



BRIAN CASSIDY

Darlene Davis' client list includes 30 small businesses and personal tax clients.

Davis looks to end solo act, add accounting staff

BY RICK DESLOGE
rdesloge@bizjournals.com

Two years after Darlene M. Davis started her own accounting firm, she's approaching a crossroads.

Davis, who is working solo from an office in Olivette, said she now has as much business as she can handle and is looking at the next step in her plan — boosting two part-time, Davis Associates employees to full-time.

"I'm trying to give myself another full year," Davis said. "That's the point the client base will be generating enough cash flow."

Davis, 35, is perhaps the only African-American woman-owned CPA business in the St. Louis region.

Only a handful of the 100 local members of the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA) are women, said Barry Winters, manager of internal audit at Sara Lee and executive vice president of NABA nationally.

"I don't know of another CPA firm affiliated with NABA that's owned by an African-American woman, and nationally they're few and far between," he said.

The Missouri Society of Certified Public Accountants has 305 female members who operate their own practices. The group, with nearly 9,000 members in the state, does not break down its members by race.

Davis started her firm after her husband, Tyrone Davis, an electrical mechanic at Union Electric Co., pushed her to launch her own practice after she left TLC Next Generation, a wireless communications business. At TLC, she had been chief financial officer and had a knack for handling the financial information.

At first, she didn't listen to her husband and assembled a plan to purchase the St.

Louis franchise territory of a disaster restoration business. She had arranged for financing through G.E. Finance Capital.

"Then at the 11th hour, the seller pulled out," she said. "But I knew from that experience I could put a fabulous business plan together."

Davis continued to look for business opportunities, but saw she was referring potential accounting customers to other firms. It was then that she acted.

Her big challenge now is juggling time to meet the needs of her roster of 30 small business clients, she said. That group does not include her personal tax work for clients who show up days and weeks before the April 15 income tax season.

Before stepping out on her own, Davis worked in the internal audit department of Monsanto Co. and then was chief financial officer at TLC, which was sold two years ago. Davis also has client-side experience with Brown-Kortkamp, a real estate and moving and storage business where she still works as part-time chief financial officer.

Davis' fees range from \$80 to \$200 an hour, depending on the assignment. "The small businesses have a need for quality, affordable accounting," she said.

"She listens. She's not a cookie cutter," said Leonard Bradley, president of Aero Bus Co., who found Davis a year and a half ago, when he was considering switching accountants.

Davis also landed an expert witness assignment from the Armstrong Teasdale law firm. She has assembled cost data for a small company that claims a lead shield it purchased arrived contaminated.

"This is her first time as an expert witness, but Darlene's quite good at it, and very thorough," said Ted Noel, the attorney handling the case. "That's all come across in her deposition."