

# Leading from the Front

Five individuals are redefining the roles of women and minorities in business

STORY BY **NANCY SHAWVER** | PHOTOS BY **ALISTAIR TUTTON**



So often articles about minorities and women in business turn into sob stories about glass ceilings, old-boys' networks and "the man." The truth is that people—women and minorities, especially—don't want to hear the same old story anymore. It's not that these barriers don't still exist. It's just that there's a new story to tell, a story of overwhelming success among businesspeople of all colors and both genders.

Some of the greatest successes have come from the willingness of certain women and minorities to completely break from the box of corporate America by starting a business of their own. In the last two decades the increase in the number of minority- and woman-owned businesses has been dramatic. Be it the formation of a firm, job creation or revenue generation, the trend is overwhelmingly upward for these companies.

Here *KC Business* introduces a handful of Kansas City-area entrepreneurs who are thriving in their chosen fields—on their own terms. These are savvy, hard-working men and women who are proud of their status as something other than a white male but who refuse to be restricted by that status. They have all run into challenges both in starting and running their respective businesses, but they have overcome those challenges and are willing to share the insight gained from those trials.

## SAMUEL P. MUDUMALA

Samuel P. Mudumala, president of Kansas City-based environmental recovery services firm **Prudent Technologies Inc.**, says he ignores the typical descriptions of his company. Terms like small, minority and disadvantaged don't even enter the entrepreneur's consciousness.

Instead he prefers to focus on the quality services his company offers, the customer care. "Why position yourself like that?" Mudumala says of the descriptors frequently attached to minority-owned enterprises. "Be the best you can be in whatever you do."

The company, with 100-plus employees on its books and offices in San Antonio, Texas; Omaha, Nebraska; and Potosi, Missouri, has plenty of other adjectives at its disposal thanks to the high-quality cleanup and environmental remediation services it provides. It also has a well-decorated front man to stand behind: Mudumala was one of 10 regional finalists for the 2009 U.S. Small Business Administration's National Minority Small Business Person of the Year award.

**Starting Off:** Mudumala has worked for large corporations—**Lockheed Martin Corp.**, **Booz Allen Hamilton**, **Ecology and Environment Inc.**—and has a knack for rapidly moved up the corporate ladder. But in 2003 he left it all behind when an opportunity to salvage some equipment from a facility company gave him a chance to start his own business.

Things didn't go as smoothly as Mudumala had hoped. The former company left behind unpaid bills and unfinished work, requiring the entrepreneur to dig out before he could start building on his own.

**Challenges:** Raising the money for the business was an urgent need, Mudumala says. Although his wife still had a good job, banks were not interested in supporting the startup environmental services firm. Mudumala turned to a risky backup plan: using credit cards and loans from family and friends to raise \$600,000.



## SAMUEL P. MUDUMALA

### PRESIDENT

Prudent Technologies Inc.  
Kansas City

**WORDS OF GUIDANCE:** Mudumala attributes part of his success to a mentor relationship his company has with AECOM, a Fortune 500 global provider of technical and management services. The relationship allows Mudumala's firm to tap into AECOM's experience when it comes to government bids.

Apart from looking to others for guidance, the entrepreneur also recommends keeping a tight focus on delivering excellent and original services.

"Work extra hard to show you are different," he says. "Stand up on your own. Do something better. Don't wait for hand-me-downs or handouts.

"Your work should be your reputation," he continues. "That's the key."

"I have family members who wanted me to succeed," he says. "And friends, people I've known for a very long time, were willing to take a second mortgage or another credit card."

While funds continued to trickle in, the company's employees began to build a reputation for quality. Once the company had its feet firmly underneath it in 2004, a local bank agreed to provide a line of credit. Unfortunately that credit dried up as a result of the current economic downturn.

Prudent's luck turned this year when the Small Business Administration (SBA) linked the company with **UMB Bank** for a \$1 million line of credit, 90 percent of which is secured through the SBA.

**The Road Ahead:** Mudumala has invested in several pieces of equipment—dump trucks, excavators, loaders, etc.—that allow his company to take on a broader range of work. Rather than lease the equipment, Mudumala opted to purchase it outright, assuring a long-term competitive advantage for Prudent.

With experience in government projects, Mudumala is focused on winning direct business from federal agencies. The company currently is working a multimillion-dollar project for the **Environmental Protection Agency** and has jobs with both the Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Defense. With all projects combined Prudent expects revenues to approach \$14 million this year—up from \$11 million last year.

## JENNIFER KYNER

Attorney Jennifer Kyner has been surrounded by entrepreneurs for the majority of her professional life. An active participant in an organization of women business owners, Kyner was reluctant to take the plunge of business ownership herself despite seeing multiple others meet with success. But after 22 years she struck out on her own—and never looked back.

The end products of that risk are Westwood-based **Kyner Law PC**, a certified woman-owned law firm that focuses on employment law issues, and a very satisfied owner.

**Starting Off:** “I had [reached] the stage in my life where I was ready for a change and a challenge,” Kyner says of her reasons for starting a company, adding that her membership in the **National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO)** was also a big motivator. “I guess that really pushed me over the edge.”

Kyner opened her firm in 2004 with the intention of specializing in issues like non-compete contracts, employment discrimination and severance agreements.

Over time she learned what type of client was the best fit for her services. She also developed a sense for understanding expectations that helps her avoid situations that have potential to leave either the client or Kyner unhappy. “It’s a sixth sense,” she says. “I’ve been pretty lucky.”

**Challenges:** Kyner quickly learned that being a partner is not exactly the same as running your own show. Unlike her previous job, Kyner’s current gig requires her to do everything on her own, from setting up computers, invoicing and collecting to paying bills for equipment and insurance.

“There’s a period of cash outlay without a period of corresponding revenue income,” she explains. “I was prepared for that mentally and financially, but it’s still troubling.”

To keep things going, Kyner says she managed frugally and avoided unnecessary expenses. It took more than two years before she felt she could breathe easy about the business.

On an emotional level, Kyner found that she missed the collaboration that can only come from working on a team.

“At a big law firm there are lots of people you can turn to and bounce ideas off of,” she says.

To fill this void, she maintains relationships with individuals at her former firm and continues to develop new relationships with others for idea exchange and problem solving.

**The Future:** Kyner has invested in technology to digitize and manage her business files and casework more effectively, a practice that pays off by saving time and improving organization. Now she can work remotely, with files always at her fingertips.

Motivated by performing challenging and fulfilling services, and pleased with the freedom to pursue interests both inside and outside the office, Kyner says she doesn’t plan to add partners or grow extensively—by merging with another firm or acquiring staff—in the near future.

“I hope I’ll be able to continue doing what I’m doing,” Kyner says. “Things are going well. I’m happy doing what I’m doing. I’m really quite content calling my own shots.”

**WORDS OF GUIDANCE:** Kyner offers support for others considering entrepreneurship, especially women.

“I would encourage it almost more for a woman than for a man,” she says. “Other women I’ve talked with seem to be happier running the show themselves because of the flexibility it gives them.”

She also advises having a strong financial plan and experience within a trade before considering entrepreneurship. But once someone is ready to take the leap, she says it’s wise to have a network of supporters—personal and professional. The NAWBO is a great place for support.

“Some of [the NAWBO members] found little legal projects that they needed done,” she recalls. “In hindsight I think now that maybe they really didn’t need them done and were just trying to show support.”



**JENNIFER KYNER**  
**ATTORNEY & OWNER**  
Kyner Law PC  
Westwood

## BENNIE L. LEWIS

Nearly 10 years ago Bennie L. Lewis retired from a 30-year career in the insurance industry. It wasn't long before Lewis discovered he wasn't enjoying the leisure time and, after taking stock of his life, decided to use his skills and strengths to launch his own business.

That's how **Bennie L. Lewis & Associates**, a government relations and public relations services firm that works in Kansas City and Jefferson City, Missouri, was born. Today Lewis handles lobbying, events and community relations for businesses, political organizations and nonprofit entities.

**Starting Off:** Lewis had more than 20 years of experience in managing a philanthropic foundation, a background that produced strong relationships with governmental offi-

cial and community leaders. That experience and those relationships were instrumental to Lewis' success upon starting a new business.

"You have to have a plan in place, and you have to follow your plan as closely as possible with measures of success, goals and objectives," Lewis says, adding that it is important to perform periodic evaluations to ensure the company is on the right track—even if the money isn't yet rolling in. "You have to be prepared for not making a lot of money initially."

Even with the right connections and planning, it can be difficult for a startup to attract clients. "I'd already developed relationships, and I used them to help promote my business," Lewis says. "Still, initially there were a lot of no's."



### BENNIE L. LEWIS

#### OWNER

Bennie L. Lewis & Associates  
Kansas City

**WORDS OF GUIDANCE:** Lewis notes that the economy has placed a lot of people at a crossroads at which they must determine whether to find another job or go into business for themselves.

He cautions those who are seriously considering the second option: "You put your life savings at risk, and there's no guarantee that there's going to be a paycheck at the end of the week."

But he also notes that entrepreneurship can be a good choice for people who are willing to make a serious commitment: "Do you want to have wishes or memories? If it's memories, then go for it."

In an attempt to learn even from failures, Lewis went back to prospective clients and asked what he could have done to turn a "no" into a "yes."

"How you deal with setbacks is very important," he says.

**Challenges:** Aside from the financial challenges of starting up a business, Lewis says the most difficult part is finding a real commitment to succeed.

"It's a question: How much do you want the prize?" he says. "There has to be a burning desire for success and going that extra mile, knowing that you can't stop at 5 o'clock. You have to keep going. And once you have the desire to be successful and do what's necessary to achieve that success, usually that is the tipping point as far as getting your business going on the right track."

Lewis is quick to recommend reaching out to others, formally or informally, for guidance. When starting his company, he was part of the Herman A. Johnson Business Mentorship program of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce's POWER (Partnering Organizations With Essential Resources) Initiative. The program aligns minority- and small-business owners with mentors in the same field.

"They'll provide direction and sometimes cheerleading," the entrepreneur says of the organization. "That helped me tremendously in my first couple of years of business."

A former colleague of the program's namesake, Lewis now champions the cause to others.

**The Future:** "My plans are to continue to grow my business," Lewis says, noting that his staffing model, which involves bringing on associates and specialists for projects or events, allows him flexibility to take on new work quickly. "It's important to know your capacity," he says. "My staffing model allows me the flexibility to expand as needed."

With growth as the focus, Bennie L. Lewis & Associates is always scanning the horizon for new opportunities. "I'm always looking for one more client," the owner says. "I need one more client."

## KATHY BENNETT

Imagine a cardboard box, any size you can think of—from pillbox tiny to Volkswagen big. No matter what size box you thought of, chances are good that **Bennett Packaging & Displays** in Lee's Summit has made it.

The certified woman-owned business, which operates in 450,000 square feet of underground cave space, can also prototype a custom design for that box; print that design; handle the box's die-cutting, folding, gluing and assembly; fill the box; securely pack the finished product for shipping; warehouse inventory; and distribute anything it packs.

The business also produces cutting-edge retail displays made of corrugated paper that can be positioned in grocery stores, convenience stores, hardware stores or just about any retail outlet imaginable. With 150 employees on her roster, CEO and President Kathy Bennett expects her business to bring in revenues near \$36 million this year.

**Starting Off:** "It was very modest in the beginning," Bennett says, thinking back to 1987 when she used a \$30,000 real estate commission check to buy the equipment of a bankrupt box manufacturing company. Her husband had been involved in the newly defunct business, which at that time focused almost exclusively on brown boxes.

Bennett and her husband used their contacts and started a new company with the purchased machinery. Intent on evolving capabilities and services from the beginning, the duo won customers with their product and their word.

"You get someone to believe that you can really deliver your product as you say you can, and you make sure that always happens," Bennett says. "You just build it one customer at a time, one order at a time, really."

From those brown-box origins, Bennett has led the company to new heights as a one-stop shop for packaging solutions. The company expanded to its current location in 2001 and in August handled more than 48 million square feet of corrugated product in that facility.

**Challenges:** Up-front capital and the need for efficient operations are two of the main

concerns for startup manufacturing businesses, Bennett says. In her instance Bennett started from scratch with every process—something that was challenging but also empowering for the new owner. "When there's nothing, it all needs to be thought through and created," Bennett notes. "That was kind of challenging to get all that put in place."

Another challenge was finding and retaining the best employees. "In all instances, you need to look at character and work ethic," she says. "We just try to hire people that have the same values we do. [They] have to have a deep commitment to customer satisfaction, credibility [and] integrity."

**The Future:** Bennett Packaging & Displays recently finished its latest equipment installation and, as a result, has additional capacity. The challenge now is bringing in new business to make that added capacity worthwhile.

The company is positioned for continued growth, thanks to its wide range of products and services.

"We're not backed into a corner," Bennett says. "We can solve a lot of packaging and delivery problems for our clients, and we can approach them from a lot of different ways. I think that's where the growth will come from."

One particular goal is also a personal passion for the entrepreneur: Peace through Business, a program of **The Institute for Economic Empowerment of Women**. Bennett is a mentor to an Afghan businesswoman, who employs widows to sports balls while also educating them in literacy and civil rights.

"She has a whole host of different issues and problems, one of which is that there is not one corrugated box manufacturer in all of Afghanistan," Bennett says.

The entrepreneur says she would like to donate her company's used equipment to help form a business there and is working with the Afghan ambassador to achieve that goal. Bennett says the project is a way to support U.S. troops while simultaneously enabling Afghan women to develop stable and sustainable businesses in their homeland.



**KATHY BENNETT**

**CEO & PRESIDENT**

Bennett Packaging & Displays  
Lee's Summit

**WORDS OF GUIDANCE:** Bennett cautions that the manufacturing business is capital intensive, with low margins and high levels of competition. It's also struggling in the United States. She says anyone entering the business today needs to be prepared for those challenges, as well as potential issues like cap-and-trade regulations and increased taxes. But for those willing to throw their hats into the ring, she counsels finding an anchor account, developing a niche and working to create an efficient operation.

Bennett also says that women in her industry face an additional hurdle: "It really is still an old-boys industry. I think sometimes a woman maybe has to be a little tougher, a little thicker skinned to get through it."



**JEANETTE HERNANDEZ PRENGER**  
**PRESIDENT**  
ECCO Select  
Kansas City

#### **JEANETTE HERNANDEZ PRENGER**

Jeanette Hernandez Prenger isn't one for small dreams. As founder and president of **ECCO Select**, a Kansas City-based professional staffing firm, her focus is on building her business into a cornerstone of the community—much as the Bloch, Hall and Kauffman families have done.

It's a big dream for any entrepreneur. But Prenger is steadily pursuing her plans. **ECCO Select**, which provides supplemental resources to the IT, accounting/finance, health care, law, marketing and human relations fields, is in the midst of its best year yet with a 30 percent revenue increase, despite the depressed economy.

**Starting Off:** Prenger had 13 years of experience in IT departments at **Russell Stover**, the **Federal Reserve Bank**, **TWA Airlines** and **Sprint**. At 35, she had developed a good management style and was comfortable with writing code, working production support and managing large-application software development. She knew that given the velocity of technological change (this was 1995), there would be a demand for supplemental resources.

Prenger learned about the business model for a professional services firm and decided to study it in hopes of eventually starting a company. She enrolled in the **Kauffman Foundation's** **FastTrac** program to create a business plan, and the rest is history.

When she told a former employer what she intended to do, the company immediately asked to become a client. Though she was alone—"I was my first employee," Prenger says—she decided to take the offer. She used the same approach with another previous employer and continued growing the business. A few years later she bought an existing direct-hire agency and acquired its clients. "At that time I was able to start working on the business instead of in the business," she says.

**Challenges:** Starting out, the biggest challenge was selling, the entrepreneur says. Prenger had no sales training, but her ability to articulate technical requirements and solutions gave her confidence.

"I knew that what I delivered was a service people absolutely needed," she says. "I had absolute confidence in what we did."

**WORDS OF GUIDANCE:** Prenger advises entrepreneurs to study their competition and understand the risks and challenges of running a business, especially those involving finances. She says she remembers self-funding her own business and initially paying herself only when clients paid their invoices.

Beyond planning and risk mitigation, Prenger acknowledges the importance of learning from others. A member of the **Helzberg Entrepreneurial Mentorship Program**, she recommends finding successful people and following their business practices.

"Regardless of your background, you have to prove your credibility," she says. "I think, especially with minorities and women, somebody remembers when you say you're going to do something and then you don't do it.

"You need to make sure you don't violate that trust. Make sure you do a great job and exceed expectations. That's how you differentiate yourself: exceed expectations."

Prenger focused on matching her clients with exactly the professional talent they needed. She developed a methodology and a proprietary database for managing the connections but kept her focus on partnering and building trust with her clients.

An entrepreneurial spirit kicked in. "I thought, 'You're saving people time and money,'" Prenger says. "The better we are at this, the more we grow. The more we grow, the more people we can hire. The more people we can hire, the more money goes back into the community.' I quit thinking of it as just me making money, and I realized we're creating something that could end up being a cornerstone of this city."

**The Future:** Prenger says she sees continued growth and plans to expand beyond current locations in Austin, Texas; Las Vegas; Washington, D.C.; and Kansas City.

"To grow to the next level, I really feel like I need to either merge with another company or acquire another company," the entrepreneur says. "I'm in discussions and taking a look at those options." Potential targets include a local firm and one on the East Coast. **KCB**