



Zakiyyah Sheila Flagg, CEO of Flagg Labor, provides commercial cleaning and snow removal services for Delta Storage in Jersey City. —AARON HOUSTON

On her own terms

Flagg took over construction company after death of her husband

BY MEG FRY

Zakiyyah Sheila Flagg had been a widow for fewer than 72 hours before she began receiving condolence phone calls from both clients and contractors — who were also requesting work and payment.

“That, in hindsight, was a gift,” Flagg said. “They knew I still needed to make a living. I just had to process and figure it out quick.”

Flagg, CEO of **Flagg Labor** in Union, has continued her husband Joseph Flagg’s work after he was killed in Newark in 2013 at age 41.

“We were already established in the industry as a go-to for labor,” Flagg said. “I just had to put on a hard hat, go out into the field and make it happen.”

But her story is not that simple.

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Joseph Flagg founded **Flagg World Construction** in 2004 to provide construction labor support to general contractors and project managers in the New Jersey, New York and Connecticut markets.

His weren’t your standard crews, however.

“As a re-entry-friendly business, Joe had built relationships with halfway houses,” Flagg said. “He had vans in which he would go and pick up men to take them to work. Or he would drive around certain areas looking for day laborers.”

Flagg had been working in finan

cial services as a branch manager for **JPMorgan Chase** when she met Joseph Flagg, a business client. After they were married in 2007, Flagg helped him create **Capital Cleaning Services**, aka Flagg Labor, to provide additional commercial cleaning services.

Joseph Flagg had just begun to merge the companies when three teenagers shot and killed him as they attempted to rob a deli he owned on Chancellor Avenue in Newark.

“His clients knew him personally,” Flagg said. “I didn’t want the industry to think I was a new company because, one, it is not an easy niche to get into, and, two, it was easier to let the industry know that we were still doing everything they needed as Flagg Labor.

“They just had to know the name Flagg.”

Flagg runs the company just a little bit differently than her late husband did.

“I initially posted labor requests on **Craigslist**, which was hit or miss in terms of reliability and quality, and would reach out to the guys I knew Joe had already worked with,” she said. “For the first six months, I got by with those residuals. But I wanted to begin screening for more quality labor.”

So, Flagg began advertising with the job site **Indeed** and attending networking events to pass out business cards.

“I would then get phone calls from

businesses and nonprofit organizations that provided their own re-entry services,” she said. “I now have one such organization in Jersey City and two in New York.”

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Flagg Labor employs between 10 and 25 contractors in the field over multiple jobs each day, doing everything from traffic flagging to the heavy lifting.

“I would say that 75 percent of their job entails cleaning the site, while 25 percent is usually construction support,” she said.

And by remaining a financially competitive company that is committed to fill requests within 24 hours, Flagg has kept Flagg Labor a nearly \$500,000 business, with profit margins of 35 percent.

“The goal is to again become a \$1 million business, because my husband always made over \$1 million,” she said. “He, of course, had more contracts than I do.”

But Joseph Flagg wasn’t a single parent.

Flagg said it is incredibly difficult to run a business in a constantly fluctuating industry — it is even more so when the CEO is also a single mother to two children, now ages 7 and 8.

“Construction is big money, but the jobs are always ending — it is always about business development,” Flagg said. “I think that it is more difficult as a mother with two small children that only has six

hours of her day to do a whole bunch of stuff. I can’t attend a lot of evening networking events or go to job sites and be out in their faces — that is what Joe would do. He would go to the sites and talk to people to get them to like him over time. Then they would call.”

And while the money and potential is there for the taking, she said, it certainly isn’t simple.

“For example, a project manager had loved working with my husband and wanted to keep me working,” she said. “But one of his site supervisors did not like that the project manager was making him use me — he said he would have personally gone with another labor company he knew.

“I was really worried he might ruin my relationship with the project manager because he complained and fired my laborers constantly.”

Flagg did not and would never back down easy, she said.

“You have to be aggressive and stand your ground as well as be visible out there on the sites,” she said. “You can’t just give up.”

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This year, due to the additional networking, marketing and social media efforts, Flagg has gained at least three new customers.

“All the T’s are crossed and all the I’s are dotted,” she said. “Anyhow, I employ a part-time assistant, but am looking to hire one on a full-time basis.”

Flagg said she also would like to eventually hire a salesperson.

But all things considered, Flagg said business and her personal life are back on track.

“I’m three years a widow and I’m OK,” she said. “I’m really proud that I was able to keep the business going and that it is successful. We have what we need financially and that motivates me.

“I’m also proud of the fact that I am now an entrepreneurial woman in business making a living for myself and my two children. If you would have asked me five years ago, I never would have thought I would have been able to pull this off.”

Despite the many entrepreneurial challenges Flagg faced in the midst of deeply tragic personal loss, she said she has come to find that she truly enjoys working in this industry.

“I love the construction industry more than I ever thought I would,” she said. “It amazes me that this all starts from dirt.”

Biz in brief

Company: Flagg Labor

Headquarters: Union

Founded: 2007

Employees: 2 full time; between 10 and 25 contractors at any time