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Larry Brinker Jr. is CEO of Black-owned company behind well-known Detroit projects



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Larry Brinker Jr. and his midsize construction company are responsible for many projects that have helped revitalize Detroit for two generations.

Brinker Jr. is the president and CEO of Brinker Group, which has five commercial construction companies under its umbrella. The first company was started by his father, Larry Brinker Sr., in 1989. It is called Brinker Team Construction. From there, Brinker Sr. started three more companies, and acquired another in 2010. The five companies are called: L.S. Brinker, Brinker Team Construction, Universal Glass & Metals, City Carpet & Flooring and Edgewood Electric.

As the companies grew, Brinker Jr. worked as an intern during the summers while in high school. He then attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and after graduating launched a music production company and a restaurant and nightclub. He also is a member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc. In 2004, he came to work for the construction management company full time.

His entry-level position was as a project engineer. He then worked as a project manager, superintendent, estimator and vice president. He became president in 2013 and added the CEO title in 2019. Now, Brinker Jr.'s son is interning at the business this summer.

The company has worked on several major Detroit projects, including the Little Caesars Global Resource Center and World Headquarters, Little Caesars Arena, Huntington Tower, the Motown Museum and Hitsville U.S.A., Wayne State University's Mike Ilitch School of Business, the Book Tower and the Shinola Hotel. It's currently working on Michigan Central Station, Ralph C. Wilson Centennial Park, Detroit Food Commons, Charles H. Wright

Museum of African American History and Detroit Public Schools Community District. Projects can involve between 15 to 800 contractors.

“One thing that I try to tell kids and adults looking to get into construction overall is construction is amazing because you can leave your legacy for future generations to see,” Brinker Jr. said. “So it doesn't matter if you cleaned up trash on a project or if you were actually the one screwing in studs or installing lights, you played a role in that project being successful and that building being able to withstand the test of time.”

As a huge sports fan, Brinker Jr. is proud of the company's work with the Henry Ford Detroit Pistons Performance Center, which is now used as a practice facility for the Pistons, a medical center for athletes, a space for the team's employees and a venue for the community. Community organizations and corporations are consistently using the space, and it has been used as a vaccine clinic, receiving board for elections and a voter registration center. One of the event spaces in the facility is called the Brinker Family Loft.

Planet Fitness and Plum Market both occupy storefront spaces at the facility. Arn Tellem, vice chairman of the Detroit Pistons, said the partnership with Henry Ford Health was crucial in the team's move to downtown Detroit.

“Brinker helped us execute, create and build on that partnership by helping us create this beautiful performance center that serves our team, our organization and the community,” Tellem said. The performance center was only the first phase of community impact. In that campus, Henry Ford Health is building a new hospital, Michigan State University is partnering with the hospital to create a medical research center and there also will be retail and housing developments, Tellem said.

I asked Brinker Jr. a few questions about his work, with an office at 3633 Michigan Ave. in Detroit that has a kitchen stocked with snacks and a golf simulator for entertainment. Here are Brinker Jr.'s answers, edited for brevity.

QUESTION: What has it been like to manage five different companies?

ANSWER: Every day is different is what I would say, but it's what I'm accustomed to. It's kind of similar to someone who was raised in a large family with a lot of siblings compared to an only child. You get used to different moving pieces when you're a part of the larger family. And we look at the Brinker Group being a large family. So we have five different companies, but I have the best staff in the world that helps me manage it. We have amazing leaders that

we've trained over 20, 25 years to be in the position they're in today. So it's always eventful, but it's always fun, as well.

Q: What are some projects that have taken place in the neighborhoods?

A: Most of our stuff recently has been in the Central Business District for the most part, but I can tell you, we've been a part of some special projects. For instance, the William Clay Ford Baseball Field, which is right off of the Lodge. We also did another baseball field on the east side of Detroit. Those were special projects for me because of the fact that you're giving kids in the city an opportunity to participate in sports, keep them off the streets and also build those leadership qualities through sports.

So no different than the Detroit Pistons Performance Center. Many people look at that project as being the headquarters and practice facility for the Pistons, but quite honestly, the Pistons have activated so many different community aspects to the building and facility in a way where it is a gathering spot for the community for the neighborhood. So you will go in there sometimes and see students and kids playing on the basketball courts. You may see various community functions being held there. But all of that gives people or folks in the community hope and aspirations to achieve things that they never thought they could.

Q: As you look at Detroit, and any other projects that you've done, what has been your overall economic impact?

A: Wow. I can tell you over the last, let's say last six years or so, we've constructed — just on the construction management side of things — we've constructed about a billion and a half dollars worth of redevelopment and new construction in Detroit. And that doesn't account for necessarily our other four companies that may have or may not have worked for those projects. So we feel that we've had a huge economic impact on the city and the metro Detroit community overall because the more people we can employ and put to work, whether or not it's our own tradespeople or other subcontractors, that money goes right back into the ecosystem of our community. So from that perspective, we feel we've had a huge impact. As we construct buildings, we oftentimes try to find ancillary companies that we can support that are in the community, whether it be office supplies, catering, security, marketing, in terms of swag and things like that.

Q: What was the first project that your dad did that really shocked you, and made you say, 'I want to do this?'

A: The first one, when he was a carpenter, and before he actually created his company, was The Oakland Press building in Pontiac. That was the first project that I saw that he worked on. And then two other projects that really come to mind that I vividly remember as a child — one was the Charles H. Wright (Museum of African American History) in Detroit, and then the other was the renovation that was done at the old Tigers stadium. Those were two projects that were early on in the years of Brinker Team Construction that he was extremely proud of. And I remember driving down on the weekends and he would drive me around Detroit and show me those projects.

Q: As a Black person in this industry, what are some of the obstacles that you face, and then also talk about the good things that have happened because of it?

A: I think more than anything else is, what I've dealt with in my career in construction sometimes, has been people making an assumption or determination of who you are or what your skill set is before they know who you are or what your skill set is. Barriers have been having to jump through a couple of more hoops or knock down a few more walls just to get to the starting line. And one of my major goals is to, hopefully as best as I can, equalize the playing field in a way where everyone is starting from the same starting line. It may sound silly, but it's so true that there's definitely an advantage when you don't have to do a full sprint just to get to the starting line to then do another sprint. And so I've dealt with that.

But then on the other side, I've also been proud that I've been able to dispel some of those, what I would say, systemic biases at times, as well. Because once someone gets to know me, once someone understands my skill set and my knowledge, it has allowed them to look at people of color differently, as well. And so I try to lead by example, and I try to also pull up the next person as much as I can, next person of color.

And in construction, it's been very hard, where we have been intentional on hiring minorities as much as we can. And we recently actually created a junior executive team for our company, where they report to our executive team. But the focus there was to put minorities in a position where they can understand the inner workings of the company and give them access and give them the opportunity for career growth.

Q: Let's get into the state of the industry. Labor shortages have impacted a lot of businesses. How has it impacted yours and how did you solve it?

A: The labor shortage isn't new. COVID accelerated it a bit. But in the downturn in 2008, for instance, Michigan lost almost 80,000 skilled trades workers during that downturn. They either moved out of state or they went to a different industry. And then shortly after that,

there were a ton of retirements. At the point of 2020, three out of four construction job openings were due to retirement. And so this has been something that's been ongoing prior to COVID, and we've all had to get really creative on what we do. Part of it is we've created workforce development programs. We did one in conjunction with our joint venture partner Christman and Ford called the Fast Track Program for the Michigan Central Station project. We also created a mentorship program for minority businesses that we worked with for the Pistons project, where we actually took small businesses that were minority-owned, and we gave them an opportunity to learn from us on the professional side and the trades side in a way where we integrated their labor with our labor in the field to help them learn from our foreman and journeyman, for instance.

But we did this as a way to help them be successful so that that next project, they could be in a position to not just say that they worked on the last project, but really be in a position of knowledge, growth and expertise, so that they can be successful on their next project.

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Q: What are three skills that you feel that people should know if they want to either enter one of your companies, or just the industry as a whole?

A: I wouldn't say three skills more than I will say three personality traits. One is integrity. The second one is hard work. And three would be the ability to learn. With those three, you can teach people how to do just about anything. And it's been proven, where we have a couple of executive vice presidents that started off in the field as apprentices, much like my father, who are now helping run day-to-day operations for our companies. But they have the integrity. They have the ability or desire to work hard and ability to learn. And they went from being an entry-level person in the field to now helping to manage the company.

Q: What do you see for the future of Detroit and how do you plan to become a part of that future?**A:** The future of Detroit is bright. That's what I say. There's so many amazing things happening. Our diversification in industries — so now we're known for technology, you look at the health care component here, in addition to obviously, the Big Three (Detroit-based automakers). So the future is bright that people actually from Chicago, New York and places like that want to be here. They feel that they can have a greater impact and they can actually see their impact, which is exciting because that then leads us to not only

keeping the best talent here in the city, but attracting additional talent, which, when that happens, great things take place.

I look to continue to be a part of it, with our company, through our continued commitment to the community. To also just playing our part and our role in the overall revitalization, whether that is us working as contractors, or us supporting the city or initiatives or supporting foundations that are giving back to the community — all of that plays a part in the revitalization and the continued success of Detroit.

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