

Dr. Alfred Seawright of the **Medical Place** found a way to get past a myriad of roadblocks and dead ends early in business. Now his message to others is to "just keep moving."

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CAN'T STOP WON'T STOP



TURNED AWAY COUNTLESS TIMES, CEO ALFRED SEAWRIGHT ADVISES BLACK BUSINESSES TO KEEP PUSHING

Everyday Alfred Seawright walks the halls of the Medical Place checking in with his employees at the supply company's distribution center on Industrial Park Boulevard. When he enters a meeting in progress, he quietly takes a seat. If someone asks whether he'd like to speak, he waves them off. The CEO prefers to listen.

"I can't sit in my office and know what's going on," he said. "I want to hear from the people doing the work."

In business almost four decades, 68-year-old Seawright, who holds a 2011 honorary doctorate from Alabama State University, is shrewd and demanding; but his praise, when earned, is dispensed with ease. Just ask his two daughters Keela, 37, and Kwanza, 34. They've been working in the family business since they graduated college and now run day-to-day operations for the company they will one day own.

"I'm hard on them, but I never had any problem," he said. "They take care of business. I crack the whip, but it's love."

When his youngest daughter graduated from the University of Alabama at Birmingham with honors and a communications degree, Keela pressed her hard.

We sell medical supplies,



Seawright recounts his first-born told her sister, so what can you do for us? Seawright 101, as he puts it; come early, stay late, work hard and above all else think strategically.

It's paid off. The medical equipment company he founded in 1983 without a single customer and an

supplies at wholesale to hospitals and retail to individuals.

Seawright remembers working late nights with his wife, Maxine, beside him at the kitchen table handling receipts and accounts in the early days; along with the invaluable assistance of Dr. Hagalyn Wilson, an impressive black woman physician who

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old supply van he borrowed money against to get started — he hand-painted the words Medical Place on it himself — has held contracts with the U.S. government and now staffs about 40 employees; providing medical grade

was "instrumental" in getting his business off the ground; as well as encouragement from sage civil rights leader E.D. Nixon, who fought for the desegregation of Montgomery's public buses, proud to see a black man in business for himself.

When he speaks of the two his voice grows



softer, more delicate, as if handling the memories like fine lace. Nixon would share stories with him about his days as a Pullman porter. Long hours, hard work. Seawright feels a closeness to that past generation, remembering himself as a young boy most comfortable among elders.

The businessman has come a long way from his humble beginnings at Father Michael's Boys School in Mt. Meigs, a children's home once ran by a local Catholic priest — though he won't spare many words on that. He isn't one to dwell on obstacles, preferring to take what's been given and make a way. It's what's informed his business strategy for decades, as well as his philanthropy, most of which he insists you won't hear anything about.

"I keep it quiet," he said matter-of-factly. "I was raised in an orphanage. If people hadn't given, then I wouldn't be where I am. Somebody helps you, you learn to help other folks."

Simple as that.

Over the years Seawright has used his profits to invest in public education, fund college scholarships and most recently a \$100,000 donation to UAB for COVID-19 vaccine research, which he is sure to note has had an outsize impact on African Americans.



LEFT PAGE

Dr. Alfred Seawright poses for a photo in the Medical Place office in Montgomery, Alabama.

THIS PAGE

Medical Place produces and distributes medical equipment, supplies, and PPE to hospitals, medical clinics, and doctors offices throughout the nation.

NEXT PAGE

Dr. Alfred Seawright stands outside of the Medical Place facility in Montgomery, Alabama where nearly 40 employees work to distribute medical equipment across the nation.

Seawright said he never had his eyes set on the medical field but was simply seeking opportunity. After graduating with a business degree from ASU in 1974, he waited tables, opened a boutique store and ran a painting business. Some endeavors failed; others never took off.

"I've been turned down so many times it's a shame, but I keep it moving," Seawright said.

When a friend told him he was leaving the medical supply business for physical therapy, he saw an opening.

The key to his success, the entrepreneur said, was being relentless and making certain that he knew the right players in the game. Soak up information like a sponge and see and be seen by influential people that can connect your business with capital is what he recommends to aspiring entrepreneurs.

For many black business owners this last step is the most difficult, and Seawright offers no salve. Experience has informed him that every black business owner should expect an uphill battle.

"Race is a real, real big factor. If you go into [business] and think it's going to be equal; you've got to be crazy. It's not equal. Whatever you're doing you've got to do more," than everybody else, he said.

He admits that he came up in a different time, when people could work 30 or 40 years and retire, no big-box retailers offering only minimum wage, a time when Montgomery's black community was tighter, more interwoven.

"My generation learned what a small business really was," he said. But old school or new school, some principles don't change. Pay your bills on time, develop a relationship with and earn the trust of your banker, and always, he said, hold your word.

Seawright approaches business like an eager student consumes coursework, studying the industry voraciously. Typically, he travels often. Meeting with entrepreneurs in the same field.

"Forget about what large businesses are doing because it doesn't work for small businesses," he said. "You don't have the money and you don't have the team."

The coronavirus pandemic has put a heavy strain on black-owned enterprises. One consumer watchdog agency reported that 95% of black business owners were shut out of the federal government's first round of emergency Paycheck Protection Program funding, a forgivable loan program to cover payroll expenses for small firms. And in a recent national survey conducted by Color of Change and UnidosUS, 45% of black and Latino small-business owners who are still in operation said they would have to shut their doors by year's end, if not sooner.

For black entrepreneurs the unavoidable gamble of business ownership, is even riskier.

Seawright recalled an unexpected disaster that could've wiped him clean out of business on a government contract



he was set to deliver — medical supplies produced in Montana for shipment to Philadelphia.

"I was telling the man at the bank what I'm going to make off [the contract] and he's telling me about risk," Seawright said.

From his point of view there was none. But that year's winter was a bitter one. Severe snowstorms made trucking the supplies dangerous and plane delivery even more hazardous. He didn't know that he could pull it off, but they managed to get the goods delivered by road, on time.

"I would have lost everything," had I not, he said.

That's business.

"Things are moving up in the right direction now," Seawright said. And he's grateful for that.

"It's a wonderful thing to go to work and see your kids every day. That's a good feeling." **BA**

Article was written by Safiya Charles of the Montgomery Advertiser.

Photos of Alfred Seawright were taken by Jake Crandall of the Montgomery Advertiser.

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