

FRONTLINE

# Entrepreneurs

by Michael Bradley

## Queen of Clean

**Veterans Stadium's infamous 700 level was Donna Allie's proving ground.**

**T**he first time Donna Allie did any cleaning professionally, she had no idea what to charge for a day's work. It was 1982, and Allie was desperate for a job to support herself and a newborn. With a degree from Wilberforce University in Ohio, the Haverford High School grad hadn't been able to gain much professional traction. She even tried work as a clown and a freelance cab driver. "I always had a little hustle," she says.

And she was definitely fed up with being on public assistance. So she took out an ad in the *Main Line Times* and got a call from a woman in Villanova who was looking for someone to clean her house. Allie did the job, and at the end of the day, the woman paid her 10 bucks. "I looked at it as 10 more dollars than I had before the day started," says Allie, who grew up on the Delaware County side of Bryn Mawr.

These days, Allie presides over 525 employees at Team Clean. Among her clients: the City of Philadelphia, Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Lower Merion Township and many others. And while Allie has been honored as a top minority and female business owner, perhaps her greatest achievement is the network of opportunities she's created for her diverse employee base. "I love pouring myself into other people," she says.

Back in early '80s Villanova, Allie's \$10 tryout turned into a regular gig for a more appropriate fee. Soon, the woman was recommending Allie to her friends, and it wasn't long before the fledgling business had 55 customers and a staff that included any friend and family member she could convince to help. "I didn't know I was operating a business until my girlfriend, Lydia—who had a little more sense than I did—said, 'You know you have a business now, right?'" recalls Allie.

Still, it took a while for Allie to see things



that way. Even when her business started thriving, she was still living as if nurturing the company was everything. Those who've started from scratch understand this. They may hire people to help and develop associations with others who become part of the equation. In the end, though, there's always a sense that if the enterprise isn't fed and nurtured at all times—by them and only them—it will collapse.

That's how it was for Allie, until her staff grew to 80-100 people and her perspective changed. Now it's as much about them

as it is about making sure Team Clean continues to grow and evolve. "Donna is a dynamo of an entrepreneur," says Aqil Saber, Team Clean's executive vice president, who's been with the company for 10 years. "She's also a very caring individual. She cares about her customers, about her employees and about the community. And she's not too proud to accept an error she's made or to speak up when she doesn't know the answer. That's an admirable trait in a leader. She's open to suggestions and ideas."

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Anybody who spent some serious time at Veterans Stadium in the '80s and '90s knows just how big the place was and exactly how downright disgusting it could get—especially after an Eagles game. When Allie moved from residential to commercial cleaning, the city was one of her first clients. Philly owned the Vet, so Allie and her army of scrubbers and sweepers would descend on the place after a game and do battle with the mess. “We cleaned the whole thing,” she says. “We did the [seating] bowl and even cleaned the urine from the 700 level.”

It was a daunting job, but Allie knew it would lead to bigger things. “If it weren't for the city, I'd still be cleaning homes on the Main Line,” she says.

Philadelphia provided a strong base for Team Clean. Through its programs that benefit businesses owned by women and minorities, the city provided training and education to help Allie grow and develop. COVID-19 cleaning has become a priority for Team Clean. Some of its employees are working to sanitize the *USNS Walter S. Diehl*, an oil products tanker docked at the Navy Yard. The company has also been contracted to clean the apartments of

people who've died from coronavirus. “It's very specific work,” Allie says.

So much so that Team Clean has begun to train others, including companies in Harrisburg. “We're starting our own network,” she says.

Allie wants that network to promote successes in communities that have been historically forgotten or passed over. She's quite happy that the company has moved its operations to the Cobbs Creek Commons building in West Philadelphia, and she wants to direct her expenses toward businesses in her community that need help growing. “There are so many Black businesses our size that are struggling to get to the next level,” Allie says. “We say it's because people have had their foot on our neck. Now, we need to say, ‘I'm a Black person, and I want to spend my money with you because you look like me.’”

Though she won't look away from the need for continued growth at Team Clean, Allie does have a life. She loves jazz, documentary films and the theater. She also relishes the company of her husband, David Rivers, and loves spoiling her granddaughter, Cameron.

For his part, Saber sees the company

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“I didn't know I was operating a business until my girlfriend said, 'You know you have a business now, right?'”

as “one of the outstanding building maintenance and janitorial service companies in the region.” He's particularly proud of the work the company has done to provide internships for students that give them “real world work” to add some spine to their resumes. He also describes Team Clean's commitment to hiring people who've recently been incarcerated or homeless, single mothers and other disaffected individuals. “You've got to give a person a chance,” Saber's boss says.

And Allie is a living example. **MLT**



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