

October 19, 2002 – Construction Worker Slowly Builds His Business, The Philadelphia Inquirer

***A Small Contractor Keeps Moving Up: After being laid off, Michael Parker started a firm.***

**by Thomas J. Brady**

Starting 10 years ago with \$3,000 in savings plus his credit cards, Michael L. Parker has built a construction business that he expects to have \$3.5 million in revenue this year.

He and his company, M.L. Parker Construction Inc., a Chester general contractor specializing in commercial construction, were recognized this month by the Small Business Administration with its Minority Enterprise Development Award.

The SBA was "very impressed with his development and growth over the last seven to eight years," James Corbett, an agency official in Philadelphia, said.

Parker, 41, recalled in an interview this week that his experience in construction began with vocational courses taken while he was a student at Chester High School. He then entered an apprenticeship program with Carpenters Local 845 of Delaware County, and worked for local contractors until striking out on his own in 1992.

A big break came two years later when the SBA certified him as an 8(a) contractor, a designation that allowed him to negotiate for federal contracts instead of going through competitive bidding. The program is for small companies run by socially or economically disadvantaged individuals.

Before that, most of his work was on small jobs, for nonprofit groups and housing authorities.

In addition to federal work, he also began receiving work from other contractors on schools and churches.

Since 1992, the business has grown from a single employee to 12 today, and Parker now owns a 10,000-square-foot headquarters building.

He also has bonding of up to \$3 million. Obtaining bonding, which is basically insurance guaranteeing that contractors will complete their work, was one of the biggest hurdles when he started the business. It took three years and help from the SBA to receive his first bonding - for \$100,000.

The company's biggest project at the moment is a \$1.2 million subcontract on the Ships Tavern Mews retail and housing development in Wilmington. Parker is installing windows and storefronts as part of the renovation of 22 buildings.

His company's revenue in 2001 was \$2.1 million, up from \$714,000 in 2000 mostly because last year was the first in which he had more than one 8(a) contract.

The projected growth to \$3.5 million this year comes partly from participation in a Department of Defense mentor-protege program, which Parker entered last year. The company's mentor is Lobar Inc., of Dillsburg, Pa.

"Their work has been outstanding," J. Richard Ayers, an owner and executive vice president of Lobar, said of M.L. Parker.

The companies are now working together on four projects - including one for the Pennsylvania State Farm Show arena in Harrisburg, where Parker is doing metal framing and drywall work. Ayers said Parker's share of the work there is worth about \$800,000.

In a Department of Defense project, Parker is also upgrading a road at an Army rifle range at Fort Indiantown Gap with Lobar.

"We're looking forward to a long-term relationship with Mike and helping him grow," David Myers, Lobar's corporate development director, said.

Among recent federal projects, Parker has done work for the National Parks Service at the Welcome Park, near Second and Walnut Streets and at the old Visitor Center at Third and Chestnut Streets in Philadelphia. At the Welcome Park, the company replaced the brick walkway and flagstones. At the Visitor Center, Parker did brick pointing on the bell tower.

He now wants to expand into the Baltimore, New Jersey and Lancaster markets.

Parker, who is married and has four children, said that he started taking time off only recently and that he and his wife, Angela - the firm's bookkeeper - would like to do some traveling.

"My wife wants to go to Venice," he said. "I still have a lot of work to do before I get to that level."