

## **TV Producer Gets Emotional About Entrepreneurs**

**By JOEL RUSSELL - 8/3/2009**

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Nelson Davis grew up in a public housing project near Niagara Falls, N.Y. Even when he was a kid, he wanted to learn how to run a business – but the opportunities to do so in that environment were limited.

Fast forward: Davis grew up to be executive producer of “Making It! Minority Success Stories.” The show, which is taped at KTLA-TV’s studios in Hollywood, has profiled minority-owned entrepreneurs for the last 20 years.

Now, he wants to use the expertise he acquired to inspire entrepreneurship in minority communities. So he recently started the Making It Institute for the Advancement of Business, a non-profit organization that will produce events and research about minority entrepreneurs.

It’s an organization he would’ve wanted to join as a young man. And now, with the recession, he foresees a surge in business startups

“There will be lots of people out of jobs who have thought of starting a company,” he said. “So at least spiritually this is a good time for the institute.”

Minority companies already have plenty of resources to draw upon, ranging from the federal government’s MED Week (Minority Enterprise Development) in Washington, D.C., to local chambers of commerce. Those groups help with the mechanics of business startups – grants, loans and other issues. The Making It Institute will be different because of its focus on what Davis calls the “inner life” of entrepreneurs – their mental and emotional states.

“There are lots of places where small business owners can get the nuts and bolts of writing a business plan, getting licenses and learning how to hire employees,” Davis explained. “Where they don’t get much support is the emotional level. People on our show have talked about being desperate, about going into the backyard and crying because their wife and kids don’t understand them. So I want the institute to cater to the inner life of a business owner.”

Frank Moran, president of Team One Staffing Services in West Los Angeles, and an early subject of a “Making It” episode, agreed that there’s an unfilled need to address entrepreneurial angst.

“There are well-intended people around us, but they don’t connect to the emotions and disciplines necessary to be an entrepreneur,” said Moran, former chairman of business advocacy group the Latin Business Association. “That’s why some experts say if you have a good idea for a business, you shouldn’t tell anybody – they’ll just rain on your parade.”

Harry Pachon, president of the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute at USC, said the minority populations are so large there is still room for more conferences and reports. But fundraising might prove a challenge.

“Getting program support is easy, but getting general administration funds to support your overhead is hard,” Pachon said. “For a startup organization it’s a challenge.”

Corporate sponsors of Davis’ TV show often asked him if “Making It” had a non-profit arm they could support. Davis is talking to former and current sponsors to arrange financial backing for the institute. Corporate sponsors for the show include Honda, Comerica Bank, Southern California Edison and Bank of America.

### **Radio to TV**

Davis was born in Adalusia, Ala., and his family moved to Niagara Falls when he was 3. His father worked as a machine operator in a forgery, moving huge cauldrons of hot metal. But Davis may have inherited his entrepreneurial interest from his stay-at-home mom: She once showed him how to make an extra dollar from some flawed car batteries she found behind a nearby factory by extracting the lead and selling it to a scrap dealer.

However, when he started his career he tried out radio in New York, then came to Los Angeles and worked as a freelance talk show host and producer. In 1980, he joined NBC as director of miniseries and later moved to director of daytime programming.

He started his own production company in 1988 and launched “Making It” the following year. The show airs locally Sunday mornings on KTLA (Channel 5) and in more than 100 local markets.

He said his plans are to reduce the show to once a quarter as he focuses more on the institute, which he said in a sense will bring his career full circle.

“Nobody in my family was in business,” Davis recalled. “Down the street was an African-American store owner, Mr. Fields, and I would pepper him with questions about how he got stuff to sell in his store. Would-be entrepreneurs need to see people who are like them, not necessarily in skin color.”

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