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2008 Minority Business Owners of the Year

Mesfin Samuel
Vickley Raeford
Misael Millan

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Albany, Ga.

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On this page and cover:
(from left) Mesfin Samuel,
Vickley Raeford, Misael
Millan at SunTrust Plaza.
Photography by Cliff
Robinson

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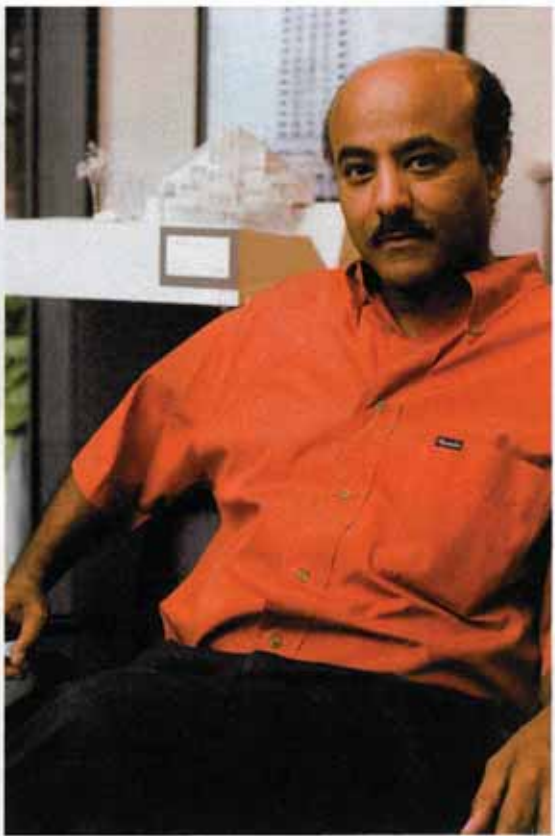
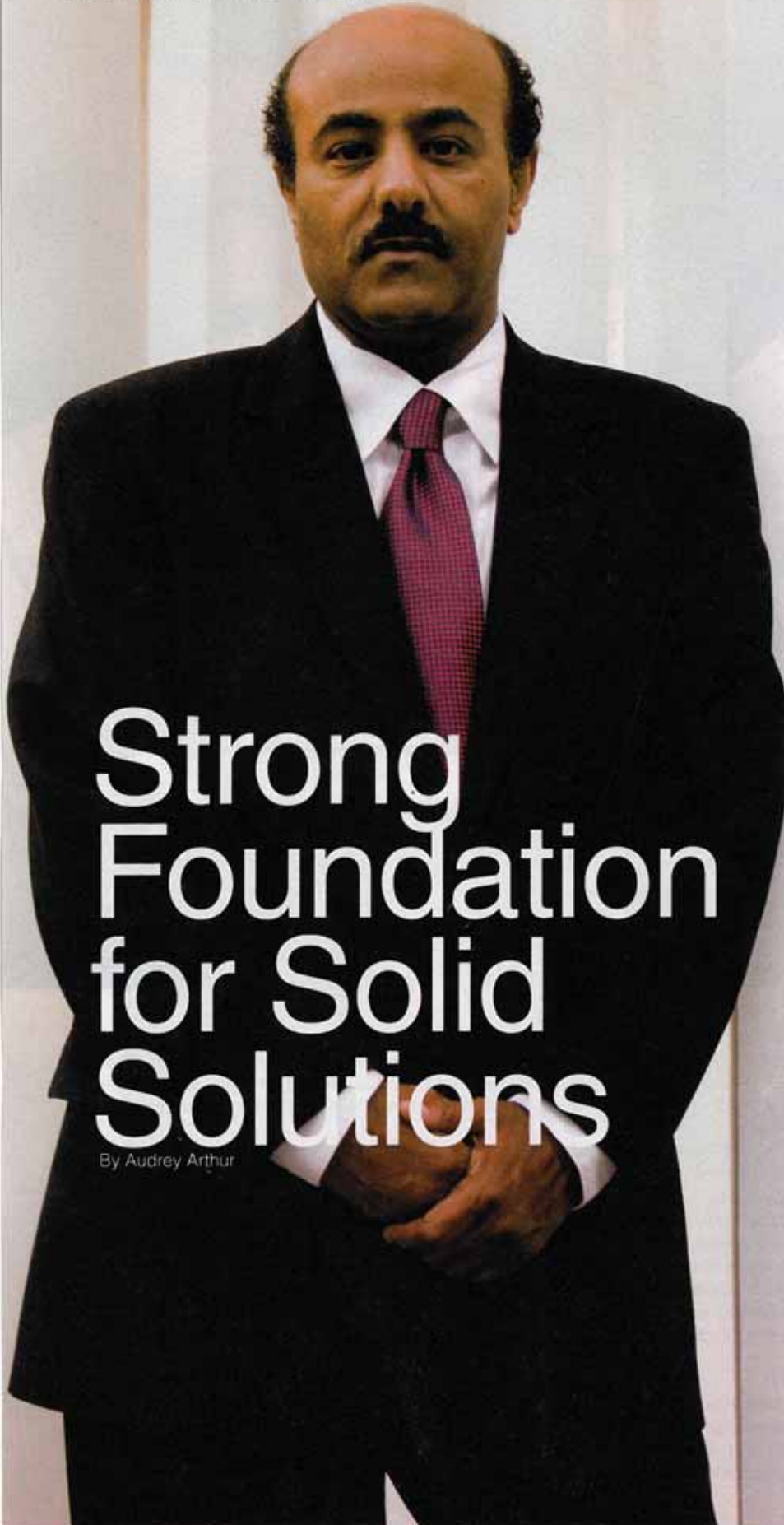
A photograph of three business owners standing in a modern office. On the left is a man in a dark suit and tie. In the center is a woman in a dark suit and pearl necklace. On the right is a man in a dark suit and red tie. They are standing in front of large, abstract, golden-brown sculptures that resemble stylized leaves or petals. The background shows a modern office interior with glass walls and a staircase.

Dream Catchers

THE QUESTION NEVER GETS OLD: WHAT ARE THE NECESSARY INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS AND LONGEVITY AS A MINORITY BUSINESS OWNER? Many would agree solid financial backing is paramount.

Others argue networking, marketing and getting a product or service in front of the right target audience are vital. What has garnered minority business owners Vickley Raeford, Mesfin Samuel and Misael Millan standout status, however, is simply a matter of strategic maneuvering: They've all managed to broker lucrative contracts to service the stringent demands of some of the nation's top corporations, blazing a trail for service providers and suppliers to follow. **It's business know-how at its finest — so take notes.**

Photography by Cliff Robinson at SunTrust Plaza



Strong Foundation for Solid Solutions

By Audrey Arthur

By all accounts, Mesfin Samuel could have easily just concentrated on his burgeoning architectural career after graduating from the University of Texas. But the Ethiopia native couldn't ignore a pull to do more for his country, where thousands were fleeing a devastating famine, drought and political unrest in the mid-1980s.

With steely determination, Samuel helped set up a non-profit relief organization for Ethiopian refugees. He operated the humanitarian wing of the organization from his home in Dallas for several years.

Still, Samuel did not abandon his passion for architecture. While running the non-profit venture, he also secured an apprenticeship with an architectural firm and took on freelance design work. Then, he decided to launch his own business — The Samuel Group Architects — out of his apartment.

The Samuel Group now has 15 branch offices in the United States, including Dallas, New York, Tampa, and Atlanta, which opened in 1993. Since launching, the company has provided architecture, planning, interiors, computer-aided facilities design and management services to companies like Proctor and Gamble, IBM, Delta Air Lines, Shell Oil and Texas Instruments.

Areas of expertise for The Samuel Group are data centers, high-end residences and mixed-use projects, such as the spa and wellness center at Lake Oconee, a golf course resort community one hour east of Atlanta. However, close to 75 percent of the firm's architectural design work is with financial institutions. The Samuel Group has designed 83 locations for Wachovia in Georgia, Texas, Florida, Connecticut, New

York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The firm has designed 850 Bank of America branch locations, and completed branding and signage conversion projects for the bank at more than 1,000 locations nationwide. Another Samuel Group client, SunTrust Bank, has contracted the company for 150 projects to date.

In the last two years, Samuel's has completed the lion's share of Wachovia's retail branch prototypes in Georgia. "There are a lot of good things that Mesfin does right," says Chuck Alexander, the Wachovia corporate real estate, high-rise portfolio leader of the southern, central and western regions. "He's recognized the need to put good people on our account, and he has kept those same people on our account. There is no turnover, so there is no learning curve. It's been a great partnership."

"Mesfin is very professional," Alexander adds. "He doesn't make a big splash and his people get it done. He has a quiet excellence."

With connections made in Germany while attending college, Samuel has set his sights on gaining more international business for The Samuel Group, which earned \$5.6 million in 2007, and expects to reach \$6.4 million in 2008. "With the economic slowdown in [the United States], we want to have a global reach," says Samuel, an American Institute of Architects scholarship recipient.

One of the firm's more high-profile international projects is the phased plan and design of the Ethiopian Cultural Center to commemorate His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I at the Jubilee Palace in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. The Cultural Center, which will cost approximately \$200 million, will consist of a performance hall, museum, national gallery and conference center built on the palace grounds. The 600,000-square-foot edifice will take up four acres in the heart of Addis Ababa.

To be invited to take part in a project like the Ethiopian Cultural Center is not just about design credentials but excelling at customer service with each client. "Good architecture is not just what you see at the end, but also about putting a solution forward," says Samuel.

"Mesfin has the ability to do more than just design. He is more of a solution provider," concurs Mike Mettler, senior vice president of location planning with Bank of America. "He is a leader and hires those who emulate his style. He has a genuine interest in our company. If someone told me Mesfin worked for Bank of America as an associate, I would believe them because he takes that much of a personal interest."

Samuel defines his leadership style as a combination of hands-on management when necessary, and delegation when it's in the best interest of the firm and client. "As principal, I get involved with the concept and design, and from there, I delegate." Samuel then digs deep into the solution, financial management and project management facets of the project. "Each day, I'm making sure that we have an even keel steering the ship."

Although 99 percent of his clients are repeat customers, Samuel theorizes that longevity in today's architectural design community relies on service and project diversification. "We're nimble and can provide turnkey services where we not only design, but [also] help clients with project management and the after care of their buildings, and consult on staffing models. There is a sense of continuity."

"Being a minority firm, I believe, adds to overall client growth," Samuel observes. "As an African-American firm, the culture, the tradition [and] the background we bring obviously sets the stage for providing quality."

And having longevity and success also boils down to enjoying what you do. "Coming to work is not really coming to work for me," he says. "I have great relationships with my staff. The office is like home for us as we spend upwards of 10 hours a day here. The people of this firm make us a success — the entire team, our clients and contractors. It takes a whole army of people to execute one building. The Samuel Group is the common denominator for the client. We are involved in the hiring of the general contractor [as well as the] review of sub contractors, engineers [and] landscape architects. It's all funneled and organized through our firm."

Samuel says the multifaceted nature of design makes work challenging for him. "So many individuals are involved in the success of the end result. Every building design is different. It's a mixture of concrete, glass and steel, but everyday is different, and I guess that is what keeps us going."

With a tone of comfortable confidence, Samuel is cognizant of where he comes from, what it has taken to build his business and where he wants his company to go. "I'm humble, but at same time I'm not afraid of challenges either." **AT**

Mesfin Samuel
The Samuel Group, Inc.
CEO/President
info@samuelgroup.net
www.thesamuelgroup.net

