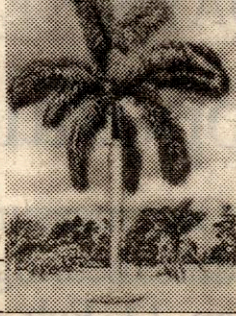


# MIAMI TODAY



WEEK OF THURSDAY, JANUARY 8, 1998

\$1.00



**NO GORE:** Although 25,000 invitations to the Jan. 26 Mayor's Economic Summit list Vice President **Al Gore** as invited keynote speaker, he will not be there. **Blanca Mesa**, spokeswoman for Miami-Dade County Mayor **Alex Penelas**, said the vice president had to cancel because of scheduling conflicts. Organizers are trying to get another cabinet member, she said. Called "Creating a Blueprint for Dade's Economic Future," the summit will take place from 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Jan. 26 at the Wyndham Hotel, 1601 Biscayne

Blvd. The program calls for three hours of remarks by the mayor. *Details:* 663-9581.

**LONG MONTH:** The Mercer Group will complete a study about Port of Miami expansion and strategy in February, **Kim Sorando** of the Miami-Dade County communications department said. In late November, County Manager **Armando Vidal** said the study would be complete in about a month. It will involve strategic planning and efficiencies, said **Charles Towsley**, who will become port director Jan. 19. "I look forward to getting involved in it, before the report is finalized."

**BANCO SOFISA:** Banco Sofisa, a Brazilian-owned bank, has received state but still needs federal approval to open in South Dade, said **Bruce Ricca**, a licensing specialist for the Florida Department of Banking. The proposed bank would be in the former Southeast Bank branch, 14095 S Dixie Hwy. It would target Brazilian businesses and individuals who require local banking services in Miami.

**STATE OF THE COUNTY:** Mayor Alex Penelas was to give his state-of-the-county address at noon Wednesday at Harris Field, 1034 NE Eighth St., Homestead. The public is invited to attend, but must reserve seating in advance. *Details:* 375-3850.

**OUR WORLD MARKET ROLE:** The next in Miami Today's International Roundtable series will focus on what steps must be taken to enhance Miami's position in the world market. The session, "Miami-Dade County's International Business Strategy," will be held from 5-7 p.m. Jan. 15 in the Miami City Club, 200 S Biscayne Blvd. Speakers include **Mario Sacasa**, vice president of international economic development for the Beacon Council, and **Manuel Gonzalez**, international trade and commerce coordinator for Miami-Dade County in the office of Mayor Alex Penelas. Miami Today international editor **Michael Hayes** will moderate. Seating limited; reservations requested. *Details:* Claudette Holder, 358-1008.



## THE ACHIEVER

Photo by Marlene Quaroni

**Ann McNeill**  
Building her own business  
The profile is on Page 4

## Highwoods on buying binge here

By MICHELLE LERNER

A North Carolina-based real estate investment trust is aggressively acquiring South Florida sites, buying at least a dozen properties in the tri-county area during the past four months and closing on an Airport West office building in the last days of December.

Highwoods Properties, based in Raleigh, closed on a 212,000-square-foot office building at the corner of Northwest 36th Street and 87th Avenue for \$16.65 million, just as 1997 came to an end.

"We think the Airport West Dade office market is one of the strongest in South Florida and believe this property is at the 100% location in the submarket," said Allen de Olazarra, vice president of Highwoods.

The seller was developer Doran Jason, who built the eight-story towers in two parts, one in 1975 and the other in 1984. The buildings are connected to form a single



# Ann McNeill sets the pace among women entrepreneurs...

As a little girl, she learned to operate her father's heavy landscaping equipment. Later, she clambered on rooftops as part of her bid to master the skills of the building trade. Eventually, Ann McNeill formed her own company and became a trailblazing force in the construction industry in South Florida.

Growing up, Ms. McNeill found herself confronted by obstacles that might have been daunting for others. As a little girl, she needed a special pass to enter the then-exclusive worlds of Palm Beach and nearby Singer Island. As an executive at Pratt & Whitney she had to suffer the indignity of verbal abuse from a senior colleague. And having decided to be her own boss and launch her venture in the tough construction business world, she faced further setbacks.

But Ms. McNeill says her religious convictions, patience and knack for turning adversities into opportunities through well-thought-out strategies, plus an element of serendipitous timing, have helped her succeed, landing substantial contracts with the Miami-Dade County School Board and other public and private entities.

She has meanwhile worked hard to help other black-owned businesses here make it, notably through her active involvement in the Black Business Association.

Ms. McNeill was interviewed at the construction site of one of her current projects, the Miami Northwestern Senior High School in Liberty City, by Miami Today international editor Michael Hayes.

**Q: You have more than one company?**

**A:** I'm involved in a number of companies. And I'm looking at opportunities in the airport, whether it be concession or retail.

As far as construction, I'm owner of MCO Construction & Services. I've been in the construction business for more than 20 years.

I'm also owner of MCO Pavarini Construction and Federal MCO.

Federal MCO is a joint venture with Kvarner Construction, which bought out Federal and Trafalgar House Construction about a year and a half ago. I started a joint venture with them back in 1992 to secure a project in West Palm Beach, which ended up being the largest project in the city's history — a \$20 million police administration building and adjacent parking garage.

**Q: How did you come to do that?**

**A:** I went after the project because West Palm Beach is my home — for many years I had to commute to Miami to work because the opportunities were just not available here for blacks and minorities. As a matter of fact, I remember as a teenager having to carry a yellow card in order to work as a maid on Palm Beach and on Singer Island; being black, I had to carry this card in order to have access to cross the bridge.

The reason I'm mentioning this is because I think God blessed me to have a sense of accomplishment. Thirty years later I secured one of the city's largest contracts, where you had people who were still employed by the city who 30 years prior were the same people requiring me to carry a card.

So those were some of the obstacles and challenges that one had to face.

**Q: Your companies are engaged in both public sector and private construction?**

**A:** Mostly public. We've had many challenges in getting involved in private projects.

I don't know if that has anything to do with the lack of relationships or the eco-



Photo by Marlene Gussner

For Ann McNeill, obstacles that might have discouraged others were seen as challenges to overcome. She now owns two construction companies in area.

## The Achiever Ann McNeill

President  
MCO Construction & Services Inc.  
6600 NW 27th Ave., Suite 202  
Miami 33147  
(305) 693-4344

Age: 43  
Born: West Palm Beach, FL  
Higher education: Florida Memorial College (B.S., accounting); Barry University (M.A., finance)  
Personal philosophy: "Work like it all depends on you and pray like it all depends on God."

nomics or race or gender. But we've on many occasions bid private work and have not been successful.

We're working on a small project for Miami Heart now. But the bulk of our work is public.

**Q: What else do you have under way?**

**A:** The other corporation I formed is MCO Pavarini Construction. The site we're sitting on is the Northwestern Senior High School replacement facility. I started the construction company in 1994 in an attempt to respond to a request for bids from the Dade County Public Schools System.

The School Board made an unprecedented decision when they decided to set aside this project for competition only among black contractors.

I waited for national black contractors and local black contractors to prepare proposals to submit in response to this bid. And in the last 30 days of the bid it appeared as though the project would not happen, because we didn't have a sufficient number of bidders. We needed at least three.

**Q: Was there anything you could do about that?**

**A:** With less than 30 days left, I contacted George Pavarini, who was the owner of Pavarini Construction in New York, and asked him for an appointment because I wanted to discuss this.

I chose to approach him because I was at the time working as a sub-contractor for them on a project in South Dade. They were a very responsive contractor to work with. They paid on time. It was just a very good working relationship.

So often we hear of blacks fronting for whites. I'm mentioning this example

because it needs to be clear that there is a difference between approaching a white contractor and being approached.

In 1987 I submitted a bid for demolition of the old Lindsey Hopkins building.

It was not set aside; it was not for blacks. It was just a straight open bid. The bid was about \$1 million. But my bid was thrown out because I could not obtain an A-rated bond, which was what the School Board required. My bond was a B-rated bond.

**Q: What happened then?**

**A:** The board asked me to re-bid the job, which I said I would not — all the time I knew that my strategy was to re-bid, but not state that publicly, because my competition would increase their price and my price would remain the same. But I had to find an A-rated bond.

So I contacted a white contractor who was currently doing work for the School Board and talked about what I wanted to do — I wanted him to bid the job in his name, with his A-rated bond, but then turn around and sub-contract 100% of the job back to me. I would pay him a fee for that. He agreed.

**Q: Was history repeating itself when you later went to Pavarini?**

**A:** Absolutely. I called Pavarini in New York. He met with me here. I told him I wanted to talk to him about providing a bond for me to bid this Miami Northwestern Senior High School project and turn the entire project back over to me if we won the job. He agreed.

So we formed a corporation called MCO Pavarini and we bid this project.

**Q: What was the outcome?**

**A:** I ended up coming in third on the bid. There was a bigger picture here: the bigger picture for me and for MCO was to help Dade County Public Schools and to help the black construction community make this project happen. And in order to do that we needed more than one bidder on this project. There would have been no way the School Board would have awarded this project if there would have been only one bidder.

By forming the MCO Pavarini corporation and bidding this project, we continued to submit other bids to the School Board. The one bid we did win is over at Miami Edison Middle School.

**Q: What is the project there?**

**A:** We secured a \$1.2 million millwork contract — millwork being all of the cabinets, shelving and those kinds of things inside the school.

**Q: When are you planning for both projects to be completed?**

**A:** In this one, at Northwestern, we are basically complete; by the end of January we'll have our punch list items finished for phase 3.

**Q: Punch list meaning what?**

**A:** The finishing touches.  
At Miami Edison, I have two contracts: by owning MCO Construction & Services, I am a part of the construction management team on that project as a prime contractor. And I also have a sub-contract as owner of MCO Pavarini.

That project should be finished through the punch list by the end of April or May.

**Q: What comes next for you?**

**A:** One of the major projects that we're looking forward to working on is the Miami Heat arena. We plan to be part of the construction management team, similar to our involvement in the Edison Middle project.

**Q: Is being part of the construction management team by virtue of being involved in the actual construction or does it mean acting as part of an oversight group?**

**A:** It will be both. We will actually be involved in certain parts of construction, but we will also be involved in the day-to-day operation of the project.

**Q: Anything else in the pipeline?**

**A:** We're also looking forward to working with the county Aviation Department on some of their projects at Miami International Airport.

**Q: Your companies are all private and closely held?**

**A:** Right.  
**Q: Would you say you're in a financially sound position today?**

**A:** We've had a number of challenges financially. I think it's important to talk about that.

I'm one of those people who has a very strong belief in God. And through that faith and much prayer we've overcome a lot of challenges in this business, to have been able to survive 20 years.

**Q: You started your career working for Dade County?**

**A:** Yes, Metro-Dade Transit.  
To go back a little further than that. I'm a 1976 graduate of Florida Memorial College, a very proud alumnus of the college.

I believe Florida Memorial has strategically placed a number of graduates throughout the city and state in business, education and banking. That Florida Memorial contact, as a matter of fact, is what helped me gain access to employment from the county.

Before the county I worked for Tal Fair at the Urban League. Tal Fair I think has done a tremendous job in training many Miami black leaders; you don't hear very much about that and I'd like to use this opportunity to say that I think he has done a tremendous job and don't think he has gotten the recognition. I could name many people who have worked for the Urban League in the '60s, '70 and '80s who are now prominent leaders in this community. When you talk about people who are making things happen, there could have been no better training ground than the Urban League of Miami and Tal Fair.

**Q: What did you do at the Urban League?**

**A:** I was a budget analyst. The person I had to submit some of my reports to at the City of Miami offered me a job transfer and I took that opportunity. That was in 1979.

**Q: You didn't stay in that post long?**

**A:** In less than a year I received an offer from Pratt & Whitney Aircraft.

**Q: What was your role there?**

**A:** I started working in the budget

# ...meeting all challenges to head MCO and other area firms

office.  
**Q: Things did not go smoothly for you?**

A: One of the challenges I had early in my career which really taught me about faith was while working at Pratt & Whitney my boss was the kind of person who felt that blacks and women had no place there.

**Q: How was it that you had moved to Pratt & Whitney?**

A: While at the Urban League, I went to a national Urban League conference in Washington. I met with the vice president of personnel for Pratt & Whitney at an exhibit at the conference. I was sharing with him that when I came out of college I had gone to Pratt & Whitney for an interview and a white man told me they were not hiring "my kind."

This was in 1976. My kind was black and women — they were not hiring those for management positions. When I mentioned that, the vice president of personnel at this exhibit tried to assure me that they were. He asked me to send him my resume, which I did.

Six months later, I accepted a job to work with them, only to find that I was the only black and the only woman in the department, and the youngest person — the next person my senior — was 20 years older than I was.

Now, where was I going for upward mobility?

My boss told me that I should be at home barefoot and pregnant. Those were his words.

That was 1979. I worked an average of 12-14 hours a day, but was never good enough. He was trying to make me feel that I was so inferior. It forced me to do a job over and beyond the call of duty, to prove that I was an equal.

Now, what I did not realize was that all the other department heads recognized it and were asking him to transfer me to their department for promotion, and he would not.

One night, while I was working very late, I found a diary he was keeping. It was a diary of lies. So I started keeping

a diary on him and all of the discriminatory acts, which were true. I also documented them with the names of people who were present when he would say these things.

In 1980, when I was going to take a week vacation, the day of my vacation he came to tell me that I was not going to be able to go. I had to work during my vacation. But after a private meeting with him, he allowed me to go on my vacation. When I returned, I had been transferred — with a promotion. In my new job, I dealt only with the vice presidents of the corporation.

That was an excellent experience.  
**Q: But presumably not one you could stomach for much longer?**

A: No. But what's interesting is that now Pratt & Whitney — to show you the positive side of this story, the change they have made — now has a black president.

What I decided to do next was take an educational leave, after going as high as I felt I could go in that corporation, to complete my master's.

At the same time, I started going to construction school at a technical institute in the community. That is the time that I started working for small black contractors in the neighborhood — for free.

**Q: What kind of work did you do?**

A: I did roofing on the weekends, to get the experience. I did carpentry for free — at the same time going to a technical institute, North Tech in Riviera Beach, to learn how to build a house from the ground up.

I did that while I had my job so I could get experience in construction.

The reason I did that was because I knew the opportunities to be self-employed were greater than having a job. And I was investing in rental property at that time — my husband and I doing our own repairs.

**Q: Why did you choose to learn construction?**

A: What really led to that was we secured an estimate to replace a roof on

a piece of property we owned.  
 Compared with the estimate, if we replaced the roof ourselves we would save \$20,000. That was a year's salary at that time, and I realized the opportunities in this business to make a year's salary in a month over a period of time were a lot greater than working an entire year for less.

Then the 1980 riots happened. Which is what brought me back to Miami — after the riots, Miami had to be rebuilt and Commissioner Barbara Carey initiated the race-conscious ordinance after a study proved that .0001% of Dade County's business was going to blacks.

Basically the county was not doing business with black contractors. Once Commissioner Carey did that, the opportunities for black contractors were enormous. But the availability of black contractors was minuscule.

Being a business person, I took advantage of the opportunity and decided to come back to Miami and volunteer to work for contractors here.

**Q: You worked with Thacker Construction Co. in Miami and went on to found your own business?**

A: Exactly. I knew — and I think this is very important for young people with a dream to become an entrepreneur — I wanted to start my own construction company. When I went to work for Thacker I only went to learn the skills, although I had to take a big cut in my salary to work for him — he did not have black women managers in his business. They were all men.

**Q: So he took a chance?**

A: Yes, he took a chance, too. But I expressed to him when I went to work for him that eventually I wanted to start my own business.

**Q: How has it turned out for you being not only black but a woman in what most people see as having been very much a man's domain?**

A: I think the way my father raised me helped me to not look at work as man's or woman's but just as work and as opportunity. I've always looked at it like

that. When I was 12, he taught me how to operate heavy equipment.

**Q: Your father was in building?**  
 A: He was a landscaper and he also owned field buses that took people to the fields to do farm work.

I had to operate heavy equipment early, so I never looked at it as man's work or woman's work.

Another important point. When we think construction we think hard hat. But it's a business. That's why I feel that women can do this business as well as men.

**Q: And sometimes better?**  
 A: I didn't want to say that!

**Q: Is there any advice you would give to a young woman thinking about becoming an entrepreneur?**

A: I would say go. Volunteer or secure a job in the kind of business you'd like to own and get the on-hands experience.

**Q: Among your many civic and community activities, you have been a leader in the Black Business Association: What does that mean to you?**

A: That's something that is crucial to our existence as a black business community. It's an organization I have been intimately involved in from its inception. It's about the business of business for black business owners. We are totally self-sufficient.

**Q: How would you characterize its mission?**

A: To create opportunities for black businesses and advocate — which is a very strong word, but we take it very seriously.

Right now, with the loss of the minority program, our role and responsibilities have increased. It's very critical to the survival of black businesses to understand the fact that we must do business with each other and must become better business people.

That's key. And to become better business people we must continue to grow, educate, associate and lobby for what we want.

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