

PROFILE JULIEN PATTERSON

Businessman leads by example



Julien G. Patterson turned his fledgling business into a global firm and is the first African-American chairman of the Virginia Chamber of Commerce.

N.Va. executive brings fortitude, faith to role as state chamber chairman

BY CHIP JONES

TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Julien G. Patterson's life could read like a spy novel.

After all, he spent a decade working as a security specialist for the CIA, traveling from the Middle East to Europe to Central America training diplomats in the fine art of staying alive.

"Most of what we were teaching was recognizing behaviors," especially anything threatening, Patterson said. He also taught Americans abroad how to maintain low profiles, or "how to be gray."

Still, it would be wrong to cast him as a secret agent man.

Patterson, a Northern Virginia business executive recently named chairman of the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, spins out his life tale slowly and carefully, with the quiet intensity of a man who has known some hard times.

Distinguished-looking in a gray suit and wire-rim glasses, Patterson, 55, laughs often — frequently at himself.

Just as quickly he quietly shares the insights of someone who pushed on through adversity. He is the first African-American chairman in the 83-year history of the state chamber, which represents more than 1,000 companies.

"My goal is to capitalize on the fact that Virginia was selected as one of the best places to do business," Patterson said, citing a 2006 ranking by Forbes.

"The task before me as chair is to make sure the Virginia Chamber continues to be a vibrant supporter of this environment and a voice for the cross section of businesses that function across the state."

Minority-owned businesses — Hispanic, Asian and African-American, among others — represent the fastest-growing segment of the economy, he said.

Patterson doesn't dwell on any obstacles he encountered as a minority.

In fact, he's the first to say he was often his own worst enemy. In this respect, his life seems less like a James Bond novel and more like the parable of the prodigal son.

His personal crisis came in the late 1980s, after he left the CIA to pursue his dream of starting a security business. He freely spent his retirement funds on the start-up enterprise, which included leasing warehouse space near Washington Dulles International Airport.

He soon needed a bank loan. That was harder to get than he ever imagined, though, since he had no contracts lined up to prove to the bank that he could generate income.

"I was looking at things through rose-colored glasses," Patterson recalled. "I didn't understand business from a practical standpoint."

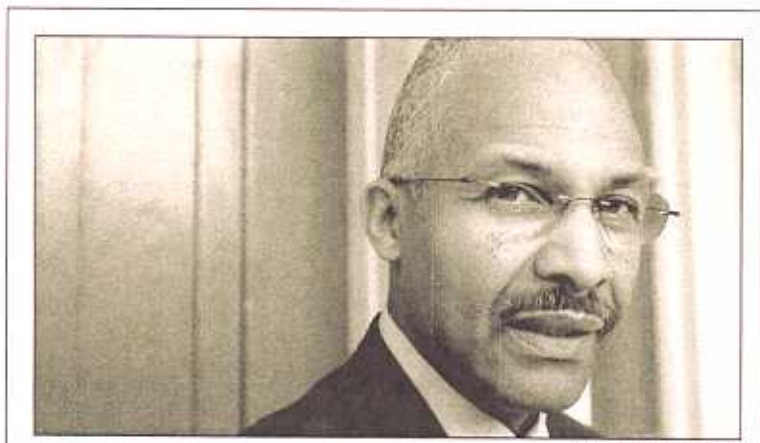
Before joining the CIA in 1976, Patterson worked for a management recruiting company in his native Norfolk and in Richmond. But his business experience was limited.

Once he set out on his own, he said, "I was a bit like Indiana Jones in that movie with the big rolling rock coming after him."

He fell seven months behind in his warehouse rent. To cut costs, he moved out of his Colonial-style home and into his warehouse, sleeping on a couch. On Sundays, he found a Tysons Corner hotel where he could chow down at a buffet. "You learn to eat one meal to get through the week," he recalled. "I had no place to go, no money. I did have ego. Ego can be the worst thing in the world when you're in need."

He also had friends who could tell he was in trouble. They included the Harry Fitzwater, former deputy director of the CIA who died in 2004, a man Patterson calls "the father I never had."

After learning of Patterson's plight, Fitz-



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

Résumé: Julien G. Patterson

- **Born:** May 11, 1951, in Norfolk
- **Education:** Granby High School, Norfolk, 1969; Norfolk State University, 1972
- **Family:** wife, Terri; daughter, Tracee; one granddaughter
- **Awards:** 2006 Top 15 Best Places to Work, Washington Business Journal; 2005 Large Business of the Year, Herndon Dulles Chamber of Commerce; 2004 Entrepreneur of the Year, Virginia Minority Supplier Development Council
- **Professional and charitable:** Central Intelligence Retirees Association; Prison Fellowship Ministry Foundation; Friends of the Fairfax Juvenile Court; Virginia Public Safety Foundation; Ox Hill Baptist Church

water agreed to help arrange a meeting with a large company — Magnavox — that was seeking a new security firm. He also lent Patterson \$10,000 in seed money.

Another friend — a woman who understood contracts — helped him fill out the request for a proposal that landed his first contract with Magnavox.

"The hand of the Lord was in it," Patterson said.

He still had to overcome other financing problems, but in the end his company — then Omnisec International — won a contract for \$750,000, and he had a staff of 67 people overseeing security at a plant in Fort Wayne, Ind.

"I've always gone out there every Christmas for their party," Patterson said. "I'm very indebted to those 67 people."

His company became Omniplex World Service Corp. Based in Chantilly, the global

security firm has about 3,500 employees and annual revenue of \$100 million, according to its Web site.

It specializes in performing background investigations for the government and also trains security and police officers, often those with high-level security clearances.

Patterson has a long list of awards as a top entrepreneur in the Washington area and is known as one of America's top African-American business leaders.

But Ben Davenport, his predecessor as state chamber chairman, said the Norfolk native's life transcends easy labels.

"He's a very articulate gentleman who brings a very organized approach to leadership," said Davenport, chairman of First Piedmont Corp. and Davenport Energy in Chatham. "He certainly is a leader by example."

Visiting Patterson's company, Daven-

Virginia Chamber of Commerce

Headquarters: 9 S. Fifth St. in Richmond

Members: more than 1,000 companies

Founded: 1924 by Central Virginia business leaders

Purpose: promotes business-friendly public policy at the state level and complements the state's economic-development work. It has become the state's largest business-advocacy organization.

Leadership: Julien G. Patterson, chairman; Hugh Keogh, president and CEO

port said, "You could tell by the way people around him acted, and the way he communicated to people, there was always a lot of respect but a lot of certainty in what he said."

He added, "Julien is a strong Christian businessman who has a deep faith. And while there's nothing offensive about the way he practices his religion, it's very obvious it's central in all he does and says."

Social outreach also is a big part of his life, including the jail ministry he joined in Fairfax County 18 years ago.

Can a former CIA officer work with prisoners? Yes, Patterson said.

"They're appreciative that a person who has done things like that cares about them. It validates the genuine concern for them."

He has hired one former jail inmate who "has become very successful and is still with us."

What about the woman, Terri Wesselman, who helped him fill out the paperwork that won the first contract? About a year later, he married her.

Patterson sees God working in his personal and his professional life.

"He blessed me with the comfort of another person who is my life partner, my encourager and my place of solitude."

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