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# **Michael V. Roberts & Steven C. Roberts The Roberts Company**

**By M. Karen Hubbard**

## **Beginnings**

Michael and Steven were the first two of four children born to Victor and Delores Talley Roberts in 1948 and 1952 respectively. They were educated through high school in the St. Louis Public Schools.

As children, they were always looking for ways to earn money. Their jobs included: cutting grass, shoveling snow, and delivering newspapers. In college, they tried to sell dashikis (colorful African shirts) and other African items to bookstores.

Michael and Steven went to college as ‘Danforth fellows’ meaning they received scholarships from the Danforth Foundation. Mike attended Lindenwood University, and then earned a law degree from St. Louis University School of Law in 1974. He also attended The Hague Academy of International Law in the Netherlands. Steven attended Clark University in Massachusetts and then returned to St. Louis to earn a law degree at Washington University. They believed that law school teaches you how to think and how to perceive (see) opportunities more quickly.

While Steven studied law, Mike opened Roberts-Roberts & Associates in 1974. Mike was knowledgeable about a relatively new area of law, discrimination in the workplace. There were many large companies who had hundreds of millions of dollars in class-action lawsuits against them because they did not employ many women or minorities. The law firm worked with private and public clients such as Anheuser-Busch, Bi-State Development, MoDOT, and Southwestern Bell. They helped the clients to increase the minority and women-owned company’s participation on the construction projects.

Both Mike and Steve served on the St. Louis Board of Aldermen. Mike was on the Board 1977-1983 and Steve’s term was 1979-1991. They left after a few years because they felt that in order for new ideas to come in, people in government positions needed to be rotated periodically. (Aldermen discuss problems, give money for community improvements, and make laws which will help the people in the area they represent.)

## **Roberts Brothers Development**

In the two decades since they left the Board, through the Roberts Brothers Development, Mike and Steve invested about \$25 million in commercial (business) and residential (homes) redevelopment in St. Louis city. They felt that

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when they were aldermen, they had political power, but now, they have economic power where they can help create jobs which will allow people to take care of their families. In 2002, they received the Mayor's Spirit of St. Louis Award for their commercial and redevelopment in the city.

### **TV Stations and Towers**

In 1981, the Roberts met a man who was looking for African Americans who were interested in owning a TV station. They applied and were granted a license after doing some market research. This was the beginning of the Roberts Broadcasting Company. After obtaining their license they had no programs to broadcast. After talking to many different groups they formed a partnership with the Home Shopping Network who agreed to pay Mike and Steve to take their programming off of the satellite and broadcast it to the St. Louis market. In order to meet their broadcasting obligations, they had to build a new full-power television station which became known as WRBU-TV Channel 46. Because of this successful experience, the Roberts built eleven more broadcasting facilities. They sold eight of these stations to different broadcasting companies.

### **Roberts Construction Company and Roberts Tower Company**

Mike and Steve became experienced in construction by building the TV towers. This led them to establishing the Roberts Construction Company. The Roberts Tower Company is a closely connected business to the construction company which designs and builds towers for television stations and for the wireless communication industry.

Through their work in building towers, the Roberts became aware of business opportunities in a number of new technologies and started the Roberts Wireless Company. They acquired a close connection with Sprint PCS (Personal Communication Services) and began developing a Sprint PCS network all over Missouri (with the exception of St. Louis and Kansas City). They also had networks in several other states. It was the only PCS company solely owned by African Americans. The Roberts' Broadcasting and Wireless businesses are among the largest minority-owned businesses in the United States.

### **Diversification (owning many different companies): A Key to Success**

"We are diversified," Mike Roberts says, "I've always felt that's important. If you limit yourself to one sector of business opportunities in this economy you die." Other examples of the Roberts' diversification are: they opened a successful restaurant called "The Roberts Steak and Buffet" (which they sold to Cracker Barrel in 2003) and, in 2000, they opened the Roberts Aviation company in which they own and lease two different types of airplanes.

The Roberts had been visiting the Bahamas Island for twenty-five years and have private homes there. They decided to buy property on the Bahamas near the city of Nassau and called it 'Roberts Isle'. In 1998, they invested \$25 million

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and built a 50 unit residential development called the 'Roberts Isle Resort'. It is the largest African American owned development.

Other businesses the Roberts have started in St. Louis are: the 'Roberts Lofts on the Plaza' (large apartments), the 'Robert Orpheum Theater' (building where live plays and performers perform), and the 'Roberts Towers' (25-story energy saving structures for residential living in downtown St. Louis). As a result of clients interest in the superb craftsmanship of the cabinetry and woodworking produced for these buildings, a woodworking business called the 'Roberts Custom Cabinetry & Woodworking' was started in 2005.

In 2007, the Roberts Hotel Group earned the prestigious Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

### **Involved and Dedicated**

Mike says, "It's not a sin to make a lot of money. It's a sin when you don't know how to reinvest through contributions back in the community to make a better society in which you operate your business."

Mike and Steve Roberts have taken on many leadership roles in professional and civic organizations. Mike's contributions include: serving as a board member of the St. Louis Community College Foundation, United Way, and Better Family Life. Steve has been involved in civic organizations such as the Muny, the Repertory Theater, St. Patrick's Center, and the Missouri Historical Society.

The Roberts even like to work in their free time. "We work seven days a week not in the office but we're always thinking about business," Steve says. Mike adds, "If you enjoy what you're doing you never work a day in your life."