

Family Matters: On Home, Family and Entrepreneurship

By Nokware Knight

Dr. Bellandra Foster begins each day like many working mothers. She rises at 5:45, wakes her two sons and cooks breakfast. In between studying the Bible and watching a few early morning news programs, she stops to see her husband before he's off to work at 6:30. She sees off her older son before he drives himself to high school, drives her younger son 10 minutes to his school, and heads to work from there.

If she has a few extra minutes, she'll take the scenic local route. If she needs to rush, she can take the highway, a little more than a mile down. Once she's at work, she's at work, going straight from 8 a.m. through 3 p.m. with no breaks. Then she goes home to finish up the rest of her work at her home office.

Starting Small

Owning her own business wasn't something Foster had really planned for. In 1992, she landed a job working for the Director of Bureau Highways and Streets under Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson. Prior to that, Foster worked in various positions in engineering and management for a Michigan power company, the road commission for Michigan Oakland county, and the State of Michigan Department of Transportation. She says working for Mayor Jackson was the best job of her career. And with the 1996 Olympics coming to town, things were only looking up. Foster became pregnant a year and a half later. Having been married more than eight years, she was more than ready to start a family.

Her husband had originally planned to move from their home in Michigan and join her in Atlanta, but he had yet to make the transition. Foster was forced make a decision. She decided to forego her promising career in Atlanta and moved back to Michigan. But she didn't leave her ambitions in Georgia. Foster applied for a Ph.D. fellowship and decided to start her own consultancy.

In the beginning, her husband wasn't so sure about her working while taking care of their newborn son. "I remember those conversations," Foster says, laughing. "He really wanted me not to go out at all. Truthfully, it didn't take much coaxing because I remember we talked about the fact that I felt that I at least needed to get out of the house some. And the fact that it wasn't going to be an everyday thing, I felt I'd be a better wife and mother if I had that as an outlet. As long as it didn't get too stressful. Since my mother had passed away and I did not have immediate family close by, I wouldn't get much reprieve from anyone in terms of childcare."

She wanted the flexibility to be home with her children, but also wanted to have some semblance of a career. "Now when I prayed that I didn't know how it could be done, I didn't worry how it could be done," Foster says. "I just knew that I wanted to be around with my children."

Fate dictated circumstances for Foster when she received the fellowship. She made the one-and-a-half hour drive to campus to attend her doctoral program classes two days a week, giving her somewhere to escape and the direction she needed to stay focused. She formed her company, BBF Engineering Services in 1994, working while at home with her 1-year old son the other five days of the week. In between, Foster also did some work for another consultancy to learn more about the business she was getting into.



Foster and her husband converted a room downstairs into a home office. After her second was born in 1996, it turned into a 'virtual' office before transforming it into a physical office with furniture and a small staff in 1997.

Foster says it was the finite nature of her doctoral program that helped balance it all and set a time frame for her goals. She had done much of the coursework during her masters' in engineering prior to starting the doctoral program. A few of those classes counted towards her Ph.D. so she only spent two years on campus and finished the other requirements in three years. She finished her doctorate in 1999 and was able to fully concentrate on her husband, children and the business.

When Foster's business began to grow, she looked to friends to consult, but her choices were limited. "I had a couple of family friends that didn't have their own business but they were working moms," she says. "I didn't really know of anyone that actually started and owned their own business and was doing both at the same time. A lot of it, I had to learn by doing, making mistakes, asking questions. Basically, taking a lot of hard knocks."

Coming from a family of firsts helped prepare Foster to become Michigan's first African-American female licensed civil engineer, Michigan State's first black female civil engineering Ph.D. and the first black woman in the state to found and own her own civil engineering company.

When Foster started her consulting agency in 1994, it took three years before she got her first client, and her company earned less than \$50,000 in its first year. Her revenues grew gradually over the years, and the company now employs 15 and nets about \$2 million annually. It is, by no means, stratospheric growth, but it has been enough for Foster, who has priorities outside of the company. And knowing what your priorities are, Foster says, may be the most important part of balancing your own business and family.

A Good Start

Foster grew up the youngest of four children in blue-collar Flint and Detroit during the 1960s and 1970s, prime years when kids could walk into stable, well-paying jobs in the auto industry right out of high school.

"But we weren't brought up in a household where you stop at high school," Foster says. "Education and integrity were very high on the list in our household. Part of it was that my father knew coming from the south that education was the ticket out. And that was one thing that no one could take away."

Foster's father was the first in his family to graduate college, getting his undergrad degree at Wayne State in the 1950s. Foster saw her older siblings leave high school and go college, so she assumed that's what she was supposed to do. And when someone in the family hit a road bump, another family member was there to give encouragement, tell them to toughen up or to set an example for resilience. It didn't matter that many of her peers didn't value education and fortitude as much as her family. Foster saw the repercussions of that as she progressed in work and academia. "One of the reasons I got my Ph.D. is because during my bachelors, masters, and Ph.D., I never had an African-American professor for any of my engineering classes."

Most of Foster's mentors to date have been black men, one of which encouraged her to get her doctorate. "If you have the ability, the funding and the wherewithal to go for your Ph.D., you owe it to yourself and society to do so," she was told.

"And I never forgot that," she says. "One thing that you need, whether you're in poverty or surroundings that negate your dream, is that if you can see someone who looks like you in a position that makes it that much more possible to accomplish that dream. One of the things I have is that my father obtained his Ph.D. in education. So from that standpoint, I knew it was possible because he did have a family, he finished it in the early 1970s, and that was a time when there was a lot of racial tension going on in this country."

Getting the Right Help

Foster realized early on she couldn't do it all by herself. So at home and in business, she contracted work out to people she either didn't have the time or capacity for. During the first few years of her company, Foster hired someone to come in and clean a couple times a month, one accountant to take care of all financial matters related to her company, two teenagers to come fold all the clothes when she did laundry (it was the most time-consuming part) and occasionally babysit.

Foster suggests those without the money to pay for professional domestic services hire local teenagers. "Especially in times like now, it's probably a lot easier than it ever was to find someone dependable to come in once or twice or month to help you mop or make beds." Outsource the things that don't require a lot of skill but are necessary, take time, and effort. "If my house is not in order, it's just an attitude shift."

Now that her sons are older, Foster tries to work away from home as much as possible. She tries her best to keep work and home separate. "We never talked a whole lot about work at home," Foster says of she and her husband.

"When I come home, I don't want my home to reflect everything that's going on in the world. I need to come home and have some peace," she says. "There is a time for home and a time for business, but you *can* have peace in both."

Foster says she has learned that keeping everything running smoothly is not so much about balance. It's about prioritizing. Know what is most important to you, set your priorities accordingly, make the effort where needed, never let negative circumstances control your life, and balance will result. Foster says she owes much of her attitude to her parents. When you're young, Foster says, situations often determine who you are, how independent you are and how much of a sense of personal responsibility you feel when you become an adult.

Foster says she made the right decision to stay home, start her firm, and go to school all at once early on. She suggests that anyone who might consider the same path start sooner than later, since working mothers won't have the opportunity to see as much of their children after high school. It matters in the early years, too.

"I did not want to miss any of those younger years. I just didn't want to sacrifice that," Foster says. "I wanted to be there for major events myself and see [my sons] grow. And also to impart the our values of me and my husband, into him. So it was very important that I had that interaction with him from day one."