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## Huntsville Center engineers have Strong mentor

**HUNTSVILLE, Ala.** -- For Huntsville native William Strong, 1972 was a tumultuous year, as it was for many blacks living in Alabama.

However, there was a silver lining to the dark cloud of racial tension still evident in the Deep South. It was the year he began working at what was then Huntsville Division.

“I really didn’t know what I was getting into when I joined the Corps,” Strong said. “I’d heard something about a group of engineers from Mobile District opening up a Huntsville office in 1967 to support a Ballistic Defense program, but I really didn’t know much about the organization.”

Strong said what he didn’t know is that accepting the job would change his entire life.

He always had an interest in building things. Somehow he always knew that when he grew up he wanted to become an engineer. As a student at the Mount Lebanon Junior High in Toney, and the William Councill Training School in Normal, he always participated in science fairs, submitting radios, telegraphs and other electronic devices he built. After he graduated high school in 1966, Strong said he held tightly to this dream.

However, his plans were put on hold when he was drafted into the Army the same year. After basic training and advanced technical training, Strong served a 12-month tour in Vietnam.

Serving in the military wasn’t a big setback for Strong. Assigned to an artillery unit there, he worked with munitions. Strong found his ability to put things together helped him excel in his job. His experience in Vietnam left him disabled and by 1969, he was out of the service and seeking resources to help him get his college education.

“I was sure about what I wanted to do after I came back from Vietnam – I wanted to become an engineer,” Strong said. “So I immediately enrolled in the engineering program at the Alabama Agriculture & Mechanical University in Normal, Ala. I was finally on my way towards an engineering career.”

Strong soon found things were hard for the engineering students at the school.

“It wasn’t always easy for African-Americans in Alabama,” Strong said. “It becomes even harder when you’re trying to become an engineer.

“We had limited opportunities to get into training programs to gain some experience because we were in a program at a historically black college or university. There were others who felt that we just weren’t smart enough to do engineering work.”

Nevertheless, things changed for Strong when he entered his junior year at the school. His professor told him about a part-time job in engineering with the federal government that was a paid cooperative education position.

Although reluctant because he wanted to open his own electronics shop, he decided to interview for the job. “I saw the job as an opportunity to work in the engineering field,” he said.

His first position at Huntsville Division was as a cooperative education student in the Electrical Section of the Engineering Directorate. He worked in this student position from 1972-74. After completing his undergraduate study,

he began performing engineering work, being utilized as an electrical engineer, working with power, instrumentation and controls engineer, respectively.

Strong said he still recalls his early years as a young engineering professional. His taking the job at Huntsville Division was a great move for him because he's worked on some of the most difficult design programs at the organization, ranging from Ordnance and Explosive facilities, Chemical Demilitarization, Medical Facilities, and Range and Land Training Program for more than 40 years.

Strong said in the early days of his employment, there were limited opportunities for training. He soon found someone to mentor him and fill that gap. William Dewitt, an electrical engineer at Huntsville Division, became Strong's first mentor and even more, a great friend. The two worked together on projects from 1975-87. Dewitt taught Strong engineering principles and designs that he still uses today.

Remarkably, the mentorship didn't end when Dewitt left Huntsville Division to teach in the Engineering Department at Purdue University. Dewitt taught at the school for more than three decades, all the while continuing to advise Strong. That's why Strong believes finding a good mentor is very important for success at Huntsville Center.

"I am forever grateful to Bill for taking the time to mentor me," Strong said.

"Although he and I were from different races, he was my friend and like a brother to me," he said. "Having him on my side was especially important for me because during that time I had to challenge the system to even be classified as an engineer."

The first black engineer hired at Huntsville Division, Fred Dorsey, also became a close confidante of Strong's. Strong said he admired Dorsey, but said it was very difficult for Dorsey to mentor him because he didn't have a lot of time due to the heavy workload. However, the two formed a great working relationship in spite of this limitation.

"Fred and I could relate to one another because we were the only two African-American employees in the engineering group at the time," Strong said.

"It was good that I could go to him when I needed someone to talk to, especially when conflict arose within our organization," he said.

"I've seen a number of African-American engineers come to this organization and leave after a short time because they thought it was difficult to work here and obtain upward mobility. I chose to stay to help others."

Strong was also eager to pass along the training that was given him early in his career. During the late 1970s, his supervisor asked him to work with new cooperative education and engineering students teaching them electrical engineering principles and design.

"I liked to mentor, and it was very rewarding for me," Strong said.

Strong said the mentoring process never ends and there is always something left for an individual to do that makes a difference in the future work force. He said he knows this is why he ended up at Huntsville Division more than 42 years ago. Getting the opportunity to mentor and train new engineers is the one thing that touched him most during his career.

Eldric Jefferson, one of eight blacks working as Center engineers, said upon arriving at the Center as a cooperative education student, he was mentored by Strong in 1995.

New to the federal government employment system, Jefferson was grateful Strong took him under his wing. Jefferson said, amazingly, Strong has trained a majority of the engineers working at the Center.

"William Strong is a great role model and mentor," Jefferson said.

“He worked at the Center when things were very difficult for minorities. I can’t imagine how much of a struggle it was for him during that time. Because of his efforts, engineers like me who have worked in the Center within the past 20 years have had a very positive experience working here.”

Although Strong retired from the federal government in 2008, he’s returned to the Center as a rehired annuitant to help out in Engineering Directorate.

“I enjoyed myself when I retired, spending time with my wife and two sons,” Strong said. “But I have to admit, I missed being involved in some type of engineering work, mentoring college students and promoting diversity in the workplace. These are my passions.”

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