

ON THE LEVEL

Personal profiles of Wisconsin's construction professionals

PROTESTS, PANDEMIC AND PROSPECTS

At helm of JCP, Phelps brothers reflect on recent months and look to future

Dan Shaw
dshaw@dailyreporter.com

Although the past few months have not been easy for anyone, they have especially been hard for the leadership team at JCP Construction.

The coronavirus outbreak has brought at least one big disappointment to the three brothers who run the Milwaukee-based contractor — James Phelps, company president; Jalin Phelps, vice president of field operations; and Clifton Phelps, vice president of business development. Their company has been enlisted to help convert the Fiserv Forum, home to the Milwaukee Bucks, into the main venue for the Democratic National Convention. But with big questions now looming about how many people will actually attend the event, the Phelps brothers have had to come to terms with the likelihood that they will have a much smaller role to play.

Meanwhile, the death last month of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer has hit home at the minority-owned JCP Construction, where about 80 percent of the office employees are black. With their commitment to having a diverse workforce, the Phelps brothers are well aware of the artificial barriers that often prevent people of color from getting on job sites.

That dedication extends beyond hiring. JCP Construction's main office is near the corner of North Reservoir Avenue and North Martin Luther King Drive in Milwaukee. That puts it in the center not only of a historically black neighborhood, but also many of the recent protests against police brutality organized in response to Floyd's death.

This week they sat down with The Daily Reporter to talk about their recent experiences and hopes for the industry. (This article has been edited for brevity and clarity.)



James Phelps



Jalin Phelps



Clifton Phelps

The Daily Reporter: What has the coronavirus outbreak meant for your company?

James: We have seen some slight delays. But, overall, what we are seeing is that projects that were ongoing continue to move forward, with a few exceptions. But a lot of the projects supposed to start over the past two or three months, I guess the owners and developers have been holding off because of the uncertainty. We are hopeful those will start moving forward. But everybody's waiting to see what the new normal will look like.

TDR: What's going on with the DNC?

James: We haven't heard for certain. But we generally expect the project will be diminished in scope to the point that the type of project is going to be way different than what it was. Originally, it was going to be a large project with a lot of parts. This is going to move it toward more of media play. But they are pivoting, and we are still waiting to see what that looks like. I just understand that scope isn't anywhere near what it was when we started.

TDR: What precautions have you been taking on job sites and in the office to keep everyone safe?

Jalin: We have been trying to keep everybody 6 feet apart and making sure everyone on site hasn't come into

contact with someone with COVID-19. And we have hand-washing and sanitizing stations and facemasks.

Clifton: And as we've started transitioning back to the office, we've made sure the entire staff got tested for the coronavirus. We definitely wanted to make sure that before we put forth a solid plan we felt safe coming back to work.

TDR: What were you planning to do if someone had tested positive?

James: Our policy was that we would shut down the job site, have everyone go into quarantine for the two-week period and have everything re-sanitized. Thankfully, no one's been sick or been flagged.

TDR: What do you think about the industry's prospects?

James: I feel that we are fortunate in construction in that it was deemed essential. So it wasn't like a hard stop. We don't have to prime everything and get it going again. However, I think the challenge is in the pipeline and getting everything online. That's to be seen as everything opens up. People are being cautious, so we aren't necessarily going back to business as usual.

Most people will tell you that architects are the canary in the well. If they are drawing, we know there

are things that have a good chance of becoming projects. About a month into this we were talking to architects and we were pretty nervous. But they are getting a little busier.

TDR: How has the death of George Floyd and the ensuing protests touched your company?

Clifton: I have the deepest respect for anyone who serves in law enforcement. So it's a shame there are some bad apples that ruin the bunch, and people want to vilify the entire institution. But we have an office that is probably around 80 percent African-American. So this hits home for a lot of people in our office and our workers in the field.

TDR: What lessons can the construction industry learn from the protests?

Jalin: Just to know that a lot of people don't have the same backgrounds. So it's important to keep communications open and just be understanding. And give people shots and give people chances. I was fortunate in that I had connection through James and that's how I got my first construction job. But I went five years before I saw another person of color on a job site. And that was in Milwaukee and surrounding areas.

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Dan Shaw Managing Editor 414-225-1807
Rich Holevoet JobTrac Manager 414-225-1822
Jenny Byington Multimedia Sales 414-225-1803
Ali Teske Public Notice Coordinator/General Inquiries 414-225-1801
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