

Building Business: One Block at a Time

Photos by Bernard Grant

Joe Blake, a seasoned businessman, is Chief Executive Officer of the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce (DMCC) and Richard Lewis is President of RTL Networks, a relatively new minority business startup. Blake gets to know Lewis' personal side as well as mentors him on how the DMCC and RTL Networks can join forces to help build the business.

Joe Blake: Where were you born?

Richard Lewis: I was born in Youngstown, Ohio but I was raised up and down the east coast, predominately in New Jersey. I ended up in Colorado when I attended the Air Force Academy.

JB: How did you know you would go to the Air Force Academy? How did you go through that process?

RL: It was kind of interesting... one of my high school teachers put the bug in my ear and after doing research and finding out what a tremendous opportunity and what a remarkable institution it was, I just had it in my mind that's where I was going to go.

JB: After you graduated in 1989, where did you go?

RL: I served ten years active duty in the United States Air Force. My first assignment was at Langley Air Force Base in Hampton, Virginia as a computer programmer. I was a Computer Science major at the Academy so my first assignment was writing code: "C" Programming Language, Unix shell scripting things of that nature.

JB: That's great! From there where did you go?

RL: From Langley, I took an assignment at Kirkland Air Force Base in Albuquerque New Mexico... I spent three years there. Although I didn't have any overseas assignments I was very blessed to have opportunities to travel all over the world... multiple times. I was very fortunate.

JB: Did you stay in cryptology?

RL: There was a cryptology element to it, but I was more communications... software development... networking... satellite and microwave relays. I remember once while deployed to Saudia Arabia. We did some satellite rehomes... both to save the Air Force money and increase band-width to make our systems more capable and productive.

JB: That's great! After the military did you work for a business and decide that you wanted to start your own or did you start your own business right off the bat?

RL: I always had aspirations of one day having my own business that's why I got my

MBA from the College of William and Mary while in the Air Force. And I don't think I mentioned I am now finishing up my second Masters.

JB: No, you did not!! That's great! Where are you getting this degree?

RL: From Colorado Technical University. I am finishing up this week. The degree is in Computer Systems Security.

JB: That is great! Gosh five years ago there was no such animal. You started this company in 1999?

RL: Actually I started it in 2002. My first job out of the military, was with US West in the IT department. I was the Senior Manager in software development. I had over 55 people working for me on various software teams and we were focused on the development of software to make the technicians more efficient and improve the service delivery. This was a time when US West was under fire for service and I'm proud to say a lot of the applications we put together addressed those needs directly. I strategically selected US West as my first job out of the military for two reasons. One, I didn't want culture shock going from the Air Force into a small mom and pop type of startup; nor did I want to be swallowed by some huge company. I joined USWest because it was limited by statute to 14 states, which made it medium-sized and an ideal opportunity to move from the military environment to corporate America without shocking my system too much.

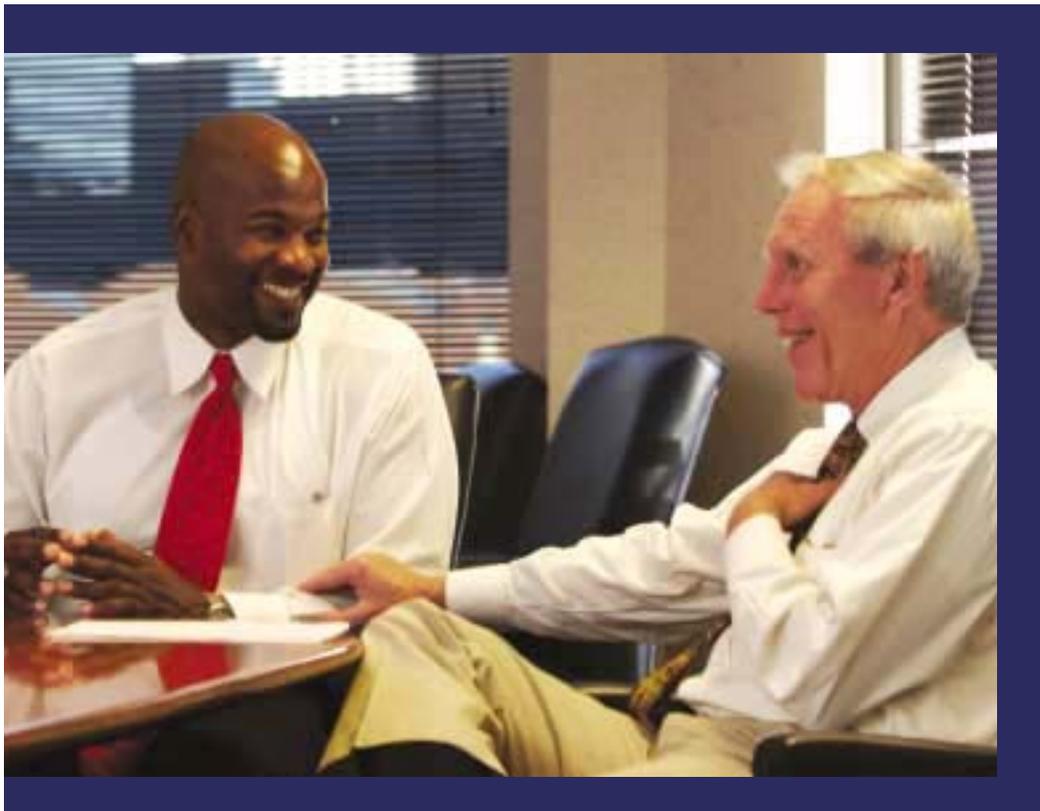
JB: I think it makes great sense. Then you started thinking about starting your own business.

RL: That's correct.

JB: And how did you choose your name?

RL: My name is Richard Lee Lewis, everyone thinks they are my initials. They are close - the Richard and the Lewis part is correct, but the initial "T" is for my son Tyler.

JB: That's great! You and Bruce (Hunter, CEO of CORE) absolutely epitomize what





we were trying to accomplish when we created the Chamber 100, two years ago. The effort was to find young people in their 20's and 30's who were just getting started, who you know were absolutely going to be leaders in this community or in business. It was not a membership development effort, as you know, it's an effort to say here is a fine young person coming along and if they can find a niche through the Chamber - whether it is a culture, political or business niche - and meet other people. This is what the Chamber 100 is designed to accomplish. I am absolutely thrilled that we had 100 people or more who wanted to do this.

RL: The Chamber 100 was all of those things for me because I did have the opportunity to meet these people and form relationships with them, and you're absolutely right these are the future leaders of this community, and the Chamber 100 was a terrific opportunity to position myself to grow with them.

JB: Richard, one of the things we talked about... the Denver Metro Chamber is truly about opportunity and the good news is it's a regional chamber. It reaches into seven counties and is considered to be Colorado's leadership. It is the organization for people to turn to when they want a perspective about business or the business community, or a piece of legislation or a proposal ... this is the organization that they want to be sure to check off with. And we are going to be expanding the experience that you and I had. There was a standing committee at the Chamber dealing with space - trying to pull together some of the larger players in the space industry: Raytheon, Ball Aerospace, Boeing, plus Space Imaging representatives from Colorado Springs, the military and their economic development group, Aurora and their economic development group, the University of Colorado and others.

We used this forum as an opportunity to successfully connect you with one of those companies - Raytheon. We want to expand

this experience in so many areas, particularly with companies like RTL that have revenues in the \$500,000 range and are trying to get revenues up to one million - two million dollars. Taking your experience and connecting with business leadership at a high level with companies that want to start expanding their small suppliers and grow those suppliers into big companies. That's what we want to do! We also want to work with the African American community and women and minority owned businesses. We are committed to do whatever we can to grow these businesses. That's our goal.

RL: If that's your goal, I would say we are a fine example of what you are trying to do, because my company certainly fits your profile. Our revenues this year are in the \$2.4 M range, and we are actively seeking business with some of the companies you mentioned; but, it's very difficult for a young company such as mine to "break in."

JB: That's right!

RL: I have to thank you. Raytheon was one of the companies I was trying to maneuver RTL Networks into for quite a while and a conversation with you made it happen. I mean, after our conversation where I let you know what I was looking to achieve and you were able to leverage the DMCC to create the relationships we needed and give me the opportunity to present to Raytheon. I firmly believe that RTL Networks can assist Raytheon in some way and because of the bridges you built, the doors have been opened and now, we're having the opportunity to show Raytheon what we can do.

JB: Richard I can appreciate that because it's not just about opportunities, it's about relationships and those relationships are built on trust and seeing ways we can help one another. Certainly this was a great opportunity, and you've done very well. You're doing all the things we wanted to see in the Chamber 100 Leadership. The relationships you were building on your own, and then to have this happen was just perfect. I think what you and I are going to do is form this kind of partnership where we're telling everybody this is the way we can grow your business and it is about relationships. Bob Willis and I met with Bonnie Freeman of

the Rocky Mountain Minority Supplier Development Council along with Jenny Virgilio here at the Chamber to begin talking about how Bonnie can grow her membership or list of companies who want to participate in the kind of thing you and I did spontaneously. That's an example of how we can reach out and help.

RL: I firmly believe that you and the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce are genuinely interested in helping companies like mine grow. All RTL Networks needed was an opportunity to present and show what we can do. You have assisted me with that, and I thank you. I would love to see other businesses taking advantage of this same kind of assistance through the Chamber 100, the Chamber itself, as well as the Small Business Development Centers.

Chamber 100 Program

The Chamber 100 is a unique group that consists of young up-and-coming executives that the Chamber sees as the next generation of Denver business leadership. This exclusive program provides young professionals with the opportunity to gain an inside view of the various programs of the Chamber including economic development, public affairs, leadership programs, small business development and more. Chamber 100 members will also have the opportunity to interact with members of the Chamber Board of Directors. Participants also enjoy several networking opportunities at exciting locations within the Denver Metro area.