

# Press Room

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### Making It

by Sonya Bernard



### **The thought: start a successful minority-owned firm. The plan: obtain the proper degree and training. The action: just do it!**

This was the key to how John Calhoun, Ph.D., and Rod Hill made entrepreneurial history as the founders of Integrated Management Services (IMS)-the first minority-owned engineering firm in Jackson, Mississippi.

Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity brothers, Calhoun, 37, and Hill, 28, met at Jackson State University in 1990 while Calhoun was earning a master's degree and Hill, an undergraduate degree. It was then that Hill expressed the urge to start an engineering firm. Those words resurfaced when Calhoun worked as senior advisor to Jackson's former mayor, Kane Ditto. When contracts were brought before the Public Works board, no minority engineering firms were represented because there weren't any.

Hill obtained an internship with the Public Works Department with Calhoun's assistance and, after graduating from JSU, interned with two major engineering firms while earning his master's in civil engineering.

The financial hurdle posed a higher obstacle. While both had excellent credit and paid their bills on time, they couldn't get a loan to start their business. But that didn't stop them. They maxed out their credit cards, borrowed on their cars and came up with the \$20,000 needed for office space, equipment, software and marketing. With Calhoun's sister as secretary, they started IMS in 1996.

Today, the 18-employee firm specializes in civil, environmental, structural and mechanical engineering. Projected revenues for 1998 were \$1.8 million. The duo credit most of their success to their solid record for meeting deadlines, aggressiveness in handling major projects and to minority city and state officials who believed in them and helped them get major accounts. They've worked 26 hours nonstop to complete projects by deadline. They also pursue primary contract projects that give them a bigger share of the work (and more money) than subcontracting, says Calhoun, the company's president. Clients include Motorola and the cities of Holly Springs and Jackson, Mississippi.

But things aren't all rosy. Calhoun and Hill, vice president, say their company is constantly under the microscope by some majority-owned firms and has been investigated for things as trivial as estimates.

But if they stick to their game plan, IMS will be a major force.

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