

May 22, 2009

Observers: Strong traits fueled Burns' rise to power

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Former Rochester Mayor Bill Johnson recalls when, in the 1980s, Ursula Burns was nominated to the board of the Urban League of Rochester.

The man who recommended Burns worked with her at Xerox. "He said, 'I'm going to nominate the person who one day is going to be the CEO of Xerox,'" said Johnson, who then headed the Urban League.

That prognostication proved remarkably accurate. When she takes over the job July 1, Burns will be the first African-American woman to be CEO of a *Fortune* 500 company.

For many within Xerox, Burns' ascension has been a foregone conclusion since she was named company president two years ago. But, as evidenced by the Urban League meeting two decades ago, the traits that carried her to this point have long been recognized.

"She knows the value of hard work," Johnson said. "She's never forgotten that."

A former Xerox engineer, Burns is known as a disciplined individual who doesn't shy from any task. Her upbringing helped shape her unflinching work ethic. Burns grew up in a subsidized housing project on Manhattan's lower east side where her mother operated a day care center and took in laundry to make ends meet while raising three children by herself.

In a 2004 *Democrat and Chronicle* profile, Burns, talking about making *Fortune* magazine's list of most powerful businesswomen, noted that her late mother would never have made such a list, but "she was one of the most powerful people I've known."

An excellent math student, Burns received an engineering degree from Polytechnic Institute of New York in 1980. She became part of a Xerox program designed to attract more minorities to engineering and worked as a summer intern for the company. She joined Xerox full time in 1981 after receiving a master's from Columbia University.

Burns noted in the 2004 profile that she had to develop more patience as she progressed through the company's leadership ranks. "I'll sit at a meeting and be more quiet now than I've ever been in my career," she said. "I have to listen to what people are saying."

Gary Bonadonna, who heads the largest union of Xerox workers, has been on the opposite side of the bargaining table from Burns.

"She's tough but fair," he said Thursday. "The company needs things, the union needs things, and we try to meet in the middle somewhere. You can count on her to do what she says. Trustworthy. She's very business-minded. The business comes first — which is how it should be, I guess."

Webster resident Dave Coriale, chairman of the Association of Retired Xerox Employees, questions

whether Burns has yet developed into a patient leader who can push the company forward while making workers feel valued. Retirees are battling Xerox over cuts in health care coverage, and Coriale predicted the relations between Xerox and its past employees will worsen under Burns.

"We're going to have a lower priority than we do today," he said. "She's got the same mindset that's bugged the heck out of me for years — 'What have you done for me lately?'"

Outgoing CEO Anne Mulcahy has helped Burns prepare for the job, said Rochester Business Alliance President Sandy Parker.

"Both are Xerox lifers," Parker said. "I think Ursula has been mentored by Anne for a significant number of years. Ursula will bring her own stamp to the position. She's obviously not a clone. But the foundations, I think, are there."

Burns has often downplayed the attention that comes with being a trailblazing African-American businesswoman. Still, local businessman Dale Trott, president of the Rochester Black Business Association, said Burns is an inspiration for others.

"To the African-American community and to kids, I think it's a tremendous honor and I think it's something they can look to and aspire to," he said.

Her success also is testament to hard work, Trott said. "To ascend to those heights, I don't believe color comes into play. You need so many skills to ascend to a level like that."