

Trucking With a Mission

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Marcia G. Taylor

Chairman and CEO, Bennett International Group, Inc. (BIG)

Marcia G. Taylor is not your typical entrepreneur. She's a matriarchal leader of a highly successful, Atlanta-based, family-owned and family-run, diversified trucking and transportation conglomerate that's almost thirty years old.

Ranked #4 on the list of Atlanta's Top 25 Women-Owned Firms – #107 on the Top 500 Women-Owned Companies in the U.S. at the end of 2000, Mrs. Taylor's business profile also includes recognition as "Entrepreneur of the Year" by Ernst and Young, recipient of an Athena award, on the board of directors for Eagles' National Bank and the Henry County Medical Center, and a member of the Georgia Motor Trucking Association. Her family and employees are also very supportive of various community initiatives including a shelter for abused children called A Friend's House.

The road taken

Beyond the business profile and obvious accomplishments and contributions for which Marcia is known lies the heart, the brains, and the resolve of a steel magnolia. Her personal story began on a farm in southern Illinois. At sixteen, Marcia was married and had her first child at seventeen. The following year she had a second child, and by nineteen, she had her third. As happy as she was with her growing family, she admits that she married too young and there were difficulties.

"Wanting to start a new life, and knowing I needed to make a change," Marcia said, "I decided to move to Georgia in January, 1971." Perhaps because her husband was a truck driver, she got a job as a "girl Friday" in a small specialized trucking company. Marcia could not have known just how much this decision would alter her life. Neither did she know that it would pave the road for her family's future.

Over the next few years, Marcia began to learn the specialty trucking business from the ground up. She also divorced her first husband and remarried – a "good man" whom she met at the company. At the same

time, she continued to raise three children with the help of her mother. Marcia and her new husband, J.D. Garrison, soon saw an opportunity to buy the company from George Bennett. In 1974, with fifteen trucks in inventory, \$500 cash on which to operate, six employees, two really good customers, and a lot of guts and determination, Marcia and J.D. began the journey to build their own business – one step and one struggle at a time.

In 1981, just when things were beginning to look up, J.D. died unexpectedly following a brief hospitalization in Texas. He was receiving treatment to help him quit smoking. For Marcia, it was a devastatingly painful blow, both personally and professionally. "To go on or to give up, those were my options," she said. Not being a quitter, Marcia dug in her heels – high heels though they may have been – and set about to grow the business primarily through diversification and non-traditional trucking services. She also learned to adapt to the impact of deregulation and listened even more intently to her customers and their changing needs. Her company's motto and mantra soon became – Large enough to serve, small enough to care..

The making of a conglomerate

Today, the company prides itself on both its customer and employee loyalty. Customers include UPS, Ford, and AGCO. Marcia's company not only does specialty trucking internationally, but hauls and drives customers' equipment, moves buses across country for the Olympic games and other special events, picks up tractors at incoming ports, and provides warehousing. The newest enterprise is a motorcycle dealership, Easy Rider of Atlanta, which - not surprisingly in this family saga – is run by Marcia's daughter-in-law.

"As we've grown," Marcia says, "our company has actually divided into eleven separate entities under the corporate umbrella which still oversees the core business. The management team is comprised of about twenty people including myself and my three grown children – two sons and a daughter. My mother has also worked with us in the past. Key managers have been brought in to add breadth and depth to the organization." Something else that has worked well for Marcia and BIG is the practice of hiring employees' family members to work for the company, including husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, etc. "It may not work for other companies," Marcia said, " but it works here and it definitely builds loyalty."

Building a loyal work force is one clear example of Marcia's impact as a leader. "I like to find good people, empower them, give direction in the course that I want, and let them go," she explains. "My own inspiration comes mainly from hard work and a deep faith." It isn't too surprising then that one of her role models is *Margaret Thatcher*, **Britain's** former prime minister, whom Marcia says always appeared to be a "tough old broad."

Leadership for tough times

Drawing a parallel to her own ability to weather tough personal times, Marcia spoke pragmatically about the future and her vision for the company in the years ahead. "Truthfully – the current year's economic volatility has given me the greatest challenge our family-based company has had to face," she said. "Right now, we're managing each day as it comes and we intend to stay the course. We've learned some valuable lessons from this experience, and we don't plan to repeat any mistakes. By leveraging the company's excellent reputation, controlling growth, and remaining true to our customers and what we do best, I believe our company and our family will continue to do well."

"It's not our goal to sell," Marcia added, "and we have a second generation already in place. Our family meets once a quarter and we're still solidly committed to the business. We love it. I may step back in ten years or so, but the business will be in good hands."

No doubt it will. This lady, this leader, this family matriarch has created a legacy in her industry – not to mention a way of life for her extended family. Her pride is justified. No wonder her employees often call her "MOM" and that the average tenure is twenty-eight years.

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By Susan B. Hitchcock (Creator of the Age of SHEroes)

VP - Client Services -Turknett Leadership Group