



A NO-CHARGE Internet kiosk they helped set up at a Roxbury bus station is one way that Derek and Alexis Brooks have developed one of the most promising African-American-owned companies in the Boston area.

Derek Brooks was a fourth-grader in Teaneck, New Jersey, when he launched his first business, a travel agency for kids. Each day at recess, he would set up a table in the school hallway, where he displayed brochures for Jamaica, Aruba, and other destinations he'd visited with his parents. For 50 cents apiece, Brooks sold his classmates make-believe vacations to the Caribbean, complete with canceled plane tickets from his family's travels. As a bonus, he'd throw in real tickets to a Broadway show (his parents belonged to a theater discount program and couldn't use them all).

"The kids would come back into school and say, 'You know what? My parents really loved that show!'" recalls Brooks, who in 1981 moved to Massachusetts to attend Tufts University, where he played on the football and baseball teams. He chuckles, then his expression turns serious. "The thing is, I was thinking like an entrepreneur when I was just 7 or 8 years old. I was essentially doing what I'm doing now."

Now is some 30 years later, with a telecommunications wire and cable company called Inside Cable Inc. that Derek and his wife, Alexis, launched in the winter of 2001 from their kitchen table in Lexington. In less than three years, the couple has pushed their firm — one of the few African-American-owned tel-data infrastructure companies in the Boston market — to the cusp of big things, attracting such heavy-hitter supporters as Senator Edward Kennedy, Mayor Thomas Menino, and the TJX Cos. and landing key contracts with the Democratic National Convention Committee headquarters and the John Kerry for President offices, both on State Street.

Boston's parochial business community is notoriously tough to crack for anyone, never mind for African-Americans, but the Brookses — Derek has a law degree and worked as an engineer; Alexis ran her own marketing firm — have a preternatural stamina for networking. Though the federal government and some private corporations set aside a percentage of contracts for minority vendors, the couple sees it as their job to reach out.

"Everywhere I go — and I'm everywhere in the city — they are there," says Tina Andrews, president of the New England Minority Supplier Development Council, which certifies minority-owned enterprises. "They have met with every single person . . . every single company. They're doing it right."

"Our motto is leverage everything!" says Alexis Brooks, who sets their rigorous schedule of industry and community events. "That's how any business grows, but especially as a minority and being new." Still, they're exhausted, personally and financially. Without an influx of capital soon, the company will die.

Walk into a room with them, and it's easy to see why this couple is making such a splash. Alexis, 41, is a former model who attended Lexington schools as a Metco student before her parents moved there and, later, Northeastern University. She stands close to 6 feet tall in heels, with black hair cascading

down her well-dressed shoulders. Warm and affectionate, she talks fast and has a politician's memory for faces, names, and connections. Her mother, Anna L. Fisher, was a pioneer in public-school education in Boston to whom Menino dedicated a media center at East Boston High School.

Derek, 40, is quieter than his wife, with a dry sense of humor. He tops 6 feet and has the broad build of an athlete (he was drafted by the Phillies after Tufts but quit after an early injury). His father, Ernest L. Brooks, was the first African-American branch manager at Chase Manhattan Bank, in Harlem in the 1960s. A dean's-list graduate from Vanderbilt University Law School, Brooks was recruited as a telecommunications design engineer by NYNEX/New England Telephone (now Verizon).

The couple met in a jazz lounge in Manhattan in the early 1990s and found that they had both attended colleges in the

Boston area. They married in 1995. "From the moment we met, we've been strategizing different business ideas," says Alexis. After each party or business meeting, they head home to debrief. "We literally put our cards on the table and say, 'Who did you meet? What did he say?' And we cheer each other on: 'We did it!'"

Their company has taken an unusual approach for a start-up by donating huge amounts of time and equipment to minority communities in need of technology. Last summer, Inside Cable and the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, with others, set up an Internet kiosk at the Dudley Square bus station in Roxbury where people can check e-mail and surf the Net at no charge. This spring, the company and a partner, iSYS/City Lights Electrical Co.,

donated \$10,000 in equipment and labor to the new Timothy Smith Technology Center, a training center at the Roxbury headquarters of the Urban League.

"It's a lot of money, especially for a minority business less than three years old," says Derek Brooks. "But it's important. . . . The community needs it, and it will help us launch a brand." Both Kennedy and Menino have praised Inside Cable's efforts in bridging the digital divide. "They're giving young people the opportunity to compete, to break down barriers," Menino says. "This is a great role model, and it's a company just a few years old."

To land the contract at the DNCC headquarters for more than 175 phone and Internet lines, Derek Brooks created a partnership with City Lights, a female-owned electrical company, since Inside Cable doesn't yet have the capital for its own workforce. In the seven months since, the DNCC has asked them to do several more upgrades and installations.

"We know this company can grow exponentially," says Derek. "All we need is someone to step forward with the shared capital vision to make this company realize its destiny." **BG**

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Live Wires

Alexis and Derek Brooks are networking their way to becoming one of Boston's hottest power couples.

BY ELAINE MCARDLE

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREA FISCHMAN