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BUSINESS

Dorri McWhorter, CEO, YWCA Metropolitan Chicago

By Erin Chan Ding, Special to the Tribune
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Dorri McWhorter, the shoe-obsessed, Beyonce-referencing, financially minded CEO of the YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, leans on the kitchen island of her Chinatown loft as she draws arrows on a piece of paper.

It looks like a bunch of scribbles. But it's McWhorter's vision of how businesses and nonprofits should work together.

"Now we're getting to my super plot to change the world," she says with a smile. "There needs to be a paradigm shift about the work we're doing."

On the left, she scrawls "B to B," for business to business. "B to C," for business to consumers. Then "Social Service." Underneath those, she has written "Govt.," for government.

She has woven them together with arrows, which all point to one word she has scrawled on the right: "Humanity."

With her pen, she circles the word again and again.

"We are in the business of serving humanity." -Dorri McWhorter

"We are in the business of serving humanity," she said.

For McWhorter, 41, who left her trailblazing position at Crowe Horwath — she was the accounting firm's first black partner — to assume her post in March 2013, work is not really work: It's an extension of her worldview.



"My whole point is that there are all these different types of enterprises, and we're just focused on the humanity more than these other ones are," McWhorter said.

"But if you take this out" — and she scratches out the word "humanity" — "these wouldn't even exist," she said, referring to the other entities on the paper. "It's just so core. Any business that does business, I immediately convert it to how they serve humanity."

Lassoing each entity on her diagram so they can better serve her constituents has become central to what McWhorter has been doing at the YWCA.

The YWCA's seven sites, in Glendale Heights, Chicago Heights and throughout the city, provide a range of services that include support for victims of sexual violence, child care provider services, racial justice advocacy and career training.

Inside the LaSalle Street headquarters of the YWCA Metropolitan Chicago, the walls' persimmon color, the organization's signature shade, resonates with McWhorter.

With her arrival, McWhorter brought vibrancy and fun. When her cellphone rang on a recent Monday, "Happy," by Pharrell Williams, began playing. A staffer has written in block letters on an office whiteboard, "Turn down for what," a lyric to a popular Lil Jon song that essentially means to not stop partying.

McWhorter is known for her shoe obsession, and it's reflected in her office decor. Above her desk hangs a large portrait of a multicolored stiletto heel. On her desk sits a Scotch tape dispenser shaped like a high heel.

Brimming with enthusiasm over the YWCA's TechGYRLS program, which she had visited the previous weekend, McWhorter told colleagues, "Our girls are brilliant. I could give up shoes for these girls!"

Yet more than her lightheartedness and humor, staff members say she has given the YWCA Metropolitan Chicago stability and guidance.

Molly Silverman, the YWCA Metropolitan Chicago's director of strategic engagement, says McWhorter has changed "more than just the vibe, but like the whole direction. I mean, it's really been like, a blessing for the organization and for the staff.

"We were kind of at a low point. We just weren't going anywhere. We didn't have a trajectory. We were like closing programs. It was pretty bad. Morale was a little low."

McWhorter's arrival, Silverman said, has given the organization "renewed hope, and I don't mean that in a cheesy way. I really believe in it."

Determined to transform the organization, McWhorter, who tweets several times a day as @chicCPA, has thrust the YWCA into the digital space. Last fall, the organization rolled out an app for Black Friday with shopping discounts, holiday survival tips and a "donate" button.

She led a redesign and curriculum creation for TechGYRLS, a program designed to raise the interest of girls ages 9 to 14 in science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics. Several weeks ago, the girls brainstormed apps that ranged from fashion design to helping police catch criminals. In May, McWhorter and her staff launched Creating Illinois Talent, a program to train women in Web and mobile app development.



“It wasn't that they were doing blatantly racist things, but there was not a reflection of you anywhere around.” - Dorri McWhorter

Leaning on her accounting background, McWhorter has created new financial strategies for the YWCA, which has been emerging from a large financial hole. In the past few years, the YWCA had run up a seven-figure deficit but had whittled it to six figures, mostly through eliminating positions and trimming salaries, before McWhorter's arrival.

According to the organization's Form 990 IRS filings, the YWCA's deficit fell from about \$2.6 million in fiscal year 2011 to \$774,000 in 2012. The deficit for the fiscal year ended in June 2013, four months after McWhorter arrived, fell to \$31,000. Revenues for that year stood at \$11.6 million, according to the YWCA's annual report, with about 75 percent of the organization's funding coming from the government and the rest from private grants and corporate and individual donations.

McWhorter estimates that for fiscal year 2014, the YWCA will break even operationally and show an overall surplus of about \$13,000, including investments.

To generate revenue and ensure that the organization's programs continue to receive funding, McWhorter has emphasized job training and career placement for the YWCA's constituents. The goal is to increase the organization's investment in that area from 5 percent to 30 percent.

The YWCA also partnered with Commonwealth Edison for its Construct program, which prepares women for readiness in construction and utility jobs.

To raise money and connect with the community, she has expanded the number of Finding Her Way luncheons, where women whose lives have changed because of the YWCA's services share their stories with potential donors and stakeholders. McWhorter brings tissues to these events, knowing she will cry.

Other fundraising events, like Empowerment Evenings, bring speakers to address issues like female leadership in the workplace; the next one, planned for Wednesday, is called Taboo Topics With Christie Hefner, in which the former CEO of Playboy Enterprises will moderate a discussion on politics, sex and money. The expansion of these types of events, McWhorter said, has increased fundraising from \$64,000 in fiscal 2013 to \$175,000 in fiscal 2014.

McWhorter has also met with dozens of executives, affinity groups and human resources managers, resulting in new sponsorships and increased awareness of the YWCA.

Cindy Burrell, who served with McWhorter on the YWCA board, said McWhorter is "always thinking of, 'How can I make this two ways?'" Burrell, president of Diversity in Boardrooms, a consulting company for executive and board searches, added, "And I think that's a true leader — not just 'What can you do for me?'"

At a recent meeting at Sears Holdings' headquarters in Hoffman Estates, McWhorter and her staff spoke with leaders of the company's internal resource groups that focus on African-Americans, Latinos and working parents about potential partnerships — emphasizing that those partnerships can go beyond donations.

"We're trying to really take it beyond the superficial, you know, 'We're a charity: Give us money,'" McWhorter said during the meeting. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. If we create value for you, you will definitely give us money."

She talks faster, saying, "We want to have hallmark things that are like, 'YWCA and Sears did this together.' ... There's just so much opportunity in the community, and we're like, 'We just want to change the game up.'"

Her eyes shine as she imagines cross-promotion possibilities and, referencing the electricity outage shortly after the 2013 Super Bowl halftime performance, she says, "You see, it's like the opposite of Beyonce: You turn the lights back on for me."

Once in a while, when McWhorter addresses groups about the YWCA, she shows a slide of herself as a toddler wearing a cone-shaped birthday hat inside an apartment in the former Robert Taylor Homes.

"It's our little project birthday party," she'll say, before pointing out that the cake said "Congratulations" instead of "Happy birthday," joking that her mom and aunt wanted to save money and figured the kids wouldn't know the difference.

In the past year, Silverman has encouraged McWhorter to connect her family history with what the YWCA does. Her mother, Doris Petithomme, grew up in the Robert Taylor Homes and never graduated from high school. Her mother would have been the type of person the YWCA could have served, McWhorter said.

McWhorter was born on the South Side and, at age 2, moved with her mom, her older sister, Priscilla Munoz, and her dad, Willie McGhee, to Racine, Wis.

Her dad worked a factory job, she said, while her mom completed her General Educational Development, or GED.

"My mom is so smart to me," McWhorter said. "Both my parents are, without having had formal education."

McWhorter's affinity for accounting started with a seventh-grade book report.

"So I was always strong in math — and this is what happens when a little kid has no guidance, right?" she said. "I did a nonfiction book report, and I learned that a CPA made \$30,000 by going to a board meeting in 30 minutes. And I was like, 'I want to be a CPA!'"

She started paying attention to accountants. At the end of movies, she waited to see the names of the production accountants scroll by. During Academy Awards telecasts, she wanted to see the representatives from the accounting firm emerge.

"What I learned early on is that accountants touch everything," McWhorter said. "So I just thought it was a supercool profession, and you clearly could make a substantive living at it, so I thought that was the way I wanted to go."

After graduating from Washington Park High School in Racine in 1991, her transition to the University of Wisconsin at Madison proved to be one of the toughest experiences of her life, McWhorter said.

She found what should be liberating to most teens, a college campus, to be isolating.

"Wisconsin, when I was there, was a very challenging time because they were just not an inclusive environment," she said. "It wasn't that they were doing blatantly racist things, but there was not a reflection of you anywhere around. ... I found out that I was a black woman. Particularly in the school of business in Wisconsin, I felt every bit of that."

Several classmates, she said, did not want her in their study groups. A teacher's aide, she said, told her she would never make it into one of the top six accounting firms. She ended up after graduation at Arthur Andersen, which at the time was one of the Big Six accounting firms.

While at Andersen, McWhorter started in auditing. That lasted three months.

"I don't like auditing," she said. "I was like, 'Oh, my God, I need to express myself.'"

“We can't keep telling people sad stories and think they're going to respond.” - Dorri McWhorter

At an Andersen presentation she learned that auditors can audit the numbers or audit the business that leads the numbers, which rang true to her "because it's the business that drives the numbers, not the numbers that drive the business."

She volunteered to join a new business unit headed by Rick Julien, who was a partner at Andersen and later a colleague at Crowe Horwath.

Julien called her "the top performer" throughout the training process for his new unit, and "with that, she got a lot of attention, and she got a lot of opportunity."

McWhorter left Arthur Andersen before its near-disintegration during the Enron scandal in 2001 and had accounting stints at BellSouth, Booz Allen Hamilton, the Catholic Healthcare Audit Network (now Chan Healthcare), Crowe Chizek and Co. (which later became Crowe Horwath) and at Snap-On before returning to Crowe Horwath as a partner.

In 2003, McWhorter returned to live in Racine, even as she worked her first stint at Crowe at its Oak Brook offices and at Kenosha-based Snap-On as director of internal audit, controls and compliance. In her 30s, she again took up cheerleading, her high school hobby, because, she said, "I still had it. It was something to do and something I enjoyed doing."

She joked that she was the oldest cheerleader rooting for the Racine Raiders, the city's Midstates Football League team. But her 5-foot, 10-inch frame and bubbly encouragement helped her mesh with the college-age squad.

While in Racine, at a party, she met James McWhorter, her future husband. They drove to Chicago for their first date a decade ago, eating at Grand Lux Cafe on Michigan Avenue and goofing around at the former ESPN Zone. James McWhorter, a sixth-grade math teacher, would go to Raiders games to cheer on Dorri as she cheered. Two years later, in 2006, they married.

After making partner at Crowe Horwath in 2008, McWhorter exercised her penchant for brightening things. On the sixth floor of Crowe's Chicago offices, she had a wall painted yellow, with a smiling hippo in the center, for the sole purpose of making people happy.

Raj Chaudhary, a partner at Crowe Horwath and a mentor to McWhorter, said she became a social anchor for the Chicago office, often rounding up colleagues for after-work drinks.

While at Crowe, McWhorter got her Executive Master of Business Administration degree from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, and while working, "her commitment to serving clients was utmost," Chaudhary said. "Whatever it took to keep the client happy, she used to do a tremendous job of that."

McWhorter always took on additional leadership roles at Crowe, Julien said, so she could support women and minorities. She said she has been acutely aware of the dearth of diversity in the accounting profession.

"I look across the firm and the profession, and I knew there wasn't a lot of pipeline (of African-Americans) I could develop," McWhorter said. "So you just want to make sure that you are a good representation because regardless, you can really impact the views that people have about others going forward, whether you're trying to or not. So I just took the approach that you show up, and you go hard at everything you do."

Even now, she sits on the board of the American Institute of CPAs, where a priority, she said, is to combat the "awareness problem in the profession. We're not getting our fair share of talented African-American kids that are out there."

While at Crowe, McWhorter attended a YWCA lunch and, impressed by the organization's mission of "eliminating racism" and "empowering women," she started getting involved. In 2005, she joined the board.

Two years ago, as the YWCA struggled with its deficit, the board of directors fired CEO Christine Bork. As a board member, McWhorter became involved in assessing what the YWCA needed.

"What I found was that as I continued to think about what we needed, I was like, 'Oh, my God, we need to do this. We need to do this,'" she said. "So I became pretty obsessed about it."

The dire financial situation, she said, did not intimidate her, because she felt the services were sound. Creating a sustainable revenue model, McWhorter said, means "connecting all of our services so that people can understand the reason why we do sexual assault and economic empowerment is that those services are interrelated."

McWhorter is also out to engage people with their consumption, partnering with Jimmy Choo and Tania Spinelli to hold shoe trunk shows whose sales would benefit the YWCA. She joined with Akira, the clothing company, to throw a party honoring female entrepreneurs, complete with wardrobe consultations and makeovers.

"The reason we do this is, we can't keep telling people sad stories and think they're going to respond," she said. "The experiences, that's what we're going for. ... You engage people where they are."

At the YWCA headquarters, a giant white sheet of paper lists several staffers, along with their strengths. Next to McWhorter is scrawled the phrase, "connecting the dots."

That McWhorter has connected her career dots to reach her current position is not lost on others, who say her assurance and satisfaction feel palpable.

Brian Jackson, a former co-worker at Andersen who's now at Sears Holdings, says "this is her life, this is what she's about. Everyone, you know, strives to find what she has."

For McWhorter, working for the YWCA comes down to all of those arrows and circles on that piece of paper.

"All these businesses," she said, including the YWCA, "serve humanity. This is the best way to do it, for me, now."

The McWhorter file

Age: 41

Born: South Side of Chicago

Raised in: Racine, Wis.

Lives in: Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood and Racine

Family: Husband, James McWhorter, and Champ, their Chihuahua rat-terrier mix

Education: Bachelor of Business Administration in accounting at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and Executive Master of Business Administration at Northwestern University

Tattoos: A lotus flower on her left leg to celebrate turning 40 and a bust of Nefertiti on her abdomen she got in her early 20s. "That was on a 22-year-old stomach," McWhorter said. "Now, (Nefertiti is) like chewing tobacco. She's looking a little aged and weathered."

Eats at: Trattoria No. 10 in the Loop and Pizza Capri in the Hyde Park neighborhood because "they have the best chopped avocado chicken salad in the world."

Reading: "The Corporate Athlete: How to Achieve Maximal Performance in Business and Life," by Jack Groppe

Favorite shoes: "BCBG Max Azria, just because it's a fun brand. Yes, I love Manolo (Blahnik shoes). I'm always mixing my highs and my lows because if you have style, you can do that." And Tania Spinelli.

Philosophy on work-life balance: "It's all life, there's no work-life. ... And if you're not expressing yourself, that's a travesty to me. But I think people are starting to understand that more, and that's why you have so many folks that are looking for purpose work. It's not purpose work. It's finally doing work that's aligned to who you are."