



All-Woman Shipping Company Sets Sail

by Karen Miller

Beverlyn Grissom blames her latest business venture on the toy companies. "Maybe if Barbie had had her own ship I wouldn't have needed to do this. I've always wanted to own my own ship," she says. And by ship Grissom does not mean a 20-foot cruiser to take out for a weekend of fishing. She has set her sights on something larger. Grissom and her partners, Michelle Bunting and New Jersey State Senator Diane Allen, have recently opened the first all-woman ocean shipping corporation in the history of the United States.

"I got told no a lot, Grissom says of her lifelong fascination with ships and shipping. But getting told no has only made her work harder to obtain her dreams. Her company, Camden Shipping Corporation, opened earlier this year. To honor the event, the South Jersey chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) is hosting a celebration, "Changing the Face of Maritime," on Friday, September 17, at 4:30 p.m. The event takes place at the Battleship New Jersey on the Camden Waterfront, across the Delaware River from Philadelphia's Penns Landing. Expected to attend are Congressman Rob Andrews, Congressman Jim Saxton, and Joseph Balzano, CEO of South Jersey Port Corporation. Cost: \$45. for NAWBO members, \$100 for non-members. Call 856-893-9595.

It has taken Grissom a number of years and what would seem to be a roundabout path to reach her goal. "I get asked a lot how an African-American woman became interested in shipping and maritime law," she says. "Growing up in East Orange, I was surrounded by water and by ships. I was always fascinated." Her interest took her first to Rutgers University, where she received her bachelors degree, and then to Tulane University in New Orleans, where she obtained a degree in law as

well as a maritime law certificate. She was attracted to Tulane because of its maritime program, which, she says, is one of the best in the country.

After graduating she quickly realized that earning a living in maritime law would be difficult, if not impossible. "An African-American woman and maritime law are kind of like an oxymoron, and I had my education to pay for," she says. "I got opportunities like doing vessel documentation in Liberia."

Returning to New Jersey, she went to work for the state and met former acting governor Don DiFrancesco. "He's the first person who told me I should own my own business," she says. "It has taken me about nine years to come full circle."

In her work as an aide to the state Senate Education Committee she also met Allen, who is now the chief financial officer for Camden Shipping Corporation. Her work with the education committee also inspired Grissom to launch her first business venture, Mercer County Children's Medical Daycare in Hamilton.

"My work with the committee led me to realize we had a need for a program that combined preschool with healthcare for children with special healthcare needs," she explains. The center, which works with low-income families and employs 50 people, was co-founded with Bunting, one of her partners in Camden Shipping Corporation. "Michelle has a vast experience in running multi-million dollar corporations," she says.

While children's healthcare and commercial shipping may seem unrelated, Grissom doesn't think so. The business was, in fact, one of her first steps in realizing her dream of owning her own shipping company. "People aren't just going to hand me a ship and a contract unless I have proved I can manage a business," she explains. "A ship is essentially a floating office filled with employees. There are many things



women are doing shore-side that are applicable to what goes on on a ship."

Her visits to the Camden waterfront helped her newest business venture. "I would visit the docks in Camden and see all this waterfront traffic passing by between Baltimore and Philadelphia and I thought, "Why can't some of that traffic stop here?" In opening her shipping company in Camden she hopes to stimulate more economic development along Camden's waterfront.

Camden Shipping Corporation opened earlier this year and is currently looking for partnerships with other maritime companies. "There are a lot of opportunities for minority companies," says Grissom. "You can charter a ship and operate it just as if you had built it yourself."

Many areas of shipping are rife with commercial potential. Her company is interested in barge routes and in commercial shipping. "Almost every company in the world uses ships to move things to its customers' doors every day," she says. But what interests Grissom the most is a contract with the Navy. "The Navy has a lot of contracts available with civilian mariners. Subsidies from the government have been available for years, ever since 1936 when the government realized it needed to help maintain a viable merchant marine," says Grissom. "Title 11 subsidies are available," she says, "and I'll be the first person to step up for them."

The maritime industry is still a rough, tough business for women in general, says Grissom, but her years of preparation have paid off and she is now ready to play with the big boys.