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Firefighter seeks buried-wire profits

Milwaukee **firefighter** Charles Goins has taken safety to another level.

The 20-year **firefighter** is president of Precise Underground Marking Inc., 6618 N. Teutonia Ave., which provides detection and marking of underground conduits, electrical and phone lines, cable wiring and water and gas pipes.

Knowing the location of underground services is important. Just ask Goins. He once was shocked while working on underground services at a prison in Fox Lake.

"I was tired and I forgot to shut the system down. I began to mark the system," Goins said. "It knocked me back and scared the hell out of me."

"I tell my people (that) before they touch any clamps, the system must be shutdown."

As a **firefighter**, Goins gained experience in excavation safety and tunnel rescue.

"I was always in tunnels looking at wiring," Goins said.

Few minorities have broken ground in the highly specialized industry. Goins' company is the only minority-owned firm certified by the state to perform such work, said Tony Hozeny, a spokesman for the state Department of Commerce.

A U.S. Navy veteran, Goins has had a burning desire to save lives ever since his two younger sisters died in a fire 31 years ago in Milwaukee.

"Losing two sisters in a fire is the biggest reason I joined the Fire Department," said Goins, choking with emotion. "I just didn't want to see that happen to someone else."

Goins' only remaining sister, Stephanie Hampton, 27, also a Milwaukee **firefighter**, is his partner in the business.

"We work 24-hour shifts and we're off 48 hours. We work different shifts so one of us oversees the business while the other works," said Goins.

Hampton recalled how the two lived a meager existence while pumping a good chunk of their salaries into the business. One way they got by was by sharing one car.

Precise Underground was started in 1994 by Goins, Hampton and two other partners. A year later, Hampton and Goins bought out the partners.

"We were broke," said Hampton. "We dumped everything we had into this company."

That has amounted to \$100,000 over three years, Goins said. And while the company is now self-sustaining, lack of capital continues to be a problem.

A new loan program is helping, though.

Precise Underground is one of three local minority-owned firms to receive assistance through a \$700,000 microloan program designed to assist, women, minorities and low-income entrepreneurs. Launched in December, the pilot program was developed by the Small Business Administration and is financed by Bank One Wisconsin.

Loans up to \$25,000 are administered by the Wisconsin Women's Business Initiative Corp., which also provides counseling and technical assistance to firms in the program.

With the \$14,000 loan he received, Goins purchased additional equipment and hired two full-time employees, increasing his staff to four.

"Goins has promise," said Wendy Werkmeister, president of the business initiative corporation. "He has versed himself on his industry and has found a good niche."

However, Goins faces hurdles in securing contracts. Many utilities that use detection and marking services are reluctant to hire a start-up company for such work, he said.

"Getting people to trust you to do this kind of work is hard," Goins said.

One company willing to take a chance on Goins was Time Warner Cable.

Time Warner Cable has hired Precise Underground under a two-year contract to locate its underground facilities in Kenosha. It's part of the company's commitment to helping women and minority-owned businesses, said Tom Sharrard, president of Time Warner Cable in Milwaukee.

"There were no minority contractors whatsoever. This gave us an opportunity to develop a minority firm in a specialized field," Sharrard said. "It's important for any company that operates in the city to develop firms that are going to provide secure long-term jobs in the inner city."

With one major contract firmly under his belt, Goins hopes to expand his business in Wisconsin and to other states.

"The competition is stiff," he said. "The Warner contract will enable us to prove ourselves."

For now, Goins said he had no immediate plans to retire from the Milwaukee Fire Department.

"I've got 12 years to go, and I'm going to hang around," he said. "I wear two caps. It's getting easier because I've got people out in the field who are taking the load off. But I still go out and do the work. I want to give the best service that I can give."

Precise Underground Marking Inc.

Top executive: Charles Goins, president

Operations: 6618 N. Teutonia Ave.; four employees

History: Started in 1994 by Goins; his younger sister, Stephanie Hampton; and two partners. In 1995, Goins and Hampton bought out the other partners, becoming 100% owners of the company. The company has two full-time workers.

Personal: Divorced, father of two sons, ages 24 and 21. Oldest of six children reared by a single mother on Milwaukee's north side.

Hobbies: Fishing and traveling

Most inspired by: An eighth-grade geography teacher. "His interest and concern for kids impressed me the most. He took our class to Denver because he felt we should see what we were learning about."

Best advice: From his late mother: "She said, 'You can be whoever you want to be.' Because of her, I'm driven to succeed."