

Entrepreneur

BEST & *Brightest*

NAWBO 2005 Rising Star, Memuna Williams

MEMUNA WILLIAMS WAS BORN IN EDMONTON, CANADA, WHERE her parents, natives of Sierra Leone, West Africa, were living at the time. Adept at language from an early age, Williams was accepted to double major in French and English literature at Concordia University in Montreal, but switched to the translation program. "It turned out to be a great fit. I loved it from the beginning, and have been doing it ever since," Williams says. After completing her undergraduate degree, Williams became a freelance translator, and took a position with Canadian Pacific Railway as a French-English translator. Seven years later, she went to New York to further her career. Williams moved to Charlotte in September 2000, when her husband, Victor (also a native of Sierra Leone), accepted an offer from Wachovia.

In 2004, Williams and her sister, Isata Jones-Stanley, launched Avantgarde Translations, a business-to-business language service that provides multilingual translation, revision, editing, proofreading and cultural consulting with a focus on accounting, advertising, banking, communication, immigration, law and marketing. Avantgarde's clients include Baker Furniture, Bowne Global Solutions, the French American Chamber of Commerce, Geotext and the National Bank of Canada.

Given that the founding partners — and only employees — are in two different physical locations (Jones-Stanley is in Mississauga, Canada) they had to establish a shared technology platform. The server is also home to a new accounting system. To fund these initiatives, Williams and Jones-Stanley have reinvested their earnings into what they see as important building blocks for the company. In the past two years, they have designed a Web site and developed branding and marketing materials. Their next goals are to locate financing for further development and hire employees. Here are Williams' thoughts on her company, life in Charlotte and the future.

Today's Charlotte Woman: What is the importance of an organization like NAWBO and what does winning the Rising Star award mean to you?

Memuna Williams: NAWBO is important because it provides businesswomen a place to go for support and sustenance. I am continuously trying to improve as a businesswoman. NAWBO helps me do that through the inspirations I find every time I find myself among its members. Winning the NAWBO Rising Star award has been a huge confidence booster for me. I think that I am being told that I am on the right path, and that if I continue, I will do well. It also helps keep me grounded. I still have a lot of work ahead of me.

TCW: Growing up, who were your role models?

MW: My father was my biggest role model and inspiration. He was from a small town in Sierra Leone, and did not start school until he was 12. Even with that disadvantaged start, he went on to earn a Ph.D. in English lit-

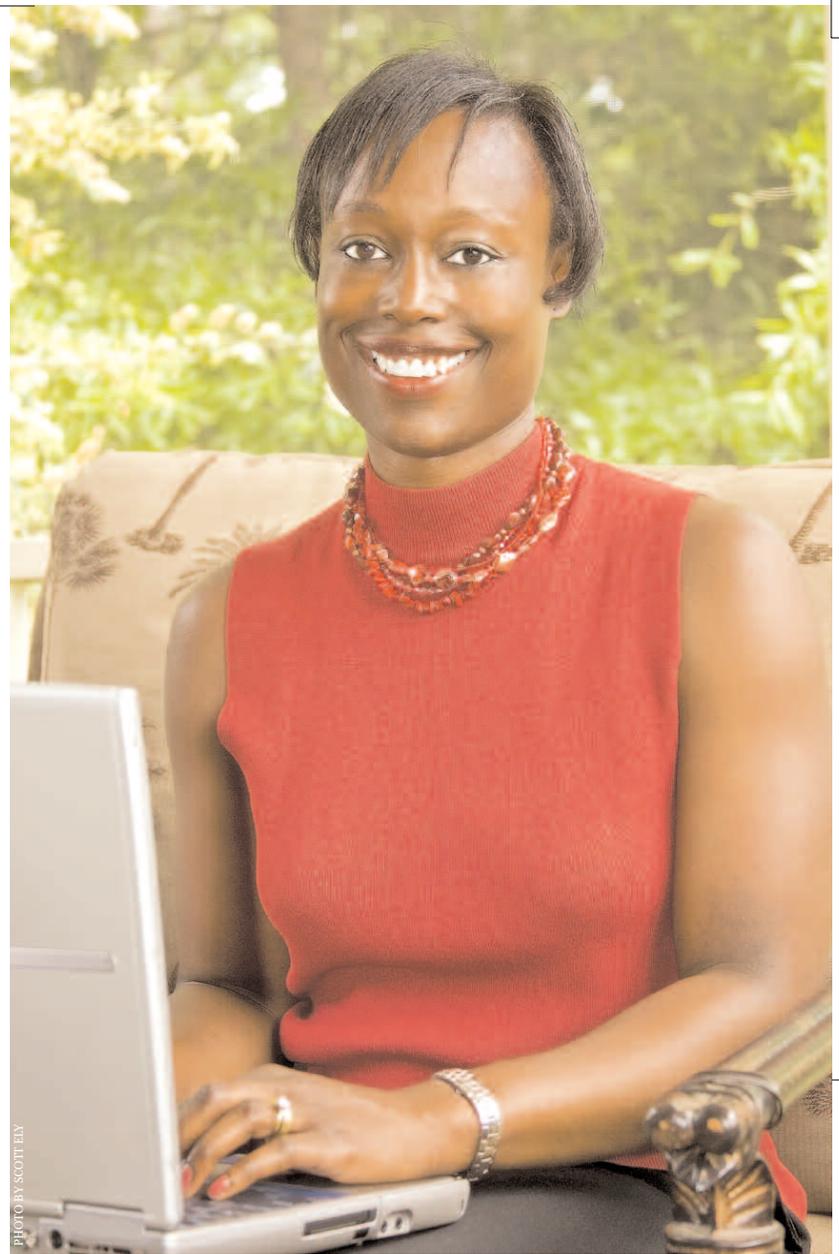


PHOTO BY SCOTT LEY

erature at the University of Alberta. He served Sierra Leone as its ambassador to Germany and the Benelux countries, then returned to Sierra Leone, and continued to work in public service as an elected official. When he was in politics, he spent nearly every weekend in the area where he was born. He helped bring education and improved the lives of the people there.

TCW: Who were your mentors, personally and professionally?

MW: My friends and family have been my closest mentors. I've been able to talk to them and watch what makes them successful, and apply those

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— Memuna Williams

lessons [to my own career]. My formal mentor is Jonathan Hine, a professor at James Madison University in Virginia. He was extremely generous in teaching me how to present myself successfully as a translator, and still refers work to me. Early in my career, I was lucky to work with a group of outstanding professionals at Canadian Pacific. My colleagues in the translation department had a great work ethic.

TCW: What obstacles did you have to overcome to establish your business, and what do you see as the biggest challenge to continued success?

MW: The biggest obstacle to establishing the business is gaining trust in the marketplace. Getting the company name known and keeping people aware of it will be the biggest challenge to continued success.

TCW: Has being a woman had any effect on your success?

MW: I have not found it harder to be successful in my career because I am a woman. I think that people appreciate it if you have passion for what you do, and work hard and produce.

TCW: What are the pluses and minuses of having your business in Charlotte?

MW: I think Charlotte is a great city for women business owners. Businesswomen here are regularly recognized throughout the community. Charlotte is also wonderfully family friendly, which is really important for women with families who are developing their careers. We have three sons, ages 8, 5 and 1. Charlotte is a wonderful place for networking and getting to know people; it is a community that is growing and becoming more diverse. The minuses are that it is still much smaller and less international than places like Washington, D.C., and New York that are perfectly suited for the translation business.

TCW: Where do you see your company headed?

MW: Right now, we are continuing to build our internal resources and operations, and are actively working on marketing initiatives. My vision for the future of the company from the beginning has been that we will become a respected name and leader in the translation industry.

TCW: What is your source of inspiration?

MW: I enjoy studying successful people to see what they have done, and see if I can apply lessons from their lives to mine. Public figures are easy to watch, but I also look at the people in my immediate surroundings. In past work situations, if someone was doing particularly well, I would look to them for lessons on how to conduct myself differently, and enjoy the rewards of their approach to things.

TCW: What does power mean to you?

MW: With power comes responsibility. If a person has power, it should be used wisely.

TCW: Under what circumstances do you maximize your capabilities, assuring success, making everyone, including yourself, happy?

MW: I'm happy, and everyone else is, too, when things are well planned and organized and get done without prompting or having to be rushed.

TCW: Sometimes our greatest strengths are also our weaknesses. Do you have one quality that has a positive and negative spin?

MW: I am very detail-oriented in my work. This means that my translations are well done, and that is a good thing. But there is a temptation to be a perfectionist if you're detail-oriented, and I've had to learn where to draw the line over the years. Striving for perfection can be a convenient excuse for never finishing projects.

TCW: Can you remember a belief, value or opinion you once had that you've done an about-face on? What changed your mind?

MW: I used to believe that age or seniority automatically conferred authority. I faced failure with that attitude, and learned that respect is earned by what you do.

TCW: Hindsight is 20/20, but if there were one thing you wished you'd learned sooner, what would it be?

MW: I would say that in hindsight, the little things really do matter — being patient, saying “please” and “thank you,” remembering a birthday. These are things I try to do more nowadays.

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TCW: What advice do you have for women who might want to follow in your career footsteps?

MW: I would advise a woman who is thinking about starting her own business to be aware of the multiple hats she has to wear. As Michael Gerber says in the *E-myth Revisited*, “Any business owner must be a technician, an entrepreneur and a manager.” Second, given the first piece of advice, I would advise them to delegate, delegate, delegate. With everything there is to do in a business, more will get done if you can rely on others. Third, delegate, but delegate responsibly by setting expectations and demanding accountability. Abdicating your responsibility in passing on duties can lead to undesirable results.

TCW: What are the best and worst parts of your job?

MW: I really enjoy having overall responsibility for everything and the challenge of thinking through problems, brainstorming, and working with others to find solutions to the issues that need to be resolved. Having responsibility for everything is also the worst part of my job. It can be difficult to coordinate everything and everyone needed to get things done, and sometimes it is hard to say if a decision was the right one.

TCW: How do you balance your personal life with the pressures of your job?

MW: My husband and I try to be flexible with our busy schedules to support each other, and rely on a network of baby sitters to help out with the boys.

TCW: Do you have a motto/mantra/what it's all about?

MW: I think that it is all about people. It is about the people you know — family, friends, colleagues. It is also about people you don't know. For those people, you can have a direct impact by doing something for them they need, or an indirect impact by being a role model. **TCW**