

By T.C. Anderson

Ronald Lipford Runs One of the Largest Minority-Owned Architectural Firms in Maryland

Ronald Lipford is not your typical architect. He prides himself on working closely with his clients as the owner of Arel Architects, his 11-person architectural firm, and likes to tout the fact that he has one of the largest minority-owned architectural firms in Maryland.

"Society once viewed architects as the arrogant guy with a white shirt and long sleeves rolled up just below the elbows that seemed to know everything about designing and constructing a building," Lipford said at his office in Clinton, Md. "Nothing could have been farther from the truth for the American architect of today."

With clients as diverse as churches, housing complexes, schools, mixed-use commercial structures, as well as local and federal government agencies, Lipford has built up an architectural firm worth \$3 million annual revenue. He continues his goal of maintaining a diverse mix of clients and projects, with revenue expected to reach \$4.25 million this year.

Arel specializes in architectural design, engineering, construction management, interior design and design build services. The firm generates about 75 percent of its revenue from private developers and commercial clients, and 25 percent from government agencies such as the U.S. General Services Administration and the U.S. Navy.

One of his firm's biggest, current projects is a mixed-use building near the Naylor Road Metro stop. The



Ronald Lipford, owner of Arel Architects

170,000 square foot structure will include a bottom floor of retail space, a second floor of office space and the rest will be condos. His firm originally designed a building that would have six floors, but further market analysis indicated that more floors could be supported because of the high need for housing in the area.

While 60-70 percent of the firm's revenue comes from religious and non-profit organizations, less than half of Arel's projects are places of worship. Many churches, through

their non-profit subsidiary, obtain grants to build multifamily housing centers for seniors, community centers and charter schools, which have been Arel's bread and butter during downturns in the economy.

"Churches have become developers for us," Lipford said. "That's really how we got moving and they're a major part of our operation today."

Arel is a 2002 8(a) graduate and has generated government revenue by providing quality architectural and engineering services to the U.S.

General Services Administration with agency relocations. Arel has handled construction management, architectural design and feasibility studies for those projects.

The company was started by Lipford, a Washington, D.C., native, in 1991. He hired three other architects at the time and invested his own personal money to buy technology to help in the design of projects. His inspiration to go into architecture developed in his childhood. He liked working with his hands and was interested in construction, but his parents steered him away from construction and inspired him to go into the structure and design of buildings. He got into drafting in high school and continued to pursue his love of structure.



"People think they can be architects if they have a talent to draw," Lipford said. "But that's just the artistic or communication part of architecture."

Lipford went on to get his architecture degree in 1983 from Hampton University, as well as a construction management certificate from Howard University in 1985 and a certificate from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design for senior citizen planning in 1988.

He spent his first six years upon graduating from Hampton under the mentorship of Robert J. Nash FAIA. He was also an architectural coordinator for the Washington Regional office of McDonald's Corp. In the eight months that Lipford worked in this position, he coordinated special design restaurants in certain geographic areas of the

Washington, D.C. region. At McDonald's Corp., he acquired the valuable business and customer service skills he uses today in his practice.

Having a license to practice architecture is a rarity among minority architects and Lipford discovered it was key if he was going to compete as a professional. African Americans with architecture licenses only make up 1 percent of all licensed architects in the United States, according to Lipford, who is licensed in Washington as well as seven other jurisdictions.

Lipford credits Arel's success to doing smaller projects for two large clients early in the firm's existence. One of its first



projects was converting Shell Oil Co.'s Gas & Go stations into MiniMarts in the early 1990s when architecture firms were downsizing. That one project later turned into the conversion of more than 90 stations over four states. The state of the economy allowed the firm to grow by hiring laid-off architects with high credentials from other firms.

The firm's second big break came when McDonald's Corp., came knocking. The fast-food chain hired Arel Architects to design additions, renovations and new specialty restaurants to more than 150 of its locations in six states.

"One thing I learned you can count on in a bad economy, other than people getting laid off, is that people will continue to buy gas and hamburgers," Lipford said.

He is inspired by projects with large open spaces that force you to turn your head around to get in all the angles. One of his favorite projects is a 2,500-seat sanctuary that was converted from an old Kmart building. The firm took out columns and sloped the floor to create an arts theatre effect.

"The sound will be tremendous," said Lipford. "You will never know that you were in a K-mart."

Lipford expects his firm will continue growing, based on its reputation among the government sector, the religious community, and private and corporate commercial development.