

## MINORITY BUSINESS LEADER AWARDS 2014



Deborah Scott Thomas, who hails from Montgomery, Ala., treasures the reunions her family members organize every other year.

### DEBORAH SCOTT THOMAS

President and CEO,  
Data Solutions & Technology Inc.

- Age: 60
- Education: Bachelor's in accounting and management, Alabama State University; master's in public administration, Webster University
- Family: Husband Otis Thomas; children William Scott, 38, Darius Thomas, 24, Duncan Thomas, 22

Deborah Scott Thomas spent time in the Air Force and working for different companies to be the owner of her own business. But opening up Data Solutions & Technology Inc. 20 years ago meant working from the ground up — and making a business function in her home, for three years, with two young children.

**What did you want to be when you grew up?** I always basically knew I wanted to be a business owner. When I arrived in the Washington, D.C., area, that's when I knew I could make it as a business owner. And then I found by working with small businesses, it's one step at a time and then you build and you can make it happen.

**What was it like starting out a business with two young children?** We always like to say we started in the basement, but really, Scott gave us his bedroom and he moved to the basement. We worked from home from '94 to '97, and Darius was 7 when we moved into an office building. We didn't have a building yet but we had a suite. But when we got there for the first time, he looked up and said, "Mom, this is our building? This is our office?" It was so amazing how he recognized the fact that we were in business. He just lit up like a lightbulb. Then it was back to reality when I got him back to our suite. But it was still so fun to see his reaction.

**What's the worst business advice you've gotten in your career?** "Open a business, you can do it girl!" [Laughs] No. When it comes down to bad business advice, I would say referrals of people that didn't end up working so well. Bad advice in staffing. I've had friends say, "This person can really make some things happen for you." And then a year later, OK, you're supposed to have connections. It's what can happen when you have a referral from a friend you trust and advice from someone that you have confidence in.

**What's your strongest character trait?** My attitude. Positive thinking. I don't think there isn't anything I really can't do if I put my mind to it. Maya Angelou said, "If you don't like something, change it. If you can't change it, change your attitude."

— Chloe Johnson



Skeptics told Venkat Subramanian that a company named "Angarai" didn't stand a chance. He named it for his hometown in India and today runs a \$5 million firm.

### VENKAT SUBRAMANIAN

President and CEO, Angarai

- Age: 48
- Education: Bachelor's in math and computer science, University of Madras, India; master's in industrial psychology, Annamalai University, India; master's in systems management, National Institute of Information Technology; MBA in international business, University of Georgia
- Family: Wife Shobana Subramanian

Venkat Subramanian knows about bootstrapping. When he first started Angarai in his Greenbelt basement in 2003, he wanted to be sure business contacts took him seriously. So the former business analyst trademarked a process for helping companies tackle problems. Then he got business cards printed up with his home address along with "Suite 100." Today, he's built the full-service professional management consulting firm into a \$5 million company with the equivalent of 50 full-time employees. "Having tasted life as an entrepreneur, I couldn't imagine life any other way," he said.

**What are the biggest challenges facing your industry?** We are in a unique and also an awkward position. Our contract values are not as high — we're talking 10 to 12 people — and when an organization needs to cut their budget, the first thing to cut is oversight. But you need to have it and it's a piece of mind you can't put an ROI on.

**What is the biggest challenge facing minority business owners?** The challenges a minority business owner faces compared to anyone else are the same. I was born and raised in India, I've traveled the world and I've lived here for 12 years. No place in the world would've provided me the opportunity afforded me in the U.S. Do you look different? Sure. Do you sound different? Yes. But that's life. Bottom line is you have to make yourself likable.

**What are you most proud of?** In the 2008 market crash, we lost 95 percent of our business. I said, "I'm going to go without a salary for 18 months." We collectively agreed as a team where everyone would take a 50 percent pay cut and we agreed we would not let anyone go. Other places were folding. We became more aggressive.

**What's the best business advice you've gotten?** All the advice can be taken as a suggestion. But you can only blame yourself. That's why leadership is lonely.

**What's the worst business advice you've ever gotten?** Someone told me, "How many people are going to recognize the name Angarai? You don't stand a chance."

— Tina Reed

### MARIO ACOSTA-VELEZ

Director of state government affairs,  
Verizon Mid-Atlantic region

- Age: 44
- Education: Bachelor's in political science, master's in public administration, University of Puerto Rico; master's in political science, University of Massachusetts

If it seems like Mario Acosta-Velez is everywhere at once, it's because he pretty much is. The government affairs guru for Verizon is, to many, the public face for the telecom giant in D.C. He is also chairman of the Greater Washington Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, helping launch an educational push for its members on legislation affecting Hispanic-owned businesses. Here's what keeps him going.

**What is the biggest challenge facing Hispanic business leaders today?** The biggest challenge Hispanic business leaders face today is how to create and sustain a business-friendly environment across the region that would enable businesses to innovate and compete fairly in the marketplace. This is an extremely important issue that not only impacts businesses directly, but also affects our region's ability to attract and retain businesses in all industries.

**What did you want to be when you grew up?** When I was growing up in Puerto Rico, I always wanted to be a lawyer. But later I realized that I wanted to pursue a career in public and government affairs.

**What's something not many people know about you?** Within the last two years, I have developed a passion for cooking. I am now becoming a home chef. Although my passion is fine Latin/Puerto Rican cuisine, I am

### BRIAN ARGRETT

President and CEO,  
City First Bank of D.C.

- Age: 50
- Education: Bachelor's degree, University of Virginia; law degree and MBA, University of California, Berkeley
- Family: Wife Cheryl; son Jordan, 16

Brian Argrett grew up in Silver Spring but began his career in California. In Los Angeles, he practiced law at Pircher, Nichols & Meeks for a spell, then gravitated to Fulcrum Capital Group as a private equity investment manager for 19 years. Argrett returned to Greater Washington in fall 2011 to head City First Bank of D.C. The position allows him to play a critical role in community development, balancing a hard-driven financial background with a surprisingly sensitive personal side.

**What are the biggest challenges facing minority business leaders?** One of the biggest challenges facing minority business leaders is access to capital and consistent access to capital as they grow. If you're successful, you are always looking for money. Being able to have the relationships in addition to having the performance is important. That's sometimes more difficult for minority business owners.

**What are the three biggest challenges at the bank?** We need to get to scale. Continued growth is a big challenge for us. Managing the

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