

Teaera Strum

COO

Strum Contracting

In seven years as COO, Teaera Strum has turned Strum Contracting into one of the most sought-after entities in Maryland construction. Over this period of time, the company has grown from five to 25 employees, and from a 1,200-square-foot office to a sprawling 20,000 square-foot facility. Strum Contracting has benefitted from the presence of Jane Addams Resource Corporations (JARC) in the Baltimore community, which has trained new and existing employees, further adding to productivity.

“I found out that JARC was opening their second site in Baltimore through a guy named Jim Earlbeck who runs Earlbeck Gases & Technologies,” recalled Strum. “He’s very well known in the welding industry here in Maryland.” After going to a meeting with Earlbeck, Strum fell in love with what JARC was trying to achieve. It was that moment she committed herself to helping the program make Baltimore its permanent home. As she became more aware of JARC’s focus on underserved and chronically unemployed communities, Strum became more involved. When JARC Baltimore graduated its first cohort of students, Strum Contracting was the first employer to hire from the program. JARC was not only a match made in heaven for Strum Contracting, it was a dream come true for Strum herself, who was looking for a way to create an in-house program for her company to train and employ those in underserved areas.

“I was looking to see how we could develop some type of program where we could help people learn how to weld and change the trajectory of their life,” explained Strum. “Since the city of Baltimore has a high unemployment rate, teaching skills that can feed their

family and eat for the rest of their lives was my goal.” Her thinking was that in Maryland, learning welding is a skill and certification that someone could pick up in a matter of weeks. In a short timeframe, a potential welder can go from making minimum wage or less, to making \$20 to \$22 an hour. In the heavy civil construction sector that Strum works in, welders can make \$27 to \$32 an hour on some projects. Strum knew from her previous position that a program that utilizes a person’s skill set and provides people with a way to better themselves could be successful.

“I come from the sports industry, specifically the National Collegiate Athletic Association. Towards the end of my career there, I was doing program development and evaluation within a department called student athlete development,” described Strum. “Essentially, it’s working with student athletes to discuss next steps in their careers, as making it to the professional level isn’t always feasible for most.” Her role with the NCAA was to help students use their education for their next act in life by giving them the tools to take their short-term opportunity which came through sports, and propel them forward to their post-sports career. When Strum transitioned into heavy civil construction, the idea of creating something similar, but for the less fortunate in her community, seemed like a no-brainer.



“Welding has low barriers to get in, doesn’t cost a lot, and you’re not repaying Sallie Mae,” Strum explained. “It’s a skill set that you can always use and it’s in demand.” With JARC, she saw a program that was already doing what she envisioned setting up, which allowed Strum Contracting to be at the forefront of change in these underserved communities. Strum knew her company was going to grow in the future, and needed a program like JARC to provide the talent pool necessary to sustain that growth.

Strum is currently serving as a JARC Board Member, and has since become the President of their Industry Advisory Council, along with a representative from Earlbeck Gases & Technologies.

Although Strum’s father started the company 33 years ago, it never crossed her mind that she would end up leading a heavy civil construction firm. “If you had told me eight years ago that I would be working for Strum Contracting, I would have said, there’s no way, you’re lying,” she laughed. “But I fell in love with the workforce development opportunities and the chance to provide livable wages that can change peoples’ lives.” She said learning the business and construction side of the company was easy. Strum always had an awareness of what her father did for a living, but was not aware of the legacy her father had growing up.

“I remember he used to get up at three, four in the morning, go to work and come home late. I knew that he worked on bridges and pipelines, but back then I really didn’t understand how impactful that work was,” explained Strum. “I didn’t know he’s actually a legend in this industry until I started working in it.”

Now, Strum and her sister Kerra, a Senior Project Manager at Strum Contracting, are continuing their father’s legacy, while playing a pivotal role in Baltimore’s economic development.