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SUNDAY EDITION

September 18, 2011

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Tillage finds role of coach a theme in career



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ARTHUR D. LAUCK / 00027000A

ED GRIGGS

Business writer

2 COMMENTS

Ken Tillage, chief executive officer of Tillage Construction LLC, has never written a book but if he did, it might be titled “How to Become an Entrepreneur and Raise One Yourself.”

The subtitle might be “The Path Isn’t a Straight Line.”

Before his current gig, running one of the country’s fastest-growing companies with his son, Tillage had been a teacher, a coach, a liquor store owner, head of the city-parish’s juvenile detention program, a cabinet maker and a homebuilder.

The high point of his coaching career came in 1977, when he took over as coach of Southern University’s football team at midseason. The low point came at the end of the season, when the school encouraged him to leave.

“I had a lot of opportunities to go and still coach other places, but I

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decided to stay here. The family was stable. My wife had a job. So if I get a job we keep on eating,” Tillage said.

The Advocate's Daily Digest

Tillage decided to put down roots in Baton Rouge. Still, he never forgot what it felt like to be fired.

“When they sent me away from coaching, I said, ‘Well, you know, I don’t need to depend on nobody else for a living. I need to depend on myself,’” Tillage said.

Although Tillage ended up taking other jobs, he never shook the entrepreneurial urge.

And he brought his son, Keith, with him everywhere, whether it was renovating the liquor store or building cabinets.

Those experiences provided Keith with a couple of key advantages in starting the commercial construction business, Tillage said.

Having seen all the failures his father experienced in residential construction, Keith could only go up from there, Tillage said. Keith also learned not to be afraid of making a mistake.

“If you break your neck, you break your neck, but at least next time you’ll know a whole lot better,” Tillage said. “But if I hold your hand you learn nothing.”

Tillage said he still offers his son advice, but the final decision remains Keith’s. Sometimes that has worked out badly. On a few occasions, Tillage has asked his son where he found a subcontractor who didn’t work out. But in most cases, things have worked out well.

These days Tillage concentrates on the construction company’s jobs in Baton Rouge, occasionally traveling to other sites when needed.

His advice to entrepreneurs or those thinking about going into business: “Every day is not sunshine. Tomorrow is not promised. You got to work hard for what you see in front of you, and you can’t give up on it,” Tillage said. “You got to get up every morning with the attitude that you’re going to make it work, and you got to work at making it work.”

Many times people sit still and complain that they can’t do anything about a situation, Tillage said. But their problem is that they’re sitting still.

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- 2) Comment by Stephen - Sunday, September 18, 2011
Way to go Ken and Keith. Very nice to see your success!

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