

# The Bulletin

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## Donna Allie Cleans Up

By Marc Kramer, *The Bulletin*

Donna Allie, the president and founder of Team Clean, Inc., is a leading provider of janitorial services in the Philadelphia region. Ms. Allie, who launched her company in the mid-1980s with no money and just a mop and a broom, has grown the company to more than 550 employees and more than \$16 million in sales. The company is now the No. 1-ranked minority-owned business in Philadelphia, according to the *Philadelphia Business Journal*.

Team Clean serves a variety of clients in government, education, industry, professional offices, sports and entertainment venues and events. Among the highlights of Team Clean's growth are clients such as the landmark National Constitution Center and Cheyney University.

Ms. Allie has won innumerable awards. For instance, the African American Chamber of Commerce honored Ms. Allie with its Entrepreneurial Spirit Award, and in 1995, she received the Business Acumen Award from the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women. In 1996, Team Clean was selected as one of Philadelphia's 100 Fastest Growing Small Businesses by the Wharton Small Business Development Center and the Philadelphia Business Journal, and in 1997, Ms. Allie was named one of Pennsylvania's 50 Best Women in Business. Also in 1997, Ms. Allie and Team Clean received the Special Recognition Award for Excellence of Service from the Pennsylvania Convention Center. The following is an interview with Ms. Allie.

*Kramer: What did you do before you started your business?*

Allie: I graduated from Wilberforce University, and then returned home to the Philadelphia suburbs and did several things to make ends meet. I guess I was destined to be an entrepreneur and a business owner and not to work for anyone else. Although serving your clients' needs is essentially working for someone else, it is 10 times better and doesn't have all the restrictions. I was formerly a house cleaner for affluent Main Liners, including a one-time cleaning in the master bedroom suite of the late Walter Annenberg. In the '80s I was also a clown for birthday parties, a private party server and a chauffeur.

*Kramer: Why did you start your business?*

Allie: Since the cleaning was the one job that I was successful with, I decided to run an ad for my services in the local newspaper (*The Main Line Times*) and the response was good. Then I started to hire other women to help me because I became very popular after cleaning all the houses I could possibly handle.

*Kramer: Did you take any courses that helped you grow your business?*

Allie: I enrolled in programs geared toward assisting minorities and women in owning and operating their own business. There were two programs which were the most valuable to me. One was the Small Business Administration's 8a Program because they offered educational programs that taught me how to bid, estimate, sole source negotiate and win government contracts.

*Kramer: Are there any programs that help minority-owned businesses?*

Allie: The City of Philadelphia's Minority Business Enterprise Council, because of their goal-oriented program which encouraged larger companies, after receiving city contracts, to do business with minority-, women-, disadvantaged- and disabled-owned firms. These programs, along with the actual procurement of government contracts, enable women- and minority-owned companies to enter into the private sector. Without these programs, I would most likely still be cleaning homes myself.

*Kramer: How did you learn about it?*

Allie: I learned about cleaning from my mother, who made me clean every Saturday morning, and I learned from my grandmother who was a domestic worker on the Main Line and also had a laundry business in her own home. I guess she was an entrepreneur as well. As a child, I can remember watching the late Philadelphia City Councilman Thatcher Longstreth picking up the laundry for his parents from my grandmother.

*Kramer: What is the hardest part of being in business for you?*

Allie: The hardest part of my business is keeping up with government regulations on employment and taxes.

*Kramer: What do you like most?*

Allie: Winning new business, and winning in general.

*Kramer: What do you like least?*

Allie: Losing.

*Kramer: Do you have a mentor?*

Allie: I consider all successful businessmen and -women my mentors. There are so many who have mentored me, I am afraid that if I start naming them I will be in trouble. However, there are two that really have had a great impact on my life. One is deceased; his name was Daniel Tabas. I remember inviting him to lunch, not really expecting him to accept; however, he did accept. I asked him, "What was the key to success," because he certainly was successful. He owned Royal Bank and several other businesses in his lifetime. I remember him looking me straight in my eyes, and saying, "Young lady, I know without a doubt you are going to be successful." I began looking around as if he were talking to someone else. After I realized that he was talking to me, I asked him, "How do you know?" He said "Because you remind me of myself. You have a little fear but not too much. Young lady, the key to success is the more you put in, the more you will get out." The other person is Ernest Jones, the president and CEO of the Philadelphia Workforce Development Corporation. Ernie never gives me any discouraging words. He always tells me, "You can do it." Believe it or not, after running a successful business for over 18 years, you still need people around you who can tell you, "You can do it."

*Kramer: Is there any business book you would recommend?*

Allie: I read so many good business books, but right now I would recommend *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, by Chip and Dan Heath.

*Kramer: What is the one piece of advice you would give to an aspiring entrepreneur?*

Allie: Keep going, keep growing and remember the more you put in, the more you will get out.

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*Marc Kramer, who is the author of five books and project faculty at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, is a serial entrepreneur.*

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