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Johnson Controls exec connects with all walks of life: Grady Crosby



SCOTT PAULUS

Grady Crosby...“The companies that do better are the companies that have a wider array of diverse talent.”

DAN SHAFER
Milwaukee Business Journal

Finding opportunities for more diversity and inclusion is a theme that has followed Grady Crosby through his career.

Today, he’s putting his passion to work as chief diversity officer and vice president of public affairs at Johnson Controls, where he’s involved in making the company more inclusive, leading its diversity initiatives around the world, and

finding ways to bring in talented people from different backgrounds.

“The companies that do better are the companies that have a wider array of diverse talent, because that diverse talent typically doesn’t operate in what we call ‘group-think,’” he said. “If we can make our doors open and attractive to all walks of life, we have a much better chance of competing successfully (and) winning in a global, diverse marketplace.”

From early on, Crosby connected

with people from different walks of life.

A native of North Carolina, he went to college on a football scholarship at Howard University in Washington, D.C. There, he developed an interest in behind-the-scenes work on Capitol Hill, and studied under Ron Walters, who ran the 1984 campaign for Rev. Jesse Jackson.

He also interned for famously conservative North Carolina Sen. Jesse Helms, the “polar opposite”

of Jackson, said Crosby. He later worked for Democratic North Carolina Gov. Jim Hunt.

“If you could get rid of the political hats they wore and get to a personal level, you would find that Sen. Helms and Gov. Hunt were two of the nicest gentlemen you could work for,” said Crosby.

After graduating from the Wake Forest University School of Law and working for five years at Raleigh, N.C.-based Poyner Spruill LLP, Crosby worked at Hanesbrands Inc. as an in-house attorney for 16 years. There, he handled international legal work, and came to a realization.

“Basic humanity is basic humanity,” he said. “No matter where you were, from Vietnam to North Carolina, people still had concerns about their jobs, their families, their friends and their relationships. At some level, you can always find an opportunity to connect.”

With Hanes and later with Johnson Controls, when he took a “leap of faith” to move north to Milwaukee, Crosby enjoyed working as an in-house attorney.

“It’s like having an all-star client as your main client,” he said. “If you have a client as big as a \$4 billion company like Hanesbrands, or a \$40 billion company like Johnson Controls, there are complexities and rich legal work that comes up in guiding those legal teams.”

Crosby, who joined Johnson Controls in 2011, officially became chief diversity officer at Johnson Controls following the retirement of Chuck Harvey in 2014. But even before then, he had discussions with legal executives at the company, including Jerry Okarma, about diversity.

“(We were) trying to identify reasons why our in-house department here at Johnson Controls was not more diverse,” he said, adding that it led to honest, constructive con-

versations about things that could be done in the law department.

Crosby also is active on this topic outside Johnson Controls. He’s part of the Wisconsin State Bar Diversity & Inclusion Oversight Committee, looking to make the profession more diverse.

“(We are) looking at this issue of the absence of a minority professional middle class in Milwaukee,” he said. “Some of those great manufacturing positions left, and it left us without a viable minority middle class. That’s one thing I noticed when I got to Milwaukee. It seemed like for African-Americans, they were either doing really well or not doing so well.”

Crosby also plays an important role in corporate citizenship in the city of Milwaukee as president of the Johnson Controls Foundation. One key initiative Crosby noted is that the foundation has “adopted” three northwest side neighborhoods – Westlawn, Havenwoods and Thurston Woods. Since the civil unrest in August, the foundation has also reached out to groups in Sherman Park.

“We think it is our job, and we’ve called on the entire corporate community to . . . do their part,” he said.

Issues of diversity and inclusiveness and how they relate both to the workplace itself and to the city in which a company is based are complex. But, says Crosby, there are ways to address these issues in a meaningful way.

“Part of the solution is exposure,” he said. “As people are exposed to people other than themselves and neighborhoods other than (their own), they begin to develop some understanding of who these people are. From that understanding you can develop some respect. And that really is what starts to build some bridges.”

► CLOSER LOOK

GRADY CROSBY

Title: Vice president of public affairs, chief diversity officer; president of the Johnson Controls Foundation

Company: Johnson Controls

Family: Wife, Monique; son, Trey, a second-year law school student at Marquette University

Education: Bachelor’s degree from Howard University; law degree, Wake Forest University School of Law

Age: 50

Resides: Downtown Milwaukee

Toughest decision: “For every ‘yes’ that we make on the foundation side, there are probably 20 ‘no’s.’ The toughest decisions are when we say ‘no’ to groups that are doing great things in our community.”

Like best about your job: “That I get a chance to do good. . . I’m really living the dream.”

Local organizations: Greater Milwaukee Committee, Marcus Center for Performing Arts, Black Arts Think Tank, Schools That Can Milwaukee, Visit Milwaukee, Milwaukee County Zoo, Wisconsin State Bar, United Way

Pastimes: Golf, singing with Johnson Controls band Total Control, church and church leadership, watching sports

First job: Unofficially — DJ in an arcade at age 14; officially — busboy at a steakhouse

Favorite words of wisdom:

“My mantra is that if you have an opportunity to do good, you need to do so.”

What’s playing on your car stereo? Sirius NFL Radio

Role models: “My father passed away in 2004, but he was a great role model to me. He wasn’t a person who received formal education. This man had two full-time jobs when I grew up, and worked 16 hours a day . . . 80 hours a week. And he did it for 40 years.” (Crosby’s father was a medic in World War II and became a certified nurse assistant.)