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**Executive of the Month: Geska, president of US Ceiling Corp.  
– Focused, driven and thrives in a fast-paced environment**

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Melissa Geska,  
US Ceiling Corp.

Webster, NY The New York Real Estate Journal conducted a question and answer session with Melissa Geska, president of US Ceiling Corp.

Q: So you're a Rochester, N.Y. native?

A: I was born in Chili, N.Y., and raised in Rochester's 19th Ward. My father emigrated to the U.S. from Jamaica with \$16 to his name. During my childhood, he was a school principal, owned and renovated many properties, and also owned several gas stations and ice cream stores. He made Rochester his home because it was a great community to raise a family and the educational system was optimal.

Q: How did you get started in construction?

A: Twenty years ago, I was helping my husband Ed prepare estimates and review contracts on a part-time basis. At that time, I was an office manager for a manufacturers' rep in the semiconductor industry. One of my husband's clients educated us about the opportunities for minority and woman-owned firms in New York State. I did the research and agreed to fully dedicate myself to the construction industry. This meant I had to seek education in business and legal matters, as well as technical training in blueprint reading, estimating (including digital) and quality control. It was important for me to be involved in as many aspects of the business to show I was performing a commercially useful function in my role as president.

Geska (pictured left) accepts NYS' Carey Gabay Excellence and Innovation Award for M/WBEs during the opening ceremony of this year's M/WBE Forum in Albany.

Q: What industry challenges do you face as a minority and woman-owned business enterprise?

A: It has been challenging to overcome ignorance and bias. At the start, many assumed I was a "front" for my husband and not a legitimate principal of the business. I felt at times I had to work twice as hard as my male counterparts to demonstrate my technical competencies. There are also inherent differences in how men and women communicate. In a male-dominated industry, I've had to work very hard to craft my approach and communication style to conduct business. My natural tendencies of clear documentation and transparency are not always well received. I've also found that many individuals are resistant to change and resentful of a process that forces them to stretch beyond their comfort zones. Many individuals prefer to utilize their "buddies" on a project and are resentful when a project's participation goals require them to work with others.

Q: Do you consider yourself an entrepreneur?

A: I absolutely consider myself an entrepreneur. “The thrill of the kill” is in my blood! I am focused and driven, and thrive in a fast-paced, fluid environment. I’m also nimble and enjoy seeking out new growth opportunities and seeing them come to fruition. Entrepreneurship is not for everyone. It takes a special person to want to assume a high level of risk. There are long hours and many burdens to bear. Some people prefer a comfortable life with set hours and repetition of tasks. One of the challenges of being an entrepreneur is learning that not everyone on your team has that mentality. It’s important to create an environment where all types of people feel comfortable, secure and that their contributions are valuable. Sometimes I need to slow myself down to recognize and foster that.

Geska teaches Rochester Urban League YouthBuild program participants about blueprint reading and skilled trades opportunities.

Q: What have you learned from being an entrepreneur?

A: I’ve learned that I am resilient and capable. I’ve had many failures in my life. When facing and pushing through a point of failure, it felt like I might not survive. It felt like the sky was falling and that all hope was lost. At that point, I learned I had to pull myself up and just take another step forward. Moving forward one step at a time gets you to a point of reflection, where you can assess the lessons you’ve learned and the experiences that shape who you are. That point of reflection is critical for growth to happen. I’ve also learned to surround myself with smarter people and to shut up and listen!

Q: Tell us about US Ceiling Corp.

A: I am most proud of the heart of US Ceiling Corp. My husband and I, over the last 17 years, have been blessed to have team members that give all they have to contribute to something great. These individuals are proud of their work and proud to be a part of something bigger than themselves. We have thrived over the years because of the talents, team work, camaraderie, generosity and the willingness of our employees to give it their all in the face of adversity. We home in on positive pursuits with a laser focus. US Ceiling Corp is a family of the most diverse individuals possible. For our clients, we represent all the greatness that is possible when diversity is at the forefront. We take that responsibility very seriously. We are different and celebrate our differences every single day. I’ve witnessed team members passionately defend another team member when facing the ugliness of ignorance and prejudice. While celebrating our diversity and delivering excellence to our clients, we are changing minds and elevating the possibilities of our industry.

Q: Who inspires you?

A: I’m inspired by individuals that put the needs of others above their own. Those everyday citizens that are serving great causes with great personal sacrifice; gratitude and humility personified while serving their communities. I respect our military, teachers, community leaders, nurses, doctors and first responders. For them, it is so much more than a job and they deserve our deepest respect and

appreciation.

Q: How do you unwind?

A: My husband and I love to cook together and spend time with our son. We also enjoy live music, traveling, long walks and snuggling with our dogs.

Q: Recommended reading?

A: "Becoming" by Michelle Obama.

Q: If you weren't president of US Ceiling Corp?

A: I would be a business attorney with my MBA.

Q: What characteristics do you value?

A: Gratitude—I'm grateful for the opportunities I have been afforded and the ability to impact the lives of others and passionately pursue what I love.

Humility—I am humbled by the respect I feel for our team and our collective efforts. I recognize I have something new to learn every single day. I will never ask someone to do something I am not willing to do myself.

Honesty—I passionately pursue TRUTH above all else. Truth in my promises, truth in my commitments and truth in being my most authentic self.

Ambition—I strive to learn and be better every single day. I have much to contribute and I'm energized by the climb.

Curiosity—I strive to find a better way to accomplish all tasks throughout my day. I'm committed to learning and adapting for greater efficiency and better outcomes.

Q: Most important lesson learned in business.

A: The purpose for my business is to provide a platform to serve and help others. I am here to serve the needs of our clients, our employees and their families. I'm just an instrument to show God's grace and mercy.

Q: What advice would you give your younger self?

A: Focus your energy on positive pursuits at all times. Ask yourself: Does this person, action, choice or opportunity serve a greater good or elevate me? If not, choose another path.

Q: What's next?

A: US Ceiling Corp will be the most respected framing, drywall and acoustical contractor in New York State and will leverage its success to do more great things in our community for people in need.

New York Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540