

The Garland Williamson Story

When people ask him for his secret to success, Baltimore businessman Garland Williamson gives them his patented answer. "I tell them, the secret is, there is no secret to success," he says. "I tell them all they have to do is work hard for a half day. That can either be the first 12 hours or the second 12 hours."

After 40 years in the computer business, Williamson should know. As President and Chief Executive Officer of Information Control Systems Corporation, an information technology company headquartered on Calvert Street in Downtown Baltimore, Williamson was a Lone Ranger, an African American IT pioneer, when he started his own company more than three decades ago.



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The year was 1973. Information Technology firms were just beginning to dot the business horizon. "There were a few of us African American IT professionals working in the Baltimore/D.C. area," said Williamson, who learned his craft while in the Navy. But opportunities were sporadic. After leaving the Navy in 1966, Williamson got hired via telephone to work as a computer programmer for Armco Steel. When he arrived onsite "they discovered I was an African American; the job suddenly disappeared."

Williamson got another strong hint while working as the sole African American IT contractor at a document center in Middle River, Md. Due to a programming error, critical forms used by the Air Force and other government agencies were not being processed. The Air Force was upset – a

fleet of jets had been grounded because they couldn't get the proper maintenance forms – and seriously considered terminating the contract.

Williamson, who had been put in charge of the failing program because no one else would accept the responsibility, discovered the error and corrected the programming flaw. "For a minute, I was the most popular man there," he said. "A month later, they called me in and told me they no longer needed my services." A light bulb went off. Williamson rented a 700 square foot office on Mt. Royal Avenue, got his first contract with an industrial supply company and later moved into government contracting.

Information Control Systems has employed over 250 professionals who work at different sites around the country. Accenture LLC is its major trading partner. Four years ago, Information Control Systems took over the entire IT function for the Baltimore City Public School System

and transferred 35 employees, including the Chief Information Officer, to BCPSS when the project ended. "We think of ourselves as troubleshooters," says Williamson. "When people call us, they're either in trouble or trying to stay out of trouble. We go in, fix the situation and then we leave."

Williamson, a Baltimore native who grew up in the shadow of Johns Hopkins Hospital with his six other brothers and sisters, showed off his entrepreneurial tendencies early on. "I sold newspapers, shined shoes, cut lawns," he said. After graduating from Douglas Senior High, Williamson spent two years of active duty in the Navy, then purchased and operated a small grocery store in East Baltimore. He eventually enrolled at Union Institute, at the time located at Morgan State, but didn't graduate until years later in 1976, when the school

had relocated to Cincinnati. Williamson married his wife Antoinette in 1985. The couple has two daughters - Courtney, 19, a sophomore and honor student at Spellman College in Atlanta, and Stacey, 17, a senior at St. Paul's School for Girls.

Throughout his career, Williamson, 60, has earned a reputation as a capable, caring, no-nonsense businessman who values his reputation, stands up for what he believes and who doesn't suffer fools easily. His business acumen and sense of commitment has not only benefited his company, but the Greater Baltimore community as well. He currently serves as president of The President's Roundtable, a group which advocates for more opportunities for minority businesses. Although he defers all Roundtable questions to Brenda Smith, its executive director, many of the organization's most significant achievements – including its successful promotion of the area's commercial nondiscrimination laws - took place under Williamson's watch.

Williamson, chairman of the Business Committee of the Governor Commission on Minority Business Reform in 2003, is pleased with the role this group played in assuring that minority firms looking to do business with the state of Maryland get fair and equitable access to opportunities and capital. "It hasn't gotten to where it needs to be," he says. "But hopefully, 20 years down the road, it won't be necessary for us to have these conversations about equal access and opportunity." Williamson also sits on the board of directors of the University of Maryland at Baltimore Foundation and Associated Black Charities. He's also Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Baltimore City Community College and President of First Tee of Baltimore, a program that uses golf to mentor inner city youngsters.

Out of necessity, Williamson may have started out as the Lone Ranger. But today, he's a strong advocate of combining forces, merging and collaborating. "That's not a lesson I learned easily," adds Williamson. "I thought I had to do everything, know everything myself. But today's marketplace is far too complex. You have to keep your eyes open for ways to collaborate with other people."