

# Companies run by veterans, women and minorities can benefit from unique perspectives

Mary Stone, Special to Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK Published 7:01 p.m. ET Oct. 29, 2018 | Updated 10:55 a.m. ET Oct. 30, 2018



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(Photo: Max Schulte / Rochester Democrat and Chronicle)

Jim White is meticulous and prepared. Four years as a machinist in the U.S. Navy taught him that.

White served in the 1980s, spending most of his time working on a World War II-era ship. At 21, he was operating equipment that was twice as old as he was.

“Everything was antiquated,” White says. “If something broke in the middle of the ocean, my job was to make a new part to fix it. You couldn’t just run over to Auto Zone.”

White’s honed skills are a good example of how certain experiences and backgrounds can bring an edge to a business leader. Several companies on the Top 100 list are run by minorities, women or veterans, and we talked to some of their executives to see what unique qualities they bring to their work.

White didn’t want the predictability of a military career, so he returned to his hometown Webster, only to find there weren’t many jobs for machinists at the time, and the few that existed relied too much on automation. Instead, it was a perfectly timed job advertisement that would lead him to a 30-year career in a completely different field — real estate — that nonetheless required the kind of meticulous preparation he had developed in his previous career.

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It would also lead to a first encounter with his now wife and business partner, Cheryl. She provided agent support services at one of the real estate franchises where White worked in the 1990s. Many years later, the couple would combine their jobs to launch their own brokerage company, Empire Realty Group, on Empire Boulevard in Webster.

White and Cheryl were joined a few months after by their now finance director, Bonnie Pagano. Pagano manages the accounting; Cheryl manages the office, and White coaches the agents. The agent-centric approach means they don’t have to pay the high overhead and franchise fees of national firms.

In September, the company opened its second office, in Pittsford, to accommodate its now 73 agents. If the last five years are any indication, White says he expects more agents will opt for the independence and savings of Empire’s co-op office model.

“We’re about agents bringing home more money to their families. We’re not about getting rich, or having a house on Canandaigua Lake, or anything like that,” White says. “At this point in our career, our kids are grown. We have our house; we have our stuff. This (business) is more of a passion and something we can do together.”

The couple, in their 60s, live off White's commissions from the real estate sales he makes himself. He sells a lot, in part because he uses what he's good at to make himself stand out from competitors — making last-minute repairs to his sellers' houses, for example. It's one more way he's leveraging those skills he first learned in the U.S. Navy.

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Erin Tolefree, executive vice president at Baldwin Richardson Foods Co. in Macedon. (Photo: SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE)

## In tune with millennials

As a minority and woman business leader, Erin Tolefree says she's actually representative of the new majority. Tolefree, executive vice president of Baldwin Richardson Foods in Macedon, says her company is trying to tap an ethnically diverse consumer base.

Baldwin Richardson Foods, or BRF, manufactures custom-made ingredients such as sauces, syrups, fillings and toppings, which are consumed en masse by Millennials. To succeed with this demographic segment, Tolefree says that BRF must be on trend.

"A recent discussion amongst our team revolved around the fact that Gen Z will continue to drive even more change in the food industry, demanding more choices and more convenience," Tolefree says. "Half of Gen Z is from diverse backgrounds. For the first time in U.S. history, the minority will be the majority."

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Jeremy Sheffield, right, and Tina Boudrieau work on the production floor at Baldwin Richardson Foods Co. in Macedon. (Photo: SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE)



Tolefree understands what's at stake. "This generation will demand more diverse choices. It is a business imperative that our organization continue to embrace the importance of having a team that is reflective of the consumers we serve and the communities in which we operate and conduct business."

This diversity fosters innovative thinking, which ultimately is what drives growth, she says.

BRF produces its ingredients for restaurants and cafes in the U.S. and Canada. BRF also supplies ingredients to cereal and breakfast food brands in addition to private-label products for national grocery chains.

The firm's office, manufacturing space, and warehouses are located in Williamson and Macedon; both are headed by Tolefree. In August, BRF and Empire State Development announced it was expanding the Williamson facility, which Tolefree says will lead to the creation of 35 new jobs.

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Erin Tolefree, executive vice president at Baldwin Richardson Foods Co. in Macedon. (Photo: SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE)

Tolefree herself joined BRF in 2001, working her way up to executive vice president in 2015.

Tolefree is from Chicago, where the company is headquartered, and worked there for more than 10 years. "Our growth and expansion in Rochester was the impetus for my official move to this region in 2012 with my family," she says, referring to her husband, Truman, and two sons, Eric and Alex.

As a woman and a minority business leader, Tolefree tries to inspire a culture of respect and inclusiveness. She also says she isn't afraid to lean on employees, giving them opportunities to advance through stretch assignments or new roles that help them realize their greater potential.

## Relationship-based business

At Butler/Till, the culture is familial in a business based on relationships, says Melissa Palmer, chief financial officer and chief operating officer at the employee-owned media and communications agency on Jefferson Road.

Founders Susan Butler and Tracy Till, who now serve as board directors, created a culture that nurtured women to succeed and rise, Palmer says. Employees have flexible work hours; they can buy vacation time; and they are offered pet insurance, in-house training and paid time off for community service.

Palmer is one of three now at the helm. The others are President Kimberly Jones and Chief Strategy Officer Peter Infante. Seventy percent of the 140 employees are women. The company became 100 percent employee owned in 2014.

As a result, the influence of women on the company's culture is so ingrained as to be almost imperceptible.

Another draw is Butler/Till's focus on engagement. Earlier this year, a group of three employees went to Nicaragua to build a school.

Palmer says that appreciating employees' work inside and outside the agency helps them feel comfortable enough to bring their whole selves to the job.

“Saying we’re a family may sound trite, but we truly care about people, personally and professionally,” Palmer explains.

Palmer has known Till since first grade, when their school participated in an experiment that separated girls from boys to see if it provided a better learning environment for them. Five of those girls remain friends to this day, even planning group trips together.

While in school, Palmer didn’t realize the story behind the gender experiment. But she says that many of the women from that first grade class have gone on to achieve great success. “I don’t know if there’s actually any correlation, but it’s interesting when I look back on that.”

Palmer’s career started out in accounting — a male-dominated field. She then went on to become a financial director in manufacturing — another male-dominated field. At meetings, she was often the only woman at the table. For much of her professional life until Butler/Till, she knew no different.

## Wanting to succeed

Annette Warren had a similar experience to Palmer. She is president and CEO of iSECURE, an IT company specializing in website and network security. Before iSECURE she was president at VocalNet, a voice and internet company she ran with her husband.

While she sometimes gets challenged by men in her field, Warren says it has less to do with being a woman and more to do with her lack of technical experience.

“My background is not technology. It’s business. And to me, running a business is all about people,” Warren says.

To Warren, her background outside of technology has been an asset and a contributor to her company’s success. She approaches problems creatively, in a way that others might assume is impossible, and she finds solutions where others may never think to look.

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**Terence Brown Sr. and Joseph E. Nelson discuss a project.** (Photo: Tina MacIntyre-Yee/Rochester Democrat and Chronicle)

“From a woman’s perspective, mine is like any other industry: You have to want it bad enough for it not to bother you (if you’re different),” Palmer says. “As a woman, there are so many layers to the things that I know and that I’m passionate about, which for me is about being creative and not being afraid of stepping outside the box.”

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**Terence Brown Sr. and TJ Brown at Steel Tech Fabricators on Conkey Avenue in Rochester.** (Photo: Tina MacIntyre-Yee/Rochester Democrat and Chronicle)

Terence Brown, owner and operator of Rochester-based Steel Tech Fabricators, says in theory, being a minority-owned company should give the steel contractor a competitive advantage for some projects. State or federally funded construction projects often require a certain percentage of the overall project to go to a minority-owned business.

But in practice, it doesn't always work out that way.

Brown's son, company project manager TJ Brown, says an existing loophole means a winning bid can sometimes go to another company later because the process can be extended to include new bidders.

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**Edwin Feliz working at Steel Tech Fabricators in Rochester.** (Photo: Tina MacIntyre-Yee/Rochester Democrat and Chronicle)

So as in any industry, success still comes down to smarts and awareness. TJ says the company's recent growth has a lot to do with being part of the overall revitalization of the city.

"We've had projects on East Avenue, the Strathallan building. We also finished 600 East Ave., a mixed-use building. There are a ton of railings by the river that we have a hand in. We are in the process of finishing that project now," TJ says.

Steel Tech has 24 employees and in recent years has made steady growth.

Terence Brown says, "One of the things that we pride ourselves on: We've never laid off a single soul in the 13 years we've been in business."

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