

Lydia Kennard Sees Success as a Matter of Unquestionable Fortitude



Lydia Kennard, Photos © John Livzey, 2016

Lydia Kennard graduated from the most prestigious universities in the nation, but she cherishes most the education she received from her pioneering father. Founder of one of the largest and oldest African-American architecture firms in Los Angeles, Robert Kennard made sure his children knew how to succeed.

“My father was a World War 2 and Korean War veteran who attended USC’s School of Architecture on the GI Bill. In 1957, after recognizing that he would not be able to move up the corporate ladder because of racial discrimination, he ventured out on his own and started his own architecture firm. Imagine, given the considerable discrimination he faced in the marketplace and with three small children at home, he went out and started his own firm, The Kennard Design Group. How courageous that was! But he was a very talented, charismatic, and smart business person with the highest degree of integrity, grit, and determination to succeed.” Today, the firm still exists. Now known as KDG Architecture, the firm is run by Lydia’s sister, Gail Kennard.

And succeed he did. But he never let success go to his head or to influence his children negatively.

“Initially, I was the only one of his three children with any remote interest in the business. So I started at 14 working at his firm. And when I did, he said, ‘Look Lydia, you are *not* the boss’s daughter here. You will have a supervisor and he will tell you what to do and it’s going to be the lowliest of jobs in the business.’ So I ran the mimeograph machine, made blueprints and ran errands. Whatever it took, I did it. And he made it clear that if my supervisor reported that I wasn’t doing a good job, I would be fired. But that’s how I learned the discipline of working in the business. Now I have a 14-year old son who started working here when he was 12 and it’s the same deal. He gets no preferential treatment.”

Kennard entered Stanford University as an undergrad determined to earn a doctorate degree from MIT in urban planning, the best urban planning school in the US. But after informing a professor of plans, her plans changed.

“At Stanford one day, I had the most pivotal conversation of my professional career. A professor of urban economics, who also happened to be a lawyer, said, ‘Oh no. Don’t get your PhD in urban planning. If you really want to be in real estate development and run your own business, go to law school. A master in urban planning is good enough. If you get a PhD in urban planning, you won’t be very marketable except to be policy wonk in government or teach at the collegiate level.’ I heard what he said, did the research and determined he was right. I never wanted to go to law school or be a lawyer, but he made a lot of sense. He said, ‘Virtually everything you do in life will be based in some way on the law. Those analytical

skills will prove critical even if you never practice law.’ But my dream was still to attend MIT, so I applied to the master’s program at MIT. My next thought was, ‘What’s the closest law school to MIT?’ And it happened to be Harvard Law School. I ultimately completed both programs concurrently and achieved my academic goals in Cambridge, Massachusetts.”

Today, Kennard uses what she learned at Stanford, MIT and Harvard to strategically guide her company,

KDG Construction Consulting, a Southern California-based construction and program management firm. Honoring her father’s renowned legacy for innovation, entrepreneurship, and tenacity, KDG is a thriving enterprise with nearly 70 professionals, and growing. KDG’s exceptional mix of engineers, architects, estimators, finance professionals, construction managers and program managers assist public and institutional clients to construct large-scale transportation and utility infrastructure for numerous clients across three states: California, Nevada and Arizona. But Kennard also took a hiatus from her role as KDG’s leader.

“In the mid 90’s, I took a hiatus from KDG after receiving an incredible offer to go inside government. First I was appointed the deputy executive director for real estate, engineering and design at LAWA (Los Angeles World Airports). Then, in late 1999, I received a call from Mayor Richard Riordan, who offered me the top spot at the agency, which is one of the largest systems of airports in the country. ”

Kennard transformed LAWA, overseeing the planning for the expansion of LAX and the construction of new facilities at Ontario International Airport, as well as handling significant changes brought about after the 911 terrorist attacks that shook the nation and the aviation system. She returned to her business in 2009. Today, Kennard continues to use the aggregate of her experience and education to expand her firm’s reach and value. But in addition to her father, her work experience, and the educational institutions she attended, Kennard cites another important influence in her career.

“I’ve been involved in WTS for decades. I think WTS is very important and my firm is very much engaged with WTS. Women have a unique perspective and face challenges in the marketplace that must be addressed. It’s still such a male-dominated business, particularly construction. My daughter is at MIT right now and has a summer internship in aerospace engineering. She reports that every time she goes to a meeting she’s the only woman. Though we’ve clearly made gains, this is *still* happening. So WTS remains a very important organization and a great resource for women. And it’s not just for women at firms or entrepreneurs. It reaches a broad swath of women; it reaches the totality of women engaged in transportation. And that’s what makes it so important and valuable.”

