave up.

They lost ambitions, drive, and hope.

Alexander watched many of those he grew up with fall to the wayside. He says, "a few of my classmates were killed. Some others were sent away to prison, and others just dropped out of school, settling for menial jobs. Some are still working those same jobs. What a waste!"

"There were a lot of crossroads," he continued, "and each time I passed one and made the right choice, I considered it a minor victory."

Defying all odds, Alexander finished high school, and, he still thirsted for education. With so few black male role models in his community to pattern himself after

or learn from, he broke new ground with every decision. He was offered a football scholarship to Jackson State University, but instinctively knew he wasn't quite ready for college.

He opted, instead, for a three-year enlistment in the Army and the G.I. Bill's education benefits afterward. He was assigned to Fort Bragg as a combat engineer.

During his army career, Alexander never lost sight of his goal — a college education. He often used his off-duty time to visit college campuses in the area. On one such visit to Shaw University, he met his future wife, Ida.

By the time his enlistment ended, he and Ida were married and had a baby daughter. They had also decided to stay in North Carolina.

Alexander enrolled in North Carolina Central University, majoring in pre-therapy. He had reached one of his goals. He was attending college.

"Sometimes," he remembers, "I'd be sitting in class, I'd touch the desk, the books, to make sure it was real. I'd think to myself, 'This is me, Redditt Alexander, actually going to college.' It was hard to believe."

College, however, was no picnic. In addition to school work, he had a family to provide for. He worked a full-time job at night as a waiter. Whatever problem confronted him, Alexander had one solution — work harder.

After completing his bachelor's degree, he experienced one of his life's big disappointments. He had applied for and had been accepted to dental school, but, because of an unfortunate set of circumstances, was unable to attend.

He entered the master's program in biology at NCCU instead, which he duly completed.

Taking into consideration his background, Alexander felt his logical career path lay either in biology or academia. Real estate and business were never even considered.

He accepted a position as supervisor of Duke University's Special Chemistry Laboratory. It didn't take him long to know that the position did not fit into his long-range plans. He felt it was too predictable and offered him no challenges.

"I was in a rut," he recalls. "Basically, I could go to work in the morning and tell you everything that was going to happen that day."

A friend of his planned to take some real estate classes, and Alexander decided to take them, too. He found his way into the field almost by accident.

After the classes were completed, he took and passed the state exams, and began working as a part-time real estate salesman. Even in those early stages, when he was still learning the trade, the financial rewards were substantial.

Two years later, in October 1979, Alexander & Associates Realtors opened its doors for business.

"There have been some rough times," Alexander says, "but, that's the secret to being an entrepreneur — sticking out through the rough times."

One thing Alexander found was that almost everything affected the sale of real estate, even things that were seemingly unrelated. He began looking at the world around him in a new and deeper way.

He also saw — and sees — things that disturb him, many in the African American community.

Using his own life and experiences as a yardstick, he believes that there has been some decline in some of the basic values and institutions that in the past gave the community strength.

As Alexander remembers it, the four mainstays of blacks were family, church, community and education. These institutions were the source from which young people acquired their values.

"Don't get me wrong," he said, "they're still part of our community, but I don't see a to have the cohesiveness they had when I was growing up."



REDDITT ALEXANDER

He also worries that many of today's young people aren't as disciplined. "I think we've let things — especially discipline — get too complicated," he said. "We've let ourselves get too analytical and have moved away from the natural. We need to get back to basics and use more common sense in our approach."

He thinks black people need to get more involved in the political processes, and become more familiar with the issues which concern them.

Asked what advice he would give young people interested in becoming entrepreneurs, Alexander replied, "I'd tell them to get as much education as they could. I'd tell them to develop a strong work ethic."

"And, I'd tell them to not be afraid to dream and dream big. Don't be satisfied with just a 'good' job. Look to be the owner."

In his own case, Alexander credits his success to caring about people. "If you take care of and care about the people you do business with," he concluded, "everything else will take care of itself."



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