

TARGET FIELD: BIG DREAMS FOR SMALL BUSINESSES



Ghana native Gilbert Odonkor's small company, YAW Construction Group, has helped build the ballpark. "Going, going...Ghana?"

Indeed. Home runs flying out of Target Field will actually have a long-distance connection to West Africa. That's because Yaw Construction Group (YCG), owned by Ghana native Gilbert Odonkor, worked with Mortenson Construction, the ballpark's construction manager, on Target Field's concrete footings, walls and columns. "Our crews got to work side by side with some of the best in the business," Odonkor said. "You can't put a price tag on that type of experience."

Perhaps Odonkor didn't picture building a ballpark, but a dream of having his own business took him from Ghana to the University of Minnesota, where he studied construction management. He worked for a few area firms before starting Yaw (his middle name) in 2006. Now Odonkor and his crews, thanks to a unique partnership with Mortenson, have a part in preserving a game that he had never watched. "In Ghana, people know soccer and even cricket, baseball is nonexistent," said Odonkor, who employs anywhere from three to 15 workers depending on the time of year. "But living here, I now see the beauty of the game."

YCG is only one small firm that's already played a big role in building Target Field. The Minnesota Ballpark Authority (MBA), Mortenson Construction, the Minnesota Twins and Hennepin County have agreed to specific project goals for hiring subcontractors and suppliers as well as employing women, minorities and small businesses. Mortenson is using its multi-faceted Community Participation Program to reach the Small, Women, and Minority Business Enterprise (SWMBE) goals. The MBA is monitoring the progress.

"Our goal is to have 30% of the ballpark construction work being done by SWMBE firms, and we've already surpassed that goal," Minnesota Ballpark Authority Chairman Steve Cramer said. "\$88 million of the \$281 million in contracts awarded so far have gone to SWMBE firms. This is truly an investment in the community."

To date, 65 SWMBE companies are involved with the project with numerous firms having multiple contracts. In addition, fifteen SWMBE firms have prime contracts. "Right from the beginning, Mortenson came out and invited minorities to get involved in the project so things could get broken down and we could bid on them," Odonkor said. "Mortenson's efforts really went beyond the talk."

While Odonkor came from across the globe, Calvin Littlejohn arrived from across town. The Roosevelt graduate grew up learning how to fix things while watching



Tri Construction co-owner Calvin Littlejohn (in foreground) looks over ballpark blueprints with business partner Lester Royal III, his apartment building's handyman. Littlejohn worked as a laborer and did handiwork himself with Mortenson for about five years before starting Tri Construction in 2001. He and his business partner Lester Royal III currently have six employees, and they know the value of building relationships along the way.

"I had worked with Mortenson, and our company partnered with Olympic Drywall Systems," he said. "We said, 'we know we're a smaller company; teach us the business, the infrastructure.' They liked the concept

and were proactive in working with minorities and small businesses.”

But when the largest public construction undertaking in state history went from blueprint to reality, Littlejohn was realistic. “We knew early on it was beyond us because of the financial costs,” he said. “But I knew there would be minority participation, and we were able to make those partnerships.”

Littlejohn’s Tri Construction has been a true role player, working on everything from the Terrace Level to Target Plaza and hanging sheetrock for the concourses. “This is awesome, but humbling at the same time. I cannot thank the MBA and Mortenson enough for taking their commitment seriously.”

Odonkor and Littlejohn agree that Target Field is a once in a lifetime project, but the reality is that the work really begins when this job ends.

“We both feel the same way: we will seize this opportunity,” said Littlejohn. “When it’s over—and this job will be over at some point—contractors won’t be looking at us saying, ‘what have they worked on?’”

The Community Participation Program allows Odonkor and Littlejohn to help build a ballpark—and portfolios. “There will be many ways to measure the success of this project. One of those is to see how these small businesses are thriving when given the chance to make an impact,” said MBA Chair Steve Cramer. “The legacy of this work and its effect on locally-based small businesses will be visible for many generations.”

Both Gilbert Odonkor and Calvin Littlejohn say that the opportunity to be a part of Target Field goes beyond a job.

“You’re going to see it in person and on television. It’s a lifelong feeling and something to be proud of,” said Odonkor.

“I feel like I have a stake in this. There’s a pride that will be there for the rest of my days,” said Littlejohn.