

by Louise Barden
photos by Greg Briley

Memuna Williams
creates success
out of her natural
talent for learning
languages, gives
advice to
small businesses



Word play

Memuna Williams, partner-owner of AvantGarde Translations, holds an MBA, and a bachelor's and master's in translation. She is certified by the American Translators Association. Since 2004, her Charlotte firm has translated brochures, annual reports, advertising and business documents for major North American companies. Recently, she answered questions about how she has built a successful business, even in tough economic times.

Pride: How did your life prepare you for this career?

M.W.: I've always had an ear for languages. I'm a Canadian citizen, born in Alberta when my father came from Sierra Leone for graduate school. My father's diplomatic career took us to England, Germany and Belgium, as well as to Sierra Leone, for five years. I returned to Canada when I was 16.

I applied to study literature in the French and English departments at Concordia University (Canada). I thought I would work in academia, as my father once did. When the student counselors noticed my proficiency in French and English, they told me a specialization in the translation department would let me combine the literature with translation, and I discovered I liked it.

Pride: How did you break into the business world?

M.W.: I graduated in a recession; I kept my college retail job and started freelancing. Then Canadian Pacific Railway hired me as a full time French-English translator. For two years I learned from my boss while earning my master's degree.

My boss was a very good teacher. He showed me how small choices could make a difference in speed and quality. When he retired, I took his job for three years.

The company treated us as professionals who should do the work we were hired for, without corporate distractions. As an internal department we tried to perform as if we were an independent company others would want to hire.

Pride: Why did you start your own business?

M.W.: From 1999 to 2003, when my husband had a job in New York, I worked for two translation agencies there. That gave me experience in multilingual translation and project management, including quality control.

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— Memuna Williams

When my husband's job brought us to Charlotte in late 2003, I was starting a family and wanted more control over my own time. I asked my sister in Canada to be my partner in our own business. She had also studied translation under my thesis professor. We use technology to bridge the distance.

Pride: What did you do to get your business off the ground?

M.W.: We started with French-English translation, and then branched out to other languages. When I needed more business knowledge, I earned an MBA at Queens University from 2006 to 2008. Just before 2009, our business started really growing. Even in this slowed economy, we have stuck with our plans and are well positioned to grow more.

We've done the strategic planning and operations work to make our internal processes efficient and productive for clients. We have gotten the certifications large clients need. I completed more training on small-business issues.

Last year was really hard. In September, I had to double my efforts to get business, but by November, things began to go really well. Now I'm getting ready to hire an administrative person so that I can focus on working with clients and on business development.

Pride: Where do your clients come from?

M.W.: Participating in NAWBO (National Association of Women Business Owners) has brought referrals. Winning NAWBO's Rising Star Award in 2007 gave me a higher profile.

Last year we hired a marketing/PR agency to do more press releases and direct mailings. It was hard to spend money. It's a big risk, but a big reward. I have also to get more face-to-face time with targeted larger companies and to be creative in making connections.

Pride: Can any bilingual speaker be a translator? What makes you different?

M.W.: No. It's an art and a skill. Education isn't always the best way to recognize a good translator. You have to be very good at the language you translate from, and excellent at the language you translate to. ... You must hear the language as you work, so you aren't influenced by the source language. You must understand the connotations of words and know specialized idioms. In Canada, translation is recognized as profession with standards, but not in this country.

Pride: What have been your biggest challenges?

M.W.: Gaining the trust of prospects. Our customers love working with us, but getting them on board is hard work. Also, we have struggled with timing staffing changes to increase our capacity. We're adding personnel now, but probably should have done that a while ago.

Pride: What is the key to success in starting a small business?

M.W.: You need planning and, when it gets lonely or hard, you must have the ability to persevere in a variety of ways — with adequate or patient capital, strong support from people around you or simply a thick skin.

Pride: Where do you think entrepreneurs fail?

M.W.: They may not have considered something critical about their type of business. Then without enough financing, support or personal desire to continue, they can't recover when an issue arises. But failing is not necessarily a bad thing. There's often a lesson in a failure. ☐