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Thor Construction's Copeland has grown to prominence from one-man firm

by Dan Emerson Staff Writer



Richard Copeland (Photo: Bill Klotz)

When Minneapolis-based [Thor Construction](#) built [Heritage Park](#), a 145-acre, \$225 million residential development on the city's north side, the project had special meaning for company founder Richard Copeland. The \$250 million complex replaced the aging Sumner-Olson housing projects, where Copeland's family had lived when he was born in 1955.

The city celebrated the opening of the 900-home, 145-acre complex in 2005, one of several landmark projects for Minnesota's largest African-American owned contractor.

The evolution of Thor Construction is a typical tale of humble beginnings. To say Copeland started small would be an understatement. He began in 1980 as a one-man, one-truck operation, doing restoration work for local utilities.

"One day I saw some NSP workers standing around a hole all day and said to myself, 'I could do better,'" he said.

Copeland went to NSP headquarters and was given some work replacing fences, laying sod and other miscellaneous chores to "fix whatever they tore up." Before starting his company, Copeland spent his last \$200 on the necessary insurance, eventually hired one employee, and before long, acquired several dump trucks to start a truck-leasing business.

After a couple of years, he became a general contractor, doing landscaping and lot paving in city and county parks.

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One of Copeland's big breaks came in the mid-1990s, when Thor won a \$6 million contract to renovate the Horn Towers public-housing high-rise at 31st Street and Blaisdell Avenue in Minneapolis. Another major step forward was forming a joint venture partnership with the state's largest contractor, Golden Valley-based Mortenson Construction. Copeland was introduced to Mortenson by a minority-business mentoring program run by the Minneapolis-based Metro Economic Development Association (MEDA).

Thor's alliance with Mortenson has led to work on some of the state's largest projects, including St. Paul's Xcel Energy Center, the Minneapolis Convention Center

expansion (at the time, the largest contract for an African-American owned company in Minnesota), the new Minneapolis Central Library and the new University of Minnesota football and Minnesota Twins stadiums.

"We believe we're the largest African-American-owned construction company west of the Mississippi and "between 10th and 15th largest for all contractors," Copeland said.

Creating opportunities

The firm opened its first satellite office outside of Minnesota in 2001 in Las Vegas, where it has completed nearly two dozen projects for major casinos, including the Bellagio, Caesar's Palace, MGM Grand and Mirage. Thor has since added offices in Los Angeles, Atlanta, and New Orleans. The firm also started a consulting arm which provides business-development and work force development services. Thor's IT staff has developed a technology platform which — as one of its functions — helps disadvantaged businesses connect with partners, vendors and potential clients.

Copeland and his company have also been honored for their affirmative action efforts. He was inducted into MEDA's Entrepreneurial Hall of Fame, for his involvement in their Construction Partnering Program. Yvonne Cheung Ho, MEDA's president and CEO, said Copeland "really gives back to the community. He mentors aspiring entrepreneurs, he also looks for opportunities to work with ethnic minority- and women-owned businesses in his contracts and projects, and he uses them as much as he can. He also co-sponsors our annual MEDA gala."

"We've been afforded a lot of opportunities because we're a minority firm, so it's incumbent on us to pass on those kinds of opportunities to others," Copeland explained. "We've done it organically by hiring women and minority subcontractors and also by employment of under-utilized communities; when those people go through training programs, we try to get them hired."

In 2006, the National Minority Contractors Association named him to its Hall of Fame. In 2005, he was a nominee for U.S. Small Businessman of the Year. In 2004, he was a finalist for Ernst & Young's Entrepreneur of the Year. That year, the city of Las Vegas and state of Nevada named Thor its Minority Business of the Year.

Copeland has seemingly been too busy overseeing the growth of his company to spend a lot of time pondering the reasons for his success. But he did offer a few plain-spoken aphorisms to aspiring entrepreneurs who would like to follow in his tire tracks: "Make sure you do what you say you're going to do; always show up; and, you've got to get back up if you get knocked down." As another measure of his progress, Copeland noted that when he took out a bank loan to buy his first truck, he had to pay 22 percent interest. "Now, banks compete for our business."

As a friend and mentor who helped him along the way, Copeland cites Howard Weiner, a retired, Minneapolis-based venture capitalist whom he met through MEDA's minority business mentoring program in the mid-1980s. "Richard is a hard worker who accepts challenges and takes risks in business," Weiner said. "He also chooses and utilizes good people to work with."

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