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Minority-owned firms looking to grow in Orlando may have a new ally

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Small Business Advocates of Central Florida is an Apopka-based nonprofit that, among other things, is working to help minority-owned firms in construction.

As Mina Robinson sees it, it's not as though there is a dearth of organizations working to help local small businesses — either in Apopka, where her Small Business Advocates of Central Florida nonprofit is based, or in metro Orlando, at large.

Rather, it's the specific expertise she believes she brings from working in business development for Tavares-based Smith, Broomfield & Howard Construction & Restoration that sets her apart as someone who can, in particular, lend a hand to the area's small and minority-owned contractors and construction firms.

"I've been doing this for years," Robinson said. "I mean, there are a lot of other organizations out there that do kind of the same thing. But where my niche comes in is, I actually used to work for a construction firm — a small, minority-owned firm that has been a small general contractor for Walt Disney World. So I know how it is to be the only small guy in the bunch."

Further, Robinson's advocacy helped her nonprofit, which was founded in 2020, score a big victory recently, as Small Business Advocates partnered with the Apopka Area Chamber of Commerce to announce they will operate a bid opportunity preference program — working with the developers and larger contractors active in the city to facilitate participation for small, minority-owned firms in these projects.

Already, the program has brought some of the most active developers and construction firms in ever-busy Apopka — Benge Development, for example — to the table as being interested in finding ways to create opportunities for such firms.

Here, *Orlando Business Journal* spoke with Robinson about the bid opportunity program, her nonprofit's work with other area small businesses and more:

How big of a deal is the bid opportunity preference program in Apopka for Small Business Advocates of Central Florida?

It helps get the organization's name out. This is humongous, for one, because in the private sector it's very hard to get people who own their own money, their own land and are doing their own things with their own developers to allow any sort of extra, local firm to come in. There's always a stigma around minority firms —

they're small, they don't have enough money, they can't perform properly, they're going to hold up our schedule. So to actually have these firms like Bengé Development come in and agree to say, 'hey, we want to see what we can do to make a difference' — I'm so excited. I'm excited for the firms.

How will Small Business Advocates of Central Florida get more private companies to come to the table?

We're going to sit down with them and figure out, 'okay, what do they want to carve out for their small businesses?' You can carve out something, but let's set a goal. You can go with 80% [for minority firms] or you can go 10% — so let's set it at 30%, so we know what we're heading toward.

As you work with small businesses across different sectors in Central Florida, what are some common types of aid they need?

It's paperwork. They know their profession, they know their trade, but they don't have the time to do that and do the payroll — or to do the accounting part of it, or just to do the day-to-day operations of the paperwork and following up or sending emails. It's just little small things. Another challenge is insurance — a lot of small businesses are really challenged with getting commercial liability insurance.

What in your background led you to being involved with a nonprofit in Central Florida?

I've been in the community for quite some time. My grandmother started a nonprofit organization and when she passed away, I ran that for her. I graduated from Apopka High School and then I went to Clark Atlanta University and got into marketing and things like that because my major was business administration. I became a community liaison for local elected officials and, in doing that, that's where my relationships with politics and community broadened. ... I've worked with different local politicians on different community things, so it helps me have a little bit more knowledge so that when I need things done, I know who to go to.

What is your preferred way to spend your downtime when not busy with work for Small Business Advocates of Central

Florida?

Sometimes your brain needs to rest, so I just like to work with people — even on the weekends, if I can find a food distribution event or just something to go out and do in the community. That's what keeps me sane and then I'm good until Monday.

Mina Robinson

president, Small Business Advocates of Central Florida

Age: 48

Hometown: Apopka

Contact: info@sbadvocatescfl.org

Education: Clark Atlanta University

Family: Three children (two daughters, one son); four grandchildren

Apopka business more people should know about: Seafood Station. It's a seafood restaurant that also does catering and has a food truck, but actually is looking to renovate some space downtown to open up a restaurant here. It has some very good catfish.

Advice to live by: Always stay true to yourself in whatever you believe in. Don't change that just to fit in. That's been major with me.

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Steven Ryzewski

Staff Writer - *Orlando Business Journal*

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